

In the Pan

Paella's perfection is found in the pan

by Maisie Wilhelm

"A paella is like any piece of art," says Lolo Manso, chef/owner of Socarrat Paella Bar restaurants in New York City. "When you go to a restaurant, you never know how it will be."

But even for a dish with infinite variations, there are a few constants every chef seems to agree on. "The most crucial thing is to have a good *sofrito* and good stock to start, otherwise you will never achieve the proper flavor you need," says Larry Baldwin, executive chef of Cata in New York City.

Paella, which hails from Valencia, was originally a field laborers' meal, garnished with inexpensive proteins like rabbit and snails. The principles for cooking it remain the same (see "Paella 101," p. 38), but the creativity and playfulness each chef brings makes every recipe unique, and offers many opportunities to interpret what many call the epitome of Spanish cuisine differently depending on the season, the day's catch or a chef's inspiration.



Fideuà, squid, scallops, beef tongue and allíoli, \$13, Chef Chris DiMinno, Clyde Common, Portland, Ore. RECIPE, plateonline.com.



Paella de la Huerta, \$10, Chef/
Owner Lolo Manso, Socarrat
Paella Bar, New York City. **RECIPE,**
plateonline.com.

There are a million variations on paella, but most chefs agree at least on the steps it takes to achieve a great one. Here, Anthony Sasso, chef de cuisine at New York City's Casa Mono, presents the basics.

101
PAELLA
101

Pick a good olive oil, like Arbequina. Does the spice hit the back of your throat in one second, two seconds? If you can't even say a word, you know it has that burn, fire, spice, kick. Look for that first. Does the creaminess come out coating your mouth, tongue? That will come out in a dish. Does it taste dirty, clean? Think about the terroir. If it's grassy, it lets you know it's pretty alive and fresh.

Dirty the pan with seasoning. 'La marca' is the seasoning of the pan with *sofrito* of caramelized onion, garlic and tomato.

Add rice. *Bomba* rice is the best; *cebolla* is also good. *Bomba* has a D.O. (a government-

regulated label denoting the country's highest quality products) and is superior to all others in the world for paella. It has a short grain, doesn't blow up in size but absorbs an incredible amount of liquid so every grain is perfectly cooked and has so much flavor inside of it.

Stock up. Cover the rice with an intense broth and saffron, cook for 10 to 15 minutes, untouched. Use a stock of fish, shellfish or chicken, depending on what kind of paella you are making.

Decorate. Put your garnish in toward the end, depending on cooking time. How you want it to look, you build it. Add ingredients to the pan one at a time, with the expectation that this is what your dish is going to look like.

Finish it off. Look for an almost completely dry pan; as the rice kernels dry, they form the crusty edge called *socarrat*.

Manuel Berganza, a Spanish chef in New York City, goes the more traditional route in his *cazuela de arroz caldoso de marisco* at Andanada 141 (\$25, recipe, plateonline.com). "I always use rabbit, calamari, shrimp, clams and mussels but the fish changes based on the market—mahi mahi is good, or red grouper, or red snapper," he says. "The better fish for paella is rockfish, for the flavor, because it eats shrimp so its flavor is more like seafood."

Typically, the *bomba* variety of rice is used, for its ability to absorb liquid and swell three times its normal size, taking in more flavor. A *sofrito*—a mixture of caramelized onions, tomato and sometimes bell peppers—acts as the base; often saffron is added for flavor and color; a rich broth cooks the grain; and proteins are added at the end.

"You can do it with almost anything—mussels, clams, calamari, shrimp, lobster," says Manso, though he cautions against octopus, which can be tough, and sardines, which have too strong a flavor. "Oysters, cockles or any soft white fish like snapper or monkfish is excellent as well." And chorizo? "Yes, but then, all the paella tastes like chorizo, so in Spain we don't use chorizo with seafood."

While traditional recipes abound, new generations have put their own spin on the dish. "Anything can go," Manso says.

NEW TAKES

Traveling through Spain, Cata's Baldwin noticed that, "Spain is huge on foie gras, and they put it on everything." After having a foie gras and rice dish, he was inspired to do "a full-on duck version" of paella. To the rice, he adds duck stock and homemade duck *butifarra*—his version of the Catalan pork sausage—along with duck *confit* and seared foie gras to finish (recipe, plateonline.com).

