

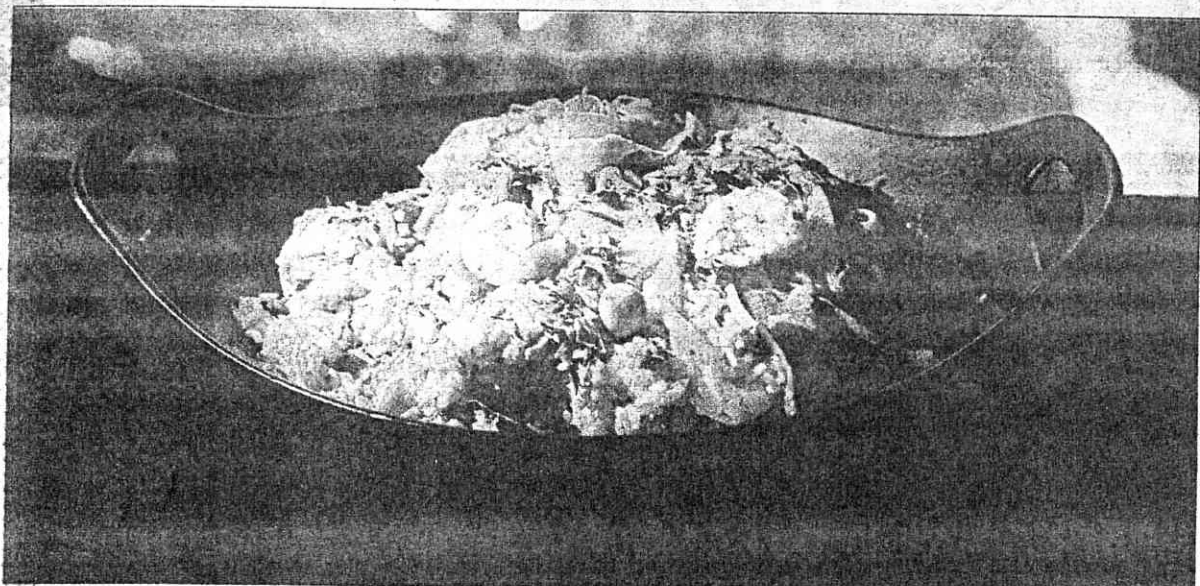
including scallops and foie gras, halibut with smoked pheasant, sweetbreads with cranberries and porcini jus.

You may have decided to peek into the kitchen. You may have noticed a gold damask curtain closing off another dining room and a smaller curtain covering an alcove behind the bar. Seeing no more doors, you may have given up in a state of dining bliss and ambled off, nodding to the bartender.

spaces most people — even New Yorkers — would consider too small for a closet.

Prune's kitchen has just two ovens, a small countertop, three cooks and no elbow room. At 71 Clinton Fresh Food, the kitchen

What's a chef to square feet and Turn out a full



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

DIG IN Patricia Williams, the chef at Butterfield 81, serves this chicken, sausage and shrimp paella at home.

The Ultimate Party Dish (Don't Forget the Saffron)

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

LAST summer, I attended a wedding in a village in southwest France where a paella for 60 was made in a pan four feet wide set over a bonfire and stirred with a paddle.

A paella for hundreds of guests is not uncommon in Spain. But Americans often think of it as restaurant fare, too daunting to make from scratch, let alone for company.

In fact, paella is the ultimate one-dish main course for entertaining: saffron-scented rice in a huge pan studded with mussels, clams,

shrimp, scallops, lobster, sausage, peas and piquillo peppers. What could be more impressive?

Paella has infinite advantages as party food. Much of it can be made ahead. It's best served buffet style. It can serve 6, or 16. And it does not have to be piping hot. Think of it as a risotto without the stirring, but one designed, perhaps, by Joan Miró.

Shopping for the ingredients may be the hardest part, but if you can sauté, you can make paella. If you're good at planning, you'll only have the paella pan to wash after dinner. And in reality, whatever you make may be superior to what too many restaurants routinely turn out.

Eric Ripert, the chef at Le Bernardin, understands the paella effect. He saves it for entertaining at home in Sag Harbor, N.Y., where his paella often combines monkfish, shrimp, mussels and sausage.

