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# Foods of Spain

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# Fresh Healthy Ingredients

**S**panish cooking is simple and delicious. It relies on fresh local ingredients for its clean natural flavor. Since Spain is blessed with a temperate climate, rich soil, and a long coastline, Spaniards have an abundance of fine ingredients to choose from. Tomatoes, potatoes, eggs, rice, wheat, chicken, pork, game, and cheese all find their way into Spanish dishes. But it is olive oil, garlic, and seafood and fish that give Spanish cooking its distinct flavor and make it one of the healthiest **cuisines** in the world.

## Ancient Oil

Olive oil has been an essential part of the Spanish diet for centuries. The ancient Phoenicians planted the first



## Fresh Healthy Ingredients

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*Olive groves are found  
throughout Spain.*



*Olive oil varies in color and taste depending on the variety of olive it comes from.*

olive trees in Spain 3,000 years ago. Today, 262 varieties of olives grow in groves throughout Spain. In fact, the Spanish region of Andalusia (ahn-dah-lou-see-ah) boasts more than 165 million olive trees, more than anywhere else in the world. Many of these trees are at least 100 years old.

Although Spaniards eat lots of olives, 90 percent of the olives grown here are used to make olive oil. Spanish olive oil varies in color and taste depending on the variety of olive it is extracted from. It can be green, pale yellow, or golden and can taste sweet, nutty, fruity, or slightly bitter. For instance, oil made from tiny



Arbequina (ar-bay-key-e-nah) olives is yellowish-green and tastes smooth and buttery, while the golden oil made from hojiblanco (ho-hee-blahn-coh) olives has a sweet fruity flavor.

## The Flavor of Spain

Spanish cooks use olive oil in everything from main dishes to desserts, which may be why olive oil is often called the flavor of Spain. As a matter of fact, Spain is the world's largest consumer of olive oil. Each Spaniard uses about 30 pounds (3.62kg) of the rich oil annually. It is drizzled over cooked vegetables and grilled meat



### Spanish Ham

Pork is an important staple in Spain. Iberico (e-bay-ree-co) ham is among everyone's favorites. It comes from pigs that are fed a special diet of acorns, which gives their meat a sweet nutty taste.

Iberico ham is preserved by a method known as air curing. The meat is rubbed with salt and left for several weeks. Next, the salt is washed off and the meat is hung to dry for up to three years. Although this is usually done in special facilities, in the past many Spanish homes had a loft room just for this purpose, and some farmhouses still do.

The ham is sliced thin and eaten uncooked as appetizers and snacks. Because it is so popular, many Spanish bars have dozens of hams in cradlelike frames called jamoneras (hah-moan-air-ahs) hanging from hooks in their ceiling. The meat is sliced as it is needed.



## Making Olive Oil

To make olive oil, olives are placed in a metal-toothed grinder. It extracts the oil from the olives by squeezing or pressing them. Olives are put through the grinder many times. After each pressing, oil is extracted. Oil that has been through multiple pressings is used for cooking and frying. Extra-virgin olive oil, which is taken from the first pressing, is considered the finest olive oil. It is the oil that Spaniards dip bread in and use to dress their salads.

and fish. Cooks fry anything and everything in it. They make sauces and dressings with it. They use it in place of butter in baking. They flavor soups and mashed potatoes with it. They bathe salads in it. They dunk bread in it. In fact, a cruet of olive oil and little dipping bowls are found on almost every Spanish table. “Olive oil is mandatory at every meal in a Spanish home,”<sup>1</sup> explains Spanish chef Antonio Diaz. It adds a rich taste and aroma to Spanish cooking.

## A Healthy Food

Spaniards not only enjoy the flavor of olive oil, but they also believe that eating olive oil keeps them healthy. And they may be right. Scientists say a diet rich in olive oil protects people from heart disease. That may be why the incidence of heart disease among Spanish women is the lowest in the world and why the



*Garlic, along with olive oil, plays an important role in Spanish cooking.*

Spanish people, in general, have one of the longest life expectancies on Earth.

## **Food and Medicine**

Garlic is another important staple in Spanish cooking. Like olive oil, it not only tastes delicious, but it is also quite wholesome. For centuries, Spaniards considered it a cure-all and used the pungent herb not only to flavor food, but also to fight infection, treat respiratory and digestive illnesses, and repel evil spirits. Although garlic cannot do all these things, scientists have found

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that it has antibacterial properties and can indeed help fight infections. And when it is combined with olive oil, it releases a chemical that keeps blood clots from forming, which prevents heart attacks.