Despite the unorthodox ingredients of his paella, Baldwin still carefully tends to the dish in order to achieve the prized,

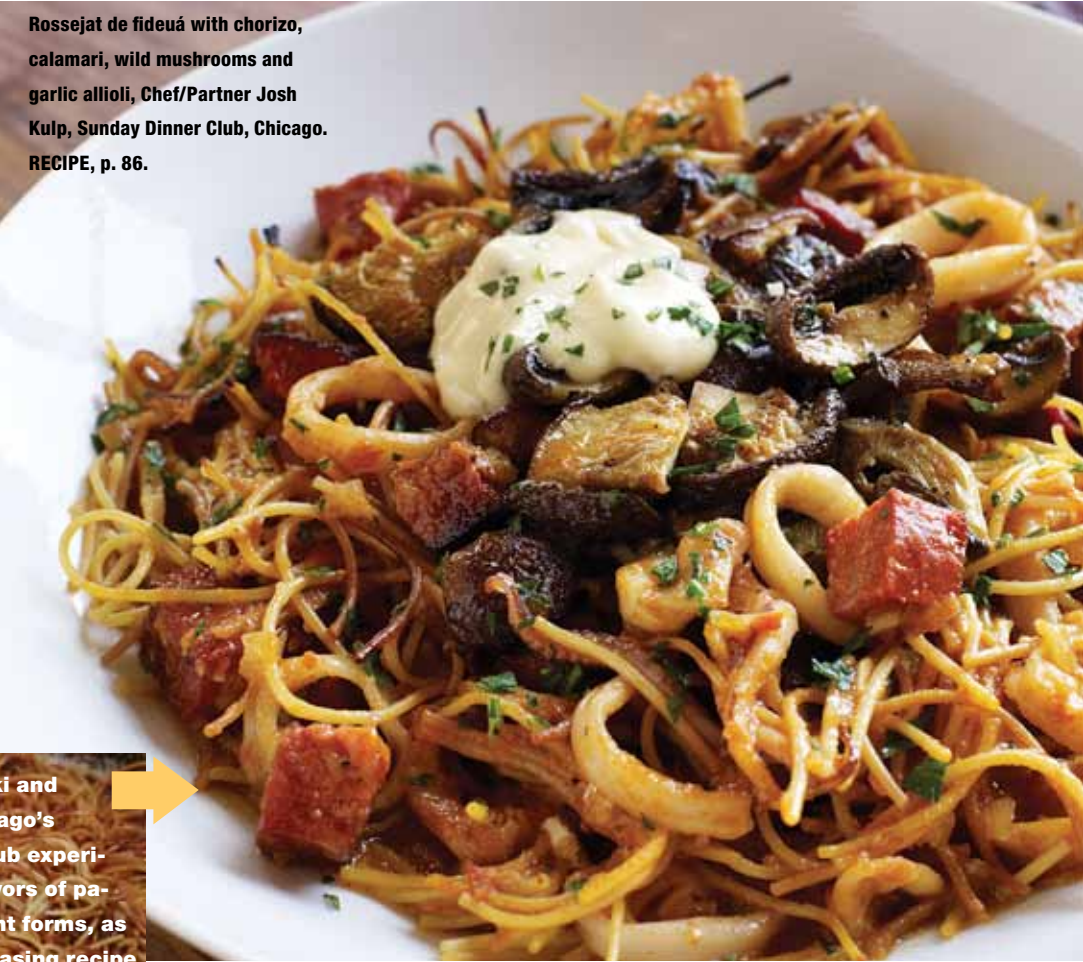
crunchy *socarrat* crust. "The presence of *socarrat* is what separates a great paella from a good one," he says. "It needs to be timed perfectly so all the liquid is evaporated or only a very slight amount remains. After you've made it many times, you start to listen more than you look to know it's ready." Because of how closely it needs to be watched, Baldwin calls the paella station the most difficult in the restaurant, and banks on diners ordering many tapas first, which the kitchen can quickly execute while the paella cooks.

Manso expects the same pattern from his patrons. "It's true we eat a lot of meat in Spain, but we eat veggies, too," he says. Nowadays, people are more healthy but we have always had vegetarians." For his *paella de la huerta* (\$10, recipe, plateonline.com), Manso focuses on the bounty of the garden, and features eggplant, cauliflower, artichokes, tomatoes, chickpeas and seasonal variations like fava beans or sugar snow peas.

Dropping the meat isn't the only way to set a paella apart. Case in point, the paella *croquetas* (\$16, recipe, p. 84) on Anthony Sasso's menu at Casa Mono.

"Family meal every Sunday in Spain was a huge paella," says Sasso. "In its basic form, paella is really simple to make and satisfies and wows a big group." But he had to figure out how to fit a dish that typically serves many into the small plates theme of the restaurant.

