

There's rice. Then there's Calasparra rice

Adam Hopkins visits a tiny Spanish backwater where growing methods, handed down from the Moors, produce an acknowledged king among grains

Rice, in a land of wine and olive oil, plays a surprisingly large part in the Spanish sense of self. We are not just talking *paella* here but hundreds of varieties of savoury rice; also, good old *arroz con leche* – rice pudding of a kind that children anywhere would recognise as the real thing.

Sally von Meister, who offers Mediterranean-style cooking courses in Gaucin in Andalucía, sees Spain's pearly grain in terms of a not-long-vanished rural past. "All the workers in the field would need was rice, a cooking pot, a little water. They picked the rocket, wild asparagus and dandelion, and somebody went off and shot the rabbit. Soak the rice and light the fire and soon there would be a dinner for the finest."

But, listening to von Meister and to native Spanish cooks, one theme you will hear continually is that although Valencia rice is excellent, the best of all comes from Calasparra.

Calasparra? Yes, tiny Calasparra, 9,000 souls residing on a saddle between mountains in northern Murcia, in one of Spain's most disregarded regions.

A plateau of olives stretches away from the town on one side, then suddenly the land plunges down to the River Segura.

In the valley, itself hemmed in by lines of mountains, frogs leap, crickets jump even further, bee-eaters sit on the telephone lines, fruit trees cluster. And all along the river, in paddy fields each not much bigger than British suburban gardens, grows Calasparra rice: a little more than 800 acres a year, it constitutes just one half of 1 per cent of Spain's rice production.

Gines Hernandez, Calasparra rice-grower and president of the regulatory council which oversees the *denominación de origen* – the only one so far given to a rice – is piloting a heavy four-wheel drive among the fields.

Sweetly spoken Rafael Navarro, the *vedor*, or enforcer of the regulations, is in the back; and the two of them are showing me, so I can see with my own eyes, touch with my own hands and smell with my own nose.

"Una maravilla," Navarro exclaims, gesturing all around with pride.

The key to Calasparra, the two men maintain, is how the water works. From the river in the middle, it is conducted in two swiftly running irrigation channels, on either side of the rice-growing land. From these, it is let out into the fields closest to the channels.

Each is divided from its neighbour by an earth bank on which vegetables are often grown, bean and tomato vines rising above the rice.

But a cutting in the bank allows the water through into the next field so that it is continually flowing through land slightly inclined towards the centre of the valley. Finally, it falls back, through pipe and sluice, into the river.

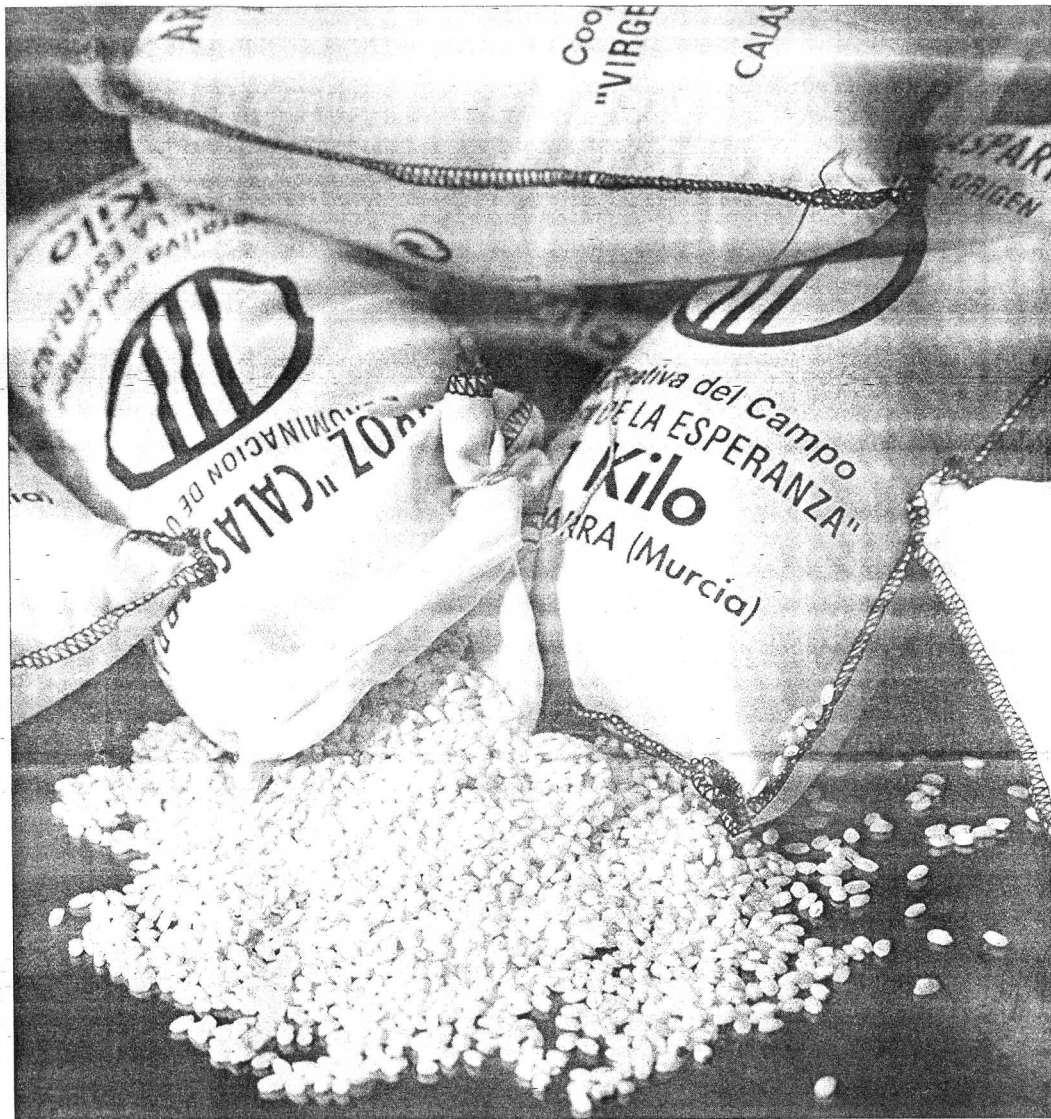
The system, as I have been learning in the city museum in Murcia, the regional capital, is entirely Arabic. It must have been inherited from the Moors, with the modern addition of concrete.

