

Which Spanish Rice is Best to Buy?

Given that so few Americans have ever even heard of real rice from Spain—let alone bought it, cooked it, or eaten it—the first step for most of us is just to sample the stuff in the first place. Any authentic Spanish rice is going to make for a far better paella than whatever long-grained substitute you may get stuck with. But that said, it's also true that, without question, the better the rice, the better the paella. There are three workable options to choose from:

Basic Valencia Rice

This is what you'll get in most every Spanish restaurant or home. It's far better than using any non-Spanish alternative. The most commonly available variety of rice from Spain is Balilla, accounting for about 90 percent of Spanish rice production. Usually you'll just see "Rice from Spain" or "Valencia Rice." As a rule of thumb, basic Balilla will absorb twice its volume in liquid, and goes from raw to ready-to-eat in about 15 minutes of cooking. And it's sure to make a better paella than any non-Spanish substitute.

Calasparra: The Cadillac of Spanish Rice

In Spanish rice cookery, there are three keys to assessing rice quality:

- 1) The actual flavor of the rice grain itself.
- 2) The rice's ability to cook through to an "al dente" texture without turning mushy; in other words "its integrity."
- 3) The amount of broth the rice can absorb during its cooking.

(The absorption rate is critical because Spanish recipes rarely call for cooking the rice in water (like Asian cooking), but rather in some sort of broth, or at the least, with other ingredients. Consequently, the more liquid the grains can absorb without losing their integrity, the better tasting the finished dish is going to be.)

On all three counts, Calasparra rice stands head and shoulders above standard-issue Spanish rice. It is, without question, a special product, and is guaranteed to improve the quality of a paella or any other Spanish rice dish.

Located in the mountains of Murcia along the Mundo and Segura River valleys, Calasparra has been recognized for the quality of its rice for centuries. In 1986 Calasparra received Denomination of Origin protection from the Spanish government, guaranteeing that the name can only be used for rice grown within the defined geographic region. Fifteen years later, it's still, despite the recognition, it's sort of small potatoes in today's production-oriented market. Calasparra accounts for only about 2500 tons of rice a year (less than one percent of Spanish production), about three-quarters of which is consumed within

Spain, where rice connoisseurs recognize the name and the quality of the grain.

About 500 meters above sea level, Calasparra is about as romantic a setting as you'll see for rice growing. Set into small mountain valleys, the fields are uneven segments divided by earthen berms, on which some farmers cultivate narrow vegetable gardens. Deep green forests grow in the background. Just above the fields the river waters flow into the valley and are then channeled through, and around, the fields. The water moves slowly but steadily at all times, a change from the lowland rice grown in Valencia in what is basically standing water. Calasparra's cooler (than the neighboring lowlands at least) summer weather and cold river water makes for a longer growing season and slower ripening of the rice plants. The result is a harder grain with higher capacity to absorb liquid while, at the same time, retaining its all-important firm texture.

Walking through the fields, I asked José Ruiz Egea, head of the cooperative since 1995, if he'd grown up in the area. "I was born in rice," he said with a smile. "Since I was little, I was working with the rice. They sent me to take out weeds." He wipes his brow in mock exhaustion. "Every summer 'til I was old enough to run out to university," He pauses, then adds: "Of course, now I'm back." Probably in his early 30s, Jose is a stocky 5-foot-5 with bushy black hair. His eyes light up every time we talk about the quality of the rice.

"What makes it so special?" I ask.

He clasps his hands to his chest, sends his eyes skyward as if looking to the Virgin, hoping for guidance in explaining to the uninitiated what must seem the most obvious thing in the world to one born and raised in Calasparra.

"What makes this special is the quality we're selling. The rice here, it takes 20 minutes to cook. Other rice, it takes 10 minutes. Once you try this you don't go back to the other rice."

Even more importantly, Calasparra can absorb about twice as much broth as standard Spanish rice, meaning that a ratio of roughly four parts liquid to one part rice is appropriate.

Because the more broth the rice absorbs the more flavorful the finished dish, anything cooked with Calasparra rice is pretty much guaranteed to be better tasting than the same recipe prepared with regular rice.

Before you buy, take note that Calasparra can cost two to three times as much as standard Spanish rice. But, if you remember that the rice is the star of the paella, when you want to make something special, Calasparra is a very, very sound investment.



Bomba—the Royalty of Spanish Rice
Ask for more information!

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