Patricia Williams, the chef at Butterfield 81, on the Upper East Side, is another devotee of paella at home. "Entertaining is about being with your guests," she said. "And I have found that once the paella is finished, it stays warm for half an hour tented with foil, so I don't have to be in the kitchen the whole time." She makes hers with chicken, green

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MENU MYSTERIES

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Chefs' silent rule: if you can't see it on the plate, you don't have to



INSIDE

THE MINIMALIST

Lamb meets schnitzel

The Ultimate Party Dish (Don't Forget the Saffron)

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beans and sausage, sometimes adding shrimp as well.

Paella is particularly accommodating for the home cook because it's so flexible. No single list of ingredients defines it.

Penelope Casas, an authority on Spanish food, gives more than 60 versions in her book "Paella! Spectacular Rice Dishes From Spain" (Henry Holt, 1999). Most of her recipes are traditional yet sound unusual, like one made with lamb, lentils and eggplant. In Spain today, she said, the dish usually has meat, poultry or seafood, but not a mixture. Mixed paellas, she explained, are only on tourist menus. "In Valencia, you won't find chorizo in a seafood paella because it will compete too much with the flavor of the seafood," she said.

I have a small Spanish cookbook that was printed in Madrid in 1912, though, that includes one paella recipe made with ham, chicken, rabbit, crab, baby eels, conger eels, tripe, artichokes, peas, peppers and tomatoes in addition to the rice and saffron.

Paella originated in Valencia, the province on the Mediterranean coast, where most of Spain's rice is grown. History suggests that the original ingredients were gathered in the wild, and included rabbit and snails, not lobster or chorizo.

But no matter what traditionalists say, I have found that what American paella lovers want most is the sausage, and they're disappointed if they do not find it. Even if you give them lobster.

There's something about paella that inspires the personal touch, which may explain why there are so many recipes, even in Spain. I've added slivers of smoked tongue or serrano ham to a chicken paella, strewn capers on top or folded in fresh corn kernels.

I have even made cold paella and served it like a salad, in summer, preparing the saffron rice with peppers and diced sausage in advance. Just before serving, I spread it on an immense round platter and top it with chilled seafood in a vinaigrette dressing.

I also like to make paella that hints of cassoulet, with rabbit, duck confit, duck sausage and even some white beans. It's similar to the hunter's paella made with duck, quail and rabbit at Solera, a Spanish restaurant in Midtown with the most interesting list of paellas in the city. There's a black one made with squid and squid ink, and another with salt cod, chickpeas and piquillo peppers.

But a well-made restaurant paella is not easy to find; all the more reason to make it at home.

"Every other Spanish restaurant serves paella but we never did," said Mario Contacessi, an owner of Meigas, on Hudson Street, one of New York's newer and better Spanish restaurants. "We make risotto-style dishes in casseroles. Besides, you can't make a great paella here because the water is wrong."

The last step is easy — just add the rest of the ingredients and let it cook. Although paella can be done entirely on top of the stove, it will cook more evenly if placed in a hot oven for the final 10 to 15 minutes, uncovered, with any quick-cooking seafood spread on top. When the paella is removed from the oven, the rice should be slightly underdone. A tent of foil is then placed on top, and the paella allowed to rest at least 10 minutes, so the rice can finish cooking.

But do not attempt to make paella without the proper pan and the proper rice.

The pan should be fairly shallow, with a flat bottom, sloping sides and two handles. It should be made of steel, not stainless and not thick. A thin, traditional pan imported from Spain will produce an even rate of evaporation so that the rice, which is the star of the show, will be moist but not soupy, and just plump and tender enough. The gorgeous contents make the simplest pan enough of a showpiece to bring to the table.

A fancy heavy-duty pan, often sold with a cover, is not necessary. The pan should not have a nonstick finish. A paella cooked in a classic pan usually does not stick very much anyway, and the rice that may adhere and become crusty is actually a treat. A skillet that is not nonstick or too heavy can be used instead of an authentic pan.

A good pan runs \$20 to \$40. It should be washed and dried, then coated lightly with vegetable oil before using. It will darken with use, but a coating of oil each time it's washed and dried will prevent rust.

