

Katrina Ryan celebrates the colourful, eclectic cuisine of Spain

eat well

Paella



Rich with fresh tomatoes, olive oil, saffron and rice, Paella is a favourite Spanish dish

A COUPLE of weeks ago I attended the Slow Food Annual Dinner at Ricky Ricardo's. The theme of the night was Catalan food and, thanks to chef Matt Golinski, the meal was a superb example of Spanish food at its best.

The highlight for me was the plate of tiny squid stuffed with pork and served with a chocolate sauce.

It may sound a little bizarre to some, but chocolate (bitter chocolate, not the sweet milky stuff) used in cooking is common in South America, its place of origin. The Spaniards were the first to introduce chocolate to Europe along with other delights such as tomatoes, potatoes and capsicum. In fact, Spanish food is a colourful and eclectic blend of all its historical influences including Roman, French, Jewish, New World and Arabic. The Arabic or Moorish influence is what distinguishes it the most from other Mediterranean cuisines with the use of spices such as cumin, paprika and saffron and dried fruits and almonds. One of Spain's most famous dishes is *paella*, a rice dish that in its simplest form consists of olive oil, rice, saffron and stock. Originating in Valencia where the rice was grown, it often contained wetland wildlife such as frogs, ducks, snails, eels and partridges. Today, *paella* is cooked all over Spain and regional specialties may contain a variety of ingredients such as chicken, prawns, mussels, clams, pork and chorizo sausage.

I once had a memorable *paella* made with rabbit in Tarragona, a small port town on the east coast of Spain. My partner and I followed the recommendation in a travel book and turned up at a very empty bar with one or two customers and the soccer playing loudly on the television. We ordered a vodka each and were presented with a bottle and two glasses. The *paella* arrived about an hour later and was one of the best I have ever tasted. The rabbit was browned and tender and the rice, rich with olive oil and tomato, was crisped and caramelised around the edges of the pan.

Named after the broad shallow pan that it is cooked in, a *paellera*, *paella* is often cooked outside over a wood fire. A gentle even heat over the base of the pan is important for the rice to cook evenly and it is not usually stirred. If cooking on the top of the stove you may need to stir it from time to time. Alternatively, it can be cooked in a hot oven, in a heavy pan or baking dish.

Paella

Serves 6

- 1 size 12 chicken
- 2 litres water
- 2 tblspns olive oil
- 90 ml extra virgin olive oil
- 1 onion diced
- 2 cloves garlic chopped
- 1 chorizo sausage sliced
- ½ red and ½ green capsicum cut into strips
- 50g tomato paste
- 2 large tomatoes chopped
- 350g short grain rice
- ¼ tsp saffron threads soaked in ¼ cup white wine
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ kilo mussels washed and debearded
- ½ cup blanched or frozen peas
- 1 tblspn chopped parsley and lemon wedges to garnish

Remove the skin and backbone from the chicken and cut off the wing tips. Put these in a pot and cover with 2 litres cold water. Bring to the boil and then turn the heat down to a simmer for 2 hours until the liquid reduces to 1 litre of chicken stock. Cut the remaining chicken into 8 pieces.

Heat the olive oil in a broad frypan or *paella* pan and fry the chicken pieces until browned all over then remove to a plate.

Heat the extra virgin oil in the same pan and fry the onion, garlic and chorizo for a few minutes then add the capsicum strips, tomato paste and tomatoes.

Cook for another 5 minutes then add the rice and stir to coat the rice well with the oil.

Add the saffron, wine, strained stock, salt and the browned chicken pieces.

Cook uncovered in a 210 degrees Celsius oven for 15 minutes.

Stir through the peas and place the mussels on top. Bake for another 5 minutes then remove from the oven and let sit covered for 5 minutes.

Serve garnished with the parsley and lemon.



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