While Spaniards appreciate garlic's medicinal value, it is the delicious flavor and aroma it adds to food that they adore. Three types of garlic grow in Spain: white, pink, and yellow. White is the strongest tasting, while pink is the mildest. Pink is the most popular garlic in Spain.

Spanish cooks use garlic in a myriad of ways. It is pickled, roasted, fried, and eaten raw in salads. One

*Garlic soup is a simple, aromatic soup that has been made for centuries.*



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## Tomato Bread

Instead of buttering bread, Spaniards like to top bread with olive oil, garlic, and tomato. It tastes best if eaten while the bread is warm.

### Ingredients

4 slices Italian or other crusty bread  
4 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil  
2 small ripe tomatoes, cut in half  
2 garlic cloves, cut in half  
pinch of salt

### Instructions

1. Toast the bread in a toaster oven or on a grill.
2. Rub each slice of bread with a garlic half.
3. Rub each slice of bread with a tomato half. Squeeze the tomato so that the juice and pulp get on the bread.
4. Sprinkle each slice of bread with a teaspoon of olive oil.

Serves 4.



*Instead of buttered toast, Spaniards prefer toast flavored with garlic, tomato, and olive oil.*

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of their favorite uses is in garlic soup. Spaniards have been eating this simple fragrant soup for centuries. It is made with water, garlic, and olive oil, then topped with a poached egg and toasted bread and served in traditional earthenware bowls known as **cazuelas** (cahs-way-lahs).

Garlic is also the chief ingredient in **alioli** (ahl-ee-ol-ee) and **sofrito** (so-free-toe), two sauces that Spaniards love. Sofrito is made with garlic, olive oil, and tomatoes. Similar to tomato sauce, it adds a sweet zesty flavor to stews and rice dishes.

Alioli has a mayonnaise-like color and texture. The sauce is made by whisking olive oil with garlic, and it has a strong garlic flavor. Spaniards dip fried fish and seafood in it, marinate grilled foods in it, and dress potatoes with it. Says chef Marimar Torres: “It enhances grilled meat and fish, and can also enliven the flavor of a dish by stirring in just a spoonful at the end.”<sup>2</sup>

## Fish and Seafood

With 3,000 miles (4,828km) of coastline, Spain is blessed with an abundance of fish and seafood, important staples of the Spanish diet. In fact, Spaniards eat about 66 pounds (29.9kg) of fish and seafood per person annually. Since fish and seafood contain nutrients that fight heart disease, they contribute to the Spanish people’s good health. But it is the simple and delicious flavor that Spaniards adore. “Spain . . . is a fish lover’s



## Garlic Shrimp

Garlic shrimp is a popular Spanish seafood dish.

### **Ingredients**

- 24 medium shrimps, cleaned and peeled
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley or cilantro, chopped
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