"Paella has to be made to order and takes a while," he says. "We wanted to push for a wow factor in different size, so we started messing around with different rices, seasonings, how to bind it, and make it just as fascinating as the large format." He hit on the idea of a croquette made with starchier and creamier Arbo-



Rossejat de fideuá with chorizo, calamari, wild mushrooms and garlic allioli, Chef/Partner Josh Kulp, Sunday Dinner Club, Chicago. **RECIPE, p. 86.**

Christine Cikowski and Josh Kulp of Chicago's Sunday Dinner Club experiment with the flavors of paella but in different forms, as in their crowd-pleasing recipe for *rossejat de fideos*, with chorizo, calamari and wild mushrooms and garlic *allioli*.

rio rice—not *bomba*—which withstood the fryer and held its shape better.

"The technique is still there—*la marca*, the saffron, *sofrito*, white wine—and all the flavors of paella, but we couldn't put other pieces of meat or shellfish inside or it would fall apart," he says. "Then we thought 'What's the briniest thing we can serve on top to get taste of the ocean?'" Sasso garnishes the *croquetas* with fresh uni and serves them on a sauce of chilled, creamy tomato vinaigrette emulsified with olive oil (\$16, recipe, plateonline.com). "We wanted to show off as much of what Spain is famous for in one bite."

Paul Canales, executive chef/owner of Duende in Oakland, Calif., goes the oppo-

site route, creating a slightly soupier than usual take on paella with his *arroz negro*, using *bomba* rice, rockfish, sea scallops, *allioli*, snap peas and shaved asparagus and blackening the dish with squid ink (\$38, recipe, plateonline.com). "It's a very unique dish, fresh and sweet without that funky ocean taste, and can easily be the most popular dish of the night," he says. "It has the same *sofrito* base, same rice, is cooked exactly like a paella, but the real distinction is that you can't develop a *socarrat* since you have squid ink, which burns."

NOODLING AROUND

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Paella croquetas, \$16,
Chef Anthony Sasso, Casa Mono, New
York City. [RECIPE](#), [plateonline.com](#).

forms, as in their crowd-pleasing recipe for *rossejat de fideuá*, with chorizo, calamari, wild mushrooms and garlic *allioli* (recipe, p. 86).

Rossejat incorporates noodles, or *fideuá*, instead of rice, yet shares elements of paella: the starch is cooked in a pan by a flavorful stock until nearly absorbed, at which point various garnishes are added while a crunchy crust forms.

“The idea that the noodles absorb the flavoring agents in a dish is really cool,” says Cikowski. “The textures are awesome and there is something incredibly soulful about this. People are obsessed with this dish.”

The *rossejat* is complemented by *allioli*, a powerful condiment of garlic, egg yolk and oil that is so pungent, “it’s almost offensive,” says Cikowski. “This is a very primal dish,” Kulp adds. “You take a small

bite and you really want to stuff it into your face as fast as possible. It’s not to mess around with. It’s really, really good.”

Chris DiMinno of Clyde Common in Portland, Ore., also features a *fideuá* dish, this time with squid, squid ink, scallops, and sausage, depending on what’s available (\$13, recipe, [plateonline.com](#)).

“It’s like tomato sauce in Italy: Everyone has their own method and according to them, everyone else is doing it wrong,” says DiMinno, who typically includes chili pepper-marinated squid, cherry tomatoes or homemade sundried tomato jam in his *fideuá*. For the noodles, he uses a short curly bucatini an inch long, or recommends cutting up spaghetti into three-quarter inch pieces before cooking. “Then we add more pepper marinade, the shellfish, sausage, lots of scallion, whole leaf parsley, and fin-

ish it with squid ink vinaigrette,” he says. He puts it all in a terracotta dish called a *cazuela* and bakes it in the oven “until it starts to boil and become dramatic,” and gets a crust, then serves it with fresh *allioli*.

In San Francisco at Coqueta, Michael Chiarello’s paella comes topped with Gulf prawns, housemade chorizo, asparagus and savory clams. The key, he said, “is the stock made twice—first we make a serrano ham broth, and then use that to wet lobster shells for the broth that goes into the *sofrito*.”

The crucial step, however, is mastering technique. “In Spain, you see the nuances of a master. It’s like a meditation or prayer,” he says about how they position the pan on the flame, and finish the dish just right.

Lolo Manso has similar thoughts. “A paella is a ritual. It goes on the table and everyone eats from the same plate. Paella is about joy, happiness, celebration.”

Maisie Wilhelm loves the buttery, powdery *matedos* cookies from Valencia.

PAN PERFECTION

Achieving a perfectly crusty *socarrat* without burning the paella is a difficult balance, one Paul Canales, executive chef/owner of Duende in Oakland, Calif., achieves by using carbon steel pans with double thickness. “It’s twice as heavy, but there is forgiveness to it between caramelizing and burning,” he says. “With regular paella pans, it’s hard to get a *socarrat* and not burn.”