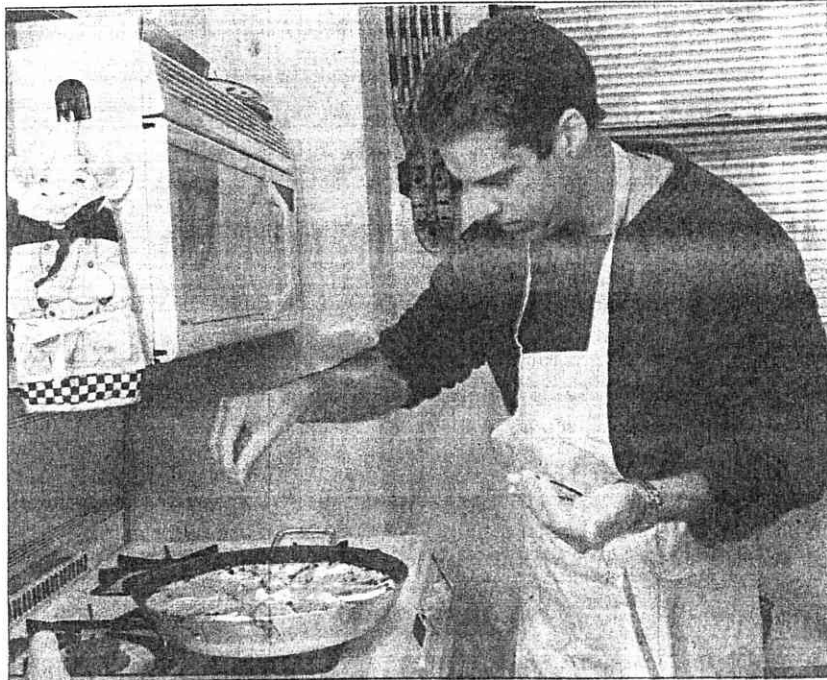
The rule of thumb when it comes to paella pans is that half the diameter equals approximately the number of servings. Burners on most home stoves can accommodate a pan no larger than 13 inches across; to make a larger quantity, use two pans.

As for the rice, it must be short grain. Spanish rices, labeled bomba, Calasparra or Valencia, are best, although Goya brand short grain and even Italian arborio rice can be used. Depending on the other ingredients, you should calculate one-third to one-half cup of rice per person. Usually twice the quantity of liquid as rice is needed.

Not all Spanish paellas are made with saffron, but when it's used it should be La Mancha saffron from Spain, which has a deep burgundy color. It should be in filaments, not ground, and should always be steeped in warm stock.

As for the other ingredients, like paprika or piquillo peppers, look for Spanish brands. The Fairway markets on the Upper West Side are a good source, and Broadway Panhandler in SoHo has the best assortment of pans. Pans and rice are also available from sites like www.tienda.com, www.tablespace.com, www.ethnicgrocer.com and www.chefshop.com on the Internet.

Spanish food aficionados nibbling their tapas may grumble that there's more to the cuisine than paella, even a properly made one. That's like saying Plácido Domingo isn't the only tenor in town. But when it comes to the leading role, paella, like Mr. Domingo, gets the bravos every time.



A CHEF AT PLAY BY ERIC

It's true that there is plenty of bad paella in Manhattan, but the fact that New York's water doesn't taste the same as Valencia's is not the main reason. There are restaurants that prepare paella in a casserole instead of a flat pan, or bolster their stingy ration of costly saffron with turmeric or food coloring. (Beware a sunny yellow paella; the color should be somewhat muted, almost mustard.) Some use the wrong kind of rice or shortchange the process by cooking the seafood separately and parking it on warm rice at the last minute.

However, interesting versions, authentic in their way, are now being served at several of the new-wave Latin restaurants. The paella tradition extends to countries where Spain has had an influence, like parts of the Caribbean and the Philippines. And so Patria, in the Flatiron district, sometimes offers a Puerto Rican-style green rice with seafood in a paella pan; Calle Ocho, on the Upper West Side, has a simple mushroom paella; and Chicama, near Union Square, does a Peruvian arroz con mariscos, with cilantro and jumbo shrimp.

Some chefs, including Bobby Flay at Bolo and Douglas Rodriguez at Pipa, serve aioli as a condiment for paella, a nice authentic touch I'll keep in mind.

Regardless of the variations, preparing paella involves three basic steps.

First, the vegetables and meat are sautéed in olive oil. Then, the rice is stirred in until it is coated; warm broth, usually with saffron steeped in it, is added.

Ripert, above, the chef at Le Bernardin, cooks paella at home.

SMALL PARTY Maximo Tejada, a chef at Pipa, preparing a tapas-style paella, which serves two people.

LOBSTER DELUXE Top right, Solera in Midtown serves a number of paellas, many featuring seafood. Below, the restaurant's classic seafood paella.

