Remarks about Paella in Migratory Contexts

The now world-famous rice dish, garnished with vegetables and sometimes with various meats, fish or shellfish, called paella, originated, as already stated, in the Valencia region of Spain, probably in the early nineteenth century, when rice-growing had become especially important in the region\(^1\). The use of chicken in the classical version of the Valencia paella, confirms that it is a festive dish reflecting an optimum economic situation for the peasants at that period. Over time, Paella became, *par excellence*, the basis of strong local identity processes: in 1896, the French filmmaker Eugène Lix came to Valence, where he filmed the making of this local rice speciality\(^2\). Personal identification processes also began to appear at the same time, for example, when local poets sang about *paella* during contests\(^3\).

Appearing in a precise socio-economic context, Paella gradually became an emblem of ‘Spanish cookery’ more or less accepted as such by the Spaniards themselves, even though it is not really a national dish\(^4\). Recipes for *paella* as a regional dish have appeared in Spanish cookbooks since the end of the nineteenth-century\(^5\). The aristocratic section of society quickly appreciated a plethoric form of *paella*— which includes duck, chicken, pork, cod, spiny lobsters, eels, frog legs, crawfishes, snails and chorizos\(^6\). The diffusion of *paella*, however, has occurred more recently in certain provinces, where the use of rice remained low until the

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\(^4\) In fact, a national dish is extremely difficult to characterise, because it exists under very particular conditions: Hubert, A., ‘Cuisine et politique: le plat national existe-t-il?’, *Revue des Sciences Sociales*, 27 (2000), 10. The point of view of the observer is fundamental, because it is always easier to identify the national dishes of the ‘Other’; see for example in this connection, the discussion between the French ethnologist Jeanine Fribourg and the Spanish anthropologist Carmen Ortiz Garcia about *paella*; the first researcher considers *paella* to be a Spain national dish, the second considers the reality to more complex than that: Fribourg, J., ‘Fêtes et cuisine traditionnelle en Espagne’, in *Cuisines. Reflets des sociétés*, Paris, 1996, 354; Ortiz Garcia, C., ‘Comida e identidad: cocina nacional y cocinas regionales en España’, in *Alimentación y Cultura*, Huesca, 1999, 312.


second half of the twentieth-century. We will detail in this paper the diffusion of paella in migratory contexts.

I. Paella in France. From an exotic dish to a local dish because migrations

The culinary situation of paella in France is complex. A plethora of versions appear in French language cookbooks, such as in Urbain Dubois's *Cuisine de tous les pays* (1868), where it was used to represent Spanish cooking from the second half of the nineteenth-century. Paella, nevertheless, remained little more than a curiosity for a long period of time. The situation changed from the nineteen thirties onwards, thanks mainly to independent factors—such as, Spanish political and economic emigration to France and French mass-tourism in Spain—which gradually led to the incorporation of paëlla into the French food universe. In certain parts of southern France, especially on the Basque Coast, paella became a dish which was claimed as local. In this border area, restaurants had been offering paella from the nineteen fifties, perhaps because of touristic demand. This particular rice dish settled quickly in this region, where it became known as the ‘Basque paella’; it was included in regional cookbooks, described as a regional speciality in gastronomical literature, pictured on postcards, and appearing on menus in Parisian Basque restaurants.

II. Paella in colonial context, the North-Africa example

After the conquest of Algeria in North Africa by the French army (1830-1847), many families from various European countries moved to the new colony. A notable Spanish community arose in the region of Oran, which quickly became famous for its rice preparations. In a paper presented in 1931 at the *Paris International Gastronomy Conference*, Léon Isnard noted the Spanish influences in North African colonial cookery and mentioned in this context, the saffron rice and the chicken rice (arroz con pollo) dishes. Roger G., who

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8 *La France à Table*, no 72: *les Pays Basques*, 1954, 51 (recipe) and 48-9 (advertisments).
was born in Alger in 1921, still remembers the ‘very good’ paella served there, and mentally preserves an ethno-gastronomic geography of Algeria where Oran corresponds to Spaniards and Paella. In French North Africa at that time, the rice dish (paella) was an element of regional, local and ethnic identity.

