

# *Dreaming of* **SUNNIER DAYS**

**Sue Bailey** recalls her younger days in Spain – and persuading her daughter to eat prawns



I had planned to write about Spanish food before the pandemic horror started. Now I want to celebrate my love of Spain and my hope for a brighter future, through my memories of its culture and food. Although we are living in a challenging period, our food experiences can help by taking us back to happier times. One particular meal often comes to mind.

This was a long ago family-sharing dish of paella. It was heavy with seafood, peas, tomatoes, and saffron-hued rice which we ate by a powder-white beach near Cadiz. The meal was memorable not for the recipe, but for our efforts to hide Fred the be-whiskered prawn under our elder daughter's mound of rice. She hated the 'nasty sea insects'. Now she loves paella with squid, mussels and even the odd prawn – but I was not so fortunate, when growing up, to taste this authentic Valencian dish.

What I recall during the late-1960s was the delights of a Vesta version of paella, comprising mini prawns, wrinkled peas and vibrant yellow rice that rehydrated into a surprisingly tasty dish. This was an exotic meal back then.

Once travel to Spain became much more the norm in the 1970s and 1980s, with early television chef Keith Floyd flouncing around on the seashore, people realised that Spanish food could be amazing.

When I taught in Santiago de Compostela we always used to discuss food. We talked about the excitement of hunting down the local produce, the sparkingly fresh fish markets and the connection with the seasons. Seeing wild asparagus for sale, baby clams and yellow and brown humbug-striped snails trying to climb out of their boxes, and tasting minute slivers of densely aged serrano ham showed us how good-quality ingredients are a vital part of the food in Spain.

However, one of the most bizarre dishes friends recommended was Galician gooseneck barnacles – they



look like what their name suggests. You nibble on the steamed sea-fresh-tasting 'neck' while discarding the rocky elephant's foot-looking bits at the top. A somewhat ugly dish but a spring treat.

Much more visually digestible is simple Spanish tapas. Favourites include nuggets of ham in a thick white sauce, which are chilled, rolled in breadcrumbs and fried to make croquettes. Or just a perfect selection of local goat's or sharp-tasting sheep's cheese with quince paste.

Other dishes that stay in my mind are a large salt-baked sea bream that we cooked with herbs buried in the salt crusting, bought slappingly fresh from the fish market that morning and served with a generously sliced sun-warmed tomato-and-orange salad dressed simply with oil.

To start, we loved a chilled glass of almond-hued fino sherry or our favourite tinto de verano. This is a drink we always make as soon as we arrive in Andalucia. It is simply a jug of ice cubes, half-filled with red wine and half with white lemonade.

Simple food and memory food – as my friend Maude says. She dreams of the comfortingly good tortilla we shared in a locals' bar. Use enough eggs, waxy potatoes and glugs of good-quality olive oil. Authentic tortillas do not use garlic or onions. Almost stew the sliced or diced potatoes in oil and then soak with the eggs for 15 minutes before cooking on a very low heat to solidify the base. When almost set, flip in the pan using a plate, firm up a bit and serve while still a little runny inside.

Yum, I can dream of us eating one there now. ■

*'She hated  
the "nasty sea  
insects". Now  
she loves paella'*