"In Valencia," says Hernandez, addressing the competition, "the rice stands in still water, in enormous fields. Here, we are 450 metres up and the continual flow of colder water means our rice matures more slowly, producing a harder grain which carries less moisture.

"You add an extra measure of water to the cooking pot and allow it to soak a little longer, but the main point about our rice is that the grain does not break up or go mushy during the cooking."

Up in town, in the label of origin office above the produce market, I have been shown photos of the tasting committee at work, with four of five different rices set out on the platter, all cooked for the same amount of time. All are, of course, mushy and glutinous, apart from Calasparra, its grains standing sharp as diamonds.

What's more, I have arrived on



In the bag: Calasparra rice is imported into the UK by London specialist Brindisa of Park Street, Southwark (tel: 0171-403 0282)

David Ahmed

Sally von Meister's arroz con verdura

Using carrots, onions, beans, courgettes, artichokes, peas and red peppers. Also olive oil, saffron, garlic, paprika and 200g Calasparra short-grained rice.

Heat the olive oil in a *cazuela* (ovenware dish about 12in across and 2in deep) and sauté the onion and peppers until softened. Add rice and coat the grains until glossy. Add the vegetables and 18 fl oz vegetable or chicken stock. Add saffron and bring to boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for five minutes. Put the dish in the oven at about 325°F

for 15-20 minutes, uncovered, until the liquid is absorbed and the rice cooked.

Remove from oven, cover with foil and let it sit for a few minutes before serving. Sprinkle with paprika and serve with freshly ground garlic, olive oil and salt (*salsa ali oli*).

■ For von Meister's cooking courses (with invited chefs) – *The Spirit of Andalucía* – call on +34 952-151303 or 151222 (in Spain); or Christopher von Meister at Abbey Tickets. Tel: 0171-287 8977.

day when the town is planning its fiesta. A meeting is being held at the revered local Sanctuary of our Lady of Hope. The rice committee has gone in with the bull-fighting club and the proceeds of all events will go to the sanctuary.

In its huge restaurant, we have an hour of speeches followed by plates of ham and wine and then sit down again to Calasparra rice with rabbit – great heaps of it, salted and yellow with saffron, and each grain a perfect whole.

There are about 2,500 acres technically available inside the *denominación*, but the rice is alternated with cereals – another distinction from Valencia. In rice years the land is ploughed in

spring, the fields flooded and sown in the first 10 days of May – men in a line, scattering the seed by hand. When the plants appear 18 to 20 days later, they are thinned and redistributed for even growth. All summer long, the growers contend with weeds which have to be removed by hand.

There is one called *mijera* which looks just like a healthy stem of rice. "You have to know what you are doing," says Navarro, who is 63, his fingers tightened into his palms by decades of weed-pulling. Young people are reluctant to go into the business – the greatest problem facing Calasparra growers.

The rice stands ankle-deep in

water as the plants gather into a green profusion then turn to gold. At the end of September the fields are drained and mechanical harvesters move on to the land, cutting, then separating grain from stem so that it arrives in the co-operative rice-mill as a dense golden mass of grains inside their hulls.

There are two varieties – a Balilla-Sollana cross, sometimes known in Valencia as *Secretario*, and *la Bomba*, king of Spanish rices, which fetches the highest Calasparra prices. They are impossible to tell apart until you note each grain of *la Bomba* has a tiny tail.

The rice is classed as organic if grown only with manure as fertil-

iser. It may be hulled, then polished and sold as white; or it may be simply hulled and sold as brown. For the supermarkets, it goes out in plastic and for specialist shops in little white sacks, red-labelled, their tops handsewn with small white ears protruding. Six women in blue uniforms and nylon netted caps sit sewing in a side room at the mill. Human labour seems the bedrock of the system.

"This is not the product of a group of agricultural speculators, here today, gone tomorrow," says Jose Ruiz, director of the co-operative, "but a product rooted in long tradition, clean, cold water and a very particular set of geographical surroundings."