III. Making and eating paella in migratory context

Originally, paella was an element of male outdoor cookery traditions. Men prepared a basic version of paella when working in the fields and a more elaborate one on the occasion of fairs and festivals. The link between the male monopoly of making paella and cooking it on an open fire, has already been discussed. Following the example of the J. Guardiola y Ortiz, various gastronomes have even regarded the outdoor preparation of paella as a ritual, which has its master of ceremony—this is the cook who knows how to perfectly handle the fire and to control the delicate cooking of the rice. In fact, Paella contrasts with the numerous types of rice made by women in the kitchen, not only from a technical, but also from a symbolic point of view—expertise in paella-making confers a much more important degree of social status on a man than that associated with the performance of routine culinary tasks confers on a woman. When, however, paella ‘left the field’, so to speak—for example, when rural workers migrated to urban centres or began to work in industry, the making paella in the traditional manner became more difficult, and paella, then, ‘entered in the kitchen’, and became part of the woman’s culinary world. Even if, in exceptional circumstances, Spanish men who live in France cook paella, its preparation frequently becomes undertaken by women, as the role of housekeepers in the transmission of its recipe in the département of

10 Interview with Roger D., June 2003.
12 Guardiola y Ortiz, J., Gastronomía alicantina (1959), Alicante, 1972, 124-8.
Hérault clearly shows\(^\text{14}\). Nowadays, therefore, men and women make *paella*, but frequently in different contexts and in different ways.

The outdoor preparation and consumption of *paella* are actions which are eminently social, particularly when a large amount of the dish is prepared. If the cooking of the rice is a task requiring special expertise, others tasks, such as the preparation of the vegetables or the shellfish, or the carving of the meat, can be delegated to less qualified persons. A *paella*-making occasion, therefore, can mobilise a significant number of people for the realisation of a common goal; this kind of programme, involving communal food preparation and consumption, is very suitable for migrant association or migrant family events. The role of *paella*-making for group cohesion, especially that of an association, appears clearly in the *paella* contests, such as the Houston Polo Club Contest, where the *Casa de España* sends one cook (designated after an internal competition) and six assistants\(^\text{15}\).

As the large-sized outdoor *paella* is a shared dish *par excellence*, its consumption allows demonstrating evidences of integration in Spanish contexts. Eating it directly in the *paellera* with a spoon is still a common practice in the Valencia area, as Yadi, a young Colombian woman who has been living there for two years, learned to her cost. Her positive answer to the question ‘Do you want a plate?’, and her instinctive use of the fork when faced with the rice, provoked a strong reaction from one of her neighbours at the table He stated: ‘Sure, you are a stranger’—he himself was also a recent Valencian inhabitant, but he knew the accepted way of eating *paella*, so he felt more at home there than Yadi, despite the fact that she had been living there for a longer period of time\(^\text{16}\).

**Conclusion**


\(^{16}\) Interview with Yadi H. S., September 2003.
Paella played an early role in the cultural identification of its birthplace, the Valencia Area, where it became a support for the expression of local identity. Similar processes can be observed when the use of this dish spread out of this original zone: the identity value of paella for a part of the pied-noir community is as strong as for the Valencian people. Because the strong identification of paella with their native country, Spanish migrants use easily this dish as totem food even if they came from regions where it was not. Well cooking and well eating paella appear a proof of a good integration to a lot of foreign migrants in Spain or Spaniards in Valencian area. Classically, it was men, in the countryside, who made paella far away from the (feminine) kitchen. The cooking paella out-of-doors by men is still honoured in certain occasions, but the groups who prepare this dish can also be mixed and the making of paella in some urban migrant communities is totally integrated in the woman domestic culinary sphere. Migratory movements point out the cultural complexity of paella: outdoor/indoor cooking, male/female cooking, sociability, symbolic uses… At the same time, paella allows thoughts about totem food, identity affirmation or cultural integration in migrant communauties. One more time, paella seems to be "chameleon dish"\footnote{We qualified yet paella as "chameleon dish" in others works because it is a preparation with a strong propensity for adaptation more so than a globalized dish or, more metaphorically, because it takes on the cultural colours of numerous places in the world.}.