### **Instructions**

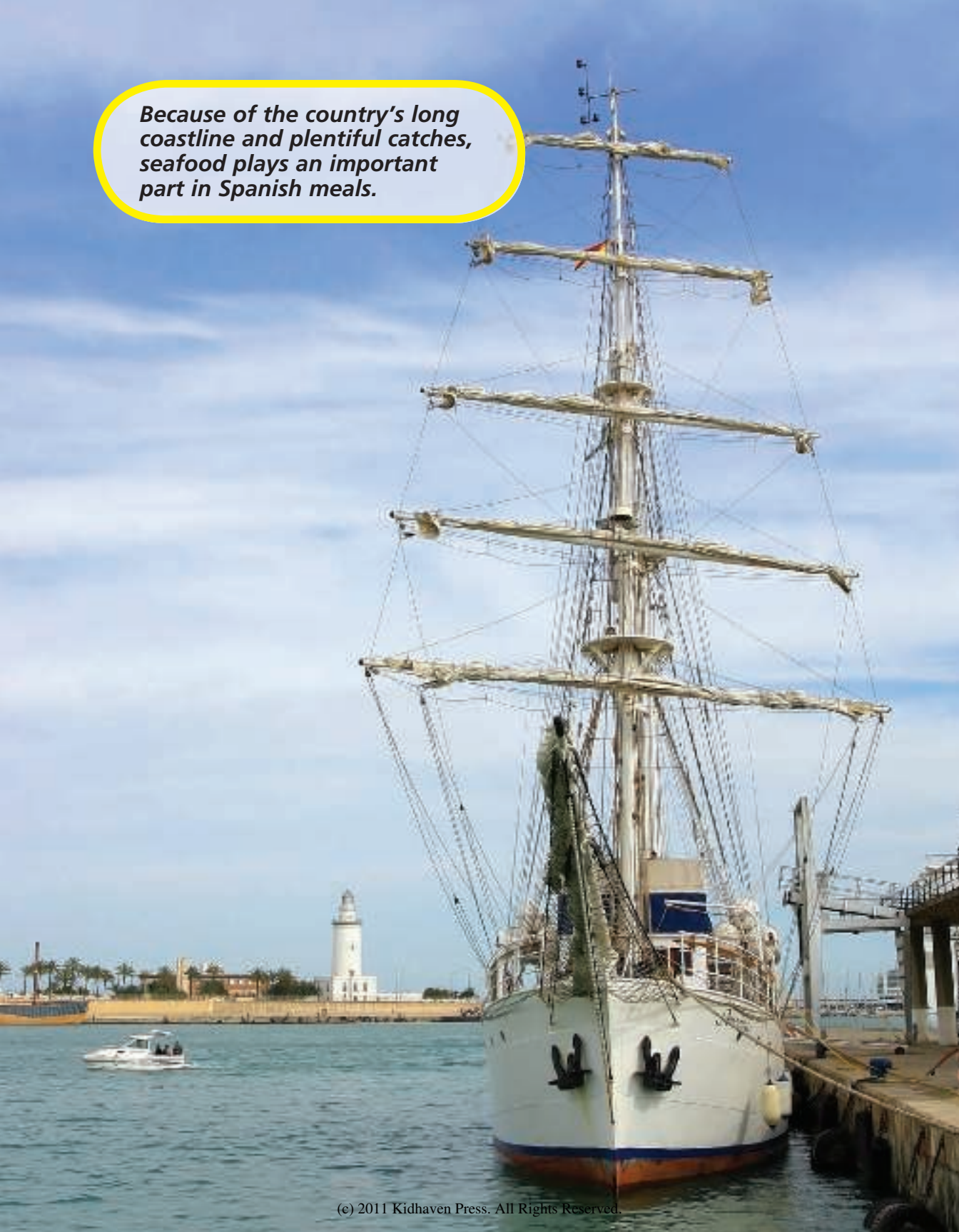
1. Heat the oil in a skillet. Add the shrimp, garlic, and red pepper flakes and cook on high heat until the shrimp are cooked, about 3–4 minutes. They should be pink and cooked throughout. Add the lemon juice.
2. Transfer the shrimp into a serving bowl and pour the oil and garlic over the shrimp. Sprinkle with parsley.

Serves 4.



*Garlic shrimp is made from Spain's plentiful shrimp supply.*

*Because of the country's long coastline and plentiful catches, seafood plays an important part in Spanish meals.*



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*Fresh fish markets are abundant in Spain. People demand—and get—only the freshest seafood.*

paradise,” explains chef Penelope Casas. “Fish reigns supreme and is the focus of all eating.”<sup>3</sup>

Favorites include tuna, shrimp, cod, tiny eels that are as small as a baby’s finger, bass, lobsters, hake, scallops, shrimp, octopus, and sardines, to name just a few. These may be grilled, baked, or fried. They may be bathed in olive oil and garlic, topped with sofrito or alioli, tossed in a salad, cooked with rice, or made into soup or stew. Cod is often dried and salted. This is known as **bacalao** (bahk-al-ow), which has been a Spanish favorite for centuries.

## 16 Foods of Spain

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## Fresh and Succulent

Because only the freshest products will do, rather than using a shopping list, Spaniards choose fish and seafood based on whatever has been harvested from the sea most recently. In coastal towns and cities, people can buy freshly caught fish and seafood right off fishing trawlers. Often the fishermen grill the fish in front of hungry customers. Manu, who grew up in a Spanish fishing village, recalls: “The only way we ate fish was off the boat. Next day we threw it out because for us it wasn’t fresh.”<sup>4</sup>

Fresh products are shipped to inland cities at least once a day. Freshness is so important that it is not uncommon for waiters in Spain’s most elegant restaurants to bring uncooked fish to patrons to inspect before they place their order. When fish and seafood are newly caught, any way they are prepared tastes delicious. “The trick is to get the freshest fish and other natural ingredients and then use your imagination,”<sup>5</sup> says chef Jose Grimaldi.

By combining freshly caught fish and seafood, local olive oil, and garlic, Spanish cooks create healthy, simple, and delicious meals. These ingredients give Spanish cuisine its distinctive flavor and contribute to the good health and long life expectancy of the Spanish people.

# A Reflection of Geography and History

**B**ecause Spaniards prefer eating fresh local food, Spain's diverse geography and climate, which ranges from snow-capped mountains to hot sun-drenched beaches, affects what people eat. For instance, thick stews and soups are popular in the mountains. Fish pies made with cold-water creatures like octopus and cod are favored along the Atlantic coast, while along the Mediterranean coast, shellfish stews rule.

Despite these regional differences, all Spanish cooking reflects the nation's long colorful history. Favorite dishes such as **paella** (pah-el-yah), **gazpacho** (gahs-pah-cho), and **tortilla española** (tor-tee-ya

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es-pahn-yo-la) are good examples of this blending of history and location.

## It Started with Rice

Paella is a rice dish that originated in Valencia, Spain, in the 19th century. But, if not for the ancient Romans and the **Moors**, this dish might never have been created.

The Moors were a group of Arabs who occupied Spain from the 8th to the 13th century. They were the first people to plant rice in Spain.

Spain's climate is somewhat dry for rice cultivation. But, because the Romans introduced irrigation farming to Spain 200 years earlier, this was not a problem. The Moors used this farming method to channel water from the mountains to the rice fields. Rice has flourished in Spain ever since.



### Spanish Restaurants

Spaniards love to eat out. Rather than hosting dinner parties in their homes, it is common for Spaniards to invite guests to a restaurant.

Spaniards have been dining out for centuries. Many Spanish restaurants are more than 100 years old. In fact, the world's oldest restaurant is located in Madrid, Spain's capital. It was established in 1725.

Early Spanish restaurants began as taverns where travelers and local people came for a drink and a bite to eat. Many also provided rooms in which travelers could spend the night as well as stables for their horses.

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Today, Spaniards eat about 50 pounds (22.7kg) of rice per person, per year. A large part of this is used in paella. Paella is a kind of stew that features a wide range of ingredients such as seafood, fish, pork, sausage, chicken, or rabbit. These may or may not be mixed with each other. There are seemingly limitless variations of the dish. “Put two Spanish cooks together and you’ll likely get three paellas,”<sup>6</sup> say authors Richard Sterling and Allison Jones. But no matter the other ingredients, paella always contains rice, olive oil, sofrito, and **saffron**. The last is a costly spice that the Moors brought to Spain. Its bright yellow color brightens paella, and its tealike flavor adds a savory taste to the dish.

*There are many variations of paella, but they always contains rice and saffron.*



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*Saffron adds color and flavor to paella.*

## A Special Pan

Seafood paella is one of the most popular varieties. To make it, a mix of different seafood and fish are stir-fried in olive oil in a large round shallow pan, known as a **paellera** (pah-el-yare-ra). It has a handle on each side and a flat bottom, which helps distribute heat evenly.

Tomatoes, garlic, and onions, the ingredients that compose sofrito, come next, followed by the rice, which is seasoned with saffron. The whole thing is coated with more olive oil, and water or broth is added. As the paella cooks, the liquid is absorbed and the rice drinks in the flavors of the other ingredients.

The paella is done when a golden crust known as the socarrat (so-cah-raht) forms on the bottom of the

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rice, while the rest of the rice is dry, plump, and slightly crunchy. Paella is usually served and eaten right out of the pan. Diners divide the paella up into sections and eat the delicious treat with special triangular spoons that are used only for this purpose.

## The Paella Maestro

Although paella can be made on a stove, traditionally it is cooked outside over a wood fire made from orange-tree branches. This gives the dish a smoky taste and a citrusy fragrance. Because it is often cooked over an open fire, Spaniards say cooking paella is a man's job. As a matter of fact, men known as paella maestros



### Cocido

Cocido (coh-cee-doh), which means *boiled* in Spanish, is a popular Spanish stew. It is made with chicken, beef, pork, sausage, and garbanzo beans, which are slowly cooked over low heat. Historians say that the first cocido was made by Spanish Jews hundreds of years ago. Because their religion prohibited them from working on the Sabbath, Jewish cooks prepared the stew before the Sabbath began and then left it to cook during the Sabbath.

