

The Times Cook

Frances Bissell

When it comes to sophisticated rice dishes, southern Europe can teach the Orient a thing or two. Photograph by Patrice de Villiers

WITH THE dog days of summer almost upon us, I shall be writing for the next few weeks about summery food — full of colour and flavour, not too taxing on the cook, and easy on the digestion. The Mediterranean way of eating — fruit, vegetables, breads, fish, pulses and grains — is exactly what appeals at this time of year.

We often think of rice as an oriental ingredient, whether as a partner to curry or as a foundation for sushi, but it is widely used throughout the Mediterranean. Indeed, it is grown extensively in southern Europe, as well as further north in the broad sweep of the Po valley in Italy. From the Camargue, that strange, low-lying country of black bulls and white horses in the south of France, comes an unusual strain of red rice, now being sold in Britain. Not as refined as white rice, it takes longer to cook and retains more bite, but it can be used to good effect in traditional rice recipes, and I have devised a red risotto to make the most of its colour.

Rice is a major ingredient in the cooking of the Iberian peninsula, and I was told, when visiting Murcia in Spain, not to miss Alicante, described as the queen of rice cooking. Our lunch at Darsena, right in the centre of the city and overlooking the port, was well worth the journey. The restaurant's menu listed no fewer than 50 rice dishes. These will have been made from rice grown around Valencia, or possibly Seville. But in that part of Spain is an even more interesting rice-growing region, Calasparra.

To get there, take the N301 from Murcia north towards Albacete. After about 50km, take the Calasparra turning (the next one after the Jumilla turning) and drive 28km to the town. The rice-growers' co-operative is on the Andalucía road, but the little rice paddies, the *tierras arroceras*, are tucked away in small, high valleys between the mountains, along twisting, narrow lanes. They have been owned and worked by the same 200 or so families since they were created.

When we visited in spring, they were repairing the ditches and canals at El Peralejo, which had been filled and damaged by earth washed down from the mountains during recent storms. Last summer was very hot, with forest fires destroying much of the tree cover on the slopes, so there was nothing to hold the soil back. By now, the farmers will have flooded the *tierras* with water from the Rio Segura, and then sown the seeds. This is done in the old-fashioned way — broadcasting by hand.

While the broad paddies of Valencia and Seville are at sea level, here the rice lands are about 500m higher and much cooler; therefore, with a growing season six weeks longer than in other parts of Spain, harvesting does not begin until mid-October. This longer season gives a harder grain, which, of course, the locals say is the best rice in the world.

Only half of the *tierras* are cultivated each year; the rest are left fallow. The land is organically cultivated and yields less than other rice-growing areas, and the labour-

intensive farming method makes the rice more expensive.

The most prized variety of Calasparra rice is Bomba. Joaquín Salinas, director of the co-operative, told me that the locals recommend four parts water to one part rice, and an average cooking time of 24 to 25 minutes, but it depends how wet or dry you like your rice. His favourite rice dish is a local one cooked with white beans and dried whole red peppers — and it is indeed very good.

You can use other grains in recipes normally used for rice. Barley "risotto" was once rather fashionable; I like it cooked with wild mushrooms and a well-flavoured stock. It will not cook to the creamy texture of white rice, but nor does spelt, which is now set to take over from barley in the fashion stakes. In Paris, Alain Solivérès at Les Elysées makes a spelt "risotto" with black truffles. In Auch, in the southwest of France, André Daguin combines one of his famous duck dishes with spelt (*épautre*) and pearl onions. You can find this wholesome grain, an ancient variety of hard wheat that used to be widely grown in Britain, in healthfood stores, and, I expect, before too long in supermarkets. Spelt flour produced under the Doves Farm label is already available in supermarkets and I find it excellent for bread-making, either on its own or combined with strong white flour.

BLACK RISOTTO WITH CORAL AIOLI

Serves 4

1 onion, peeled and finely chopped
2tbsp olive oil or butter
300g *carriaroli*, *arborio*, *vialone* or other risotto rice
1½ to 1.25l fish stock
2 sachets squid ink
4-6 large diver scallops
Cloves of fresh garlic, to taste
Olive oil
Lemon juice
Salt and pepper

IN A LARGE PAN, gently fry the onion in the oil or butter until soft. Stir in the rice until well coated, then pour on a ladleful of boiling stock and stir. Once the stock has been absorbed, add more, gradually using it up until the rice is cooked through. You can add boiling water if you like your risotto creamy and the rice has absorbed all the stock. If you prefer your risotto drier and firmer, don't use all the stock.

About halfway through cooking, add the contents of the ink sachets. Meanwhile, separate the coral from the scallops and poach them gently for a minute or so. Cut the scallops into strips, and cook them briefly in a hot frying pan. Put the coral and the peeled, chopped garlic in the blender and process until smooth. Then gradually add about 80ml of oil, as if making mayonnaise, together with a dash of lemon juice and seasoning.

Spoon the risotto into heated soup plates, tip a spoonful of coral aioli on top and put some pieces of scallop on top of the lot. Serve

