

Paella Recipe

Many people have told me that they've experienced disasters with paella recipes mainly due to rice still lying in the water/stock which makes the dish too soggy.

I've never had any problem with this dish thanks to the lesson I learned from Emilio at Bar Victoria in Miraflores de la Sierra, a village in the Sierra de Guadarrama just outside Madrid.

Emilio invited me into his kitchen and took me through the process step by step and I can honestly say that restaurant paella is never as good as this homemade version. It is extremely flexible in terms of ingredients and cooking times so no need to get stressed, in fact a lot of the work can be done in advance.

Paella ingredients:

For 6 - 8 people

1-2 large onions
1 head of garlic
2 large peppers (I use a green one & a red one)
Plenty olive oil (not extra virgin)
1 chicken stock cube (use a fish one if you prefer)
1 chicken chopped up into small pieces (could use chicken breasts)

250g small prawns
250g baby clams or clams
250g calamares in rings
Mussels - 1 or 2 per person
Large prawns - 1 or 2 per person

Food colouring
Rice (short or long grain)
1 bag of frozen peas
Tin of pickled red peppers
Lemons

You'll need a paella pan and three large saucepans for the preparation.

Preparation:

Your purist Spanish chef will cook the dish from start to finish in a paella dish. I found that this caused a lot of spitting of hot ingredients considering the large open area of such a pan so I begin by cheating!

1) Take a large, deep saucepan and cover the bottom with the olive oil ... no worries about quantity as you can't go wrong. Add the chopped chicken and stir until you hear that the frying has started. Now throw in the chopped onion, pepper and garlic and fry away gently until everything is cooked. Lots of juices come out of the chicken during this stage leaving you with a pan full of delicious contents and a great smelling kitchen. Put this pan aside now as you won't need it until we get to using the paella pan in the final stage.

2) This is the messy part of the preparation which you can begin while your pot of chicken is cooking away. You'll need to take the heads and shells off all the small prawns and keep all the heads and shells. Put the peeled prawns to one side along with the calamari rings which should be halved. Also wash the mussels and clams.

The next stage is crucial

3) You MUST work with the correct quantity of liquid in this recipe. Whereas everything else is quite flexible this isn't. I work on the basis of half a mug of rice per person so if we're cooking for 8 people that's 4 mugs of rice. Emilio taught me to use double the quantity of water to rice "plus a bit" which I've taken to be 9 mugs of water when cooking for these 8 people.

You're only cooking for 4 people? Okay, so that's 2 mugs of rice which requires 4 mugs of water "plus a bit" so up to 5 mugs of water.

Now add this water to another deep saucepan and throw in the mussels and clams. Bring them to the boil and continue until all the shells are open (discard any that don't open) then sieve the water into another large saucepan. Set the mussels and clams aside as we won't need them until the final stage.

4) Now in the water which you've just boiled the shellfish add the heads and shells from the small prawns. Once they're boiling add some yellow food colouring (saffron is of course the choice of the purist here but it doesn't create that fabulous paella colour and it's expensive). Also add the chicken stock cube. A fish stock cube is an alternative but I use chicken to tone down the fish flavour slightly. The rice will take its salt from this stock cube.

After a few minutes of gentle boiling the water will have taken on the flavour of the prawn heads and shells and will have turned into a deep yellow colour. Turn off the heat and use a colander to sieve out the shells which can now be disposed of leaving you with a pan of delicious stock.

4) Now we can move outside and cook in the paella pan. In Spain we have burners that connect to a gas bottle and the paella pan sits on this burner. Alternatively you can place your paella pan on the gas rings of your cooker though you must try to make the heat supply equal on all parts of the pan.

Heat up the paella pan and add the contents of the saucepan containing the chicken, onions, peppers and garlic as well as the clams or baby clams. Once these start sizzling throw in the rice (remember.. 4 mugs for 8 people and 2 mugs for 4 people). Stir the rice into the juices and don't worry if some bits stick as this becomes the favourite part of the paella in its home region of Valencia where the burnt bit is known as 'socorrat'. Also add the peeled prawns and calamares at this stage.

Immediately pour in the yellow fish stock, stir and allow to boil very gently. Don't worry if all the stock doesn't go in immediately, just let some cook off and add it later. Now you throw in the frozen peas and place the mussels, large prawns and strips of red peppers carefully to make the dish look as attractive as possible. This is where the guests start complementing the chef!

5) Allow the paella to cook gently for around 20 minutes, turning the pan occasionally to make sure that all parts of it are cooking equally. Towards the end I like to put a newspaper over the pan which ensures that the rice on top cooks properly (keep the ink off the rice!). Once most of the liquid has been soaked up by the rice your masterpiece is finished. Just place a few halves of lemon on top and place the whole paella pan in front of your very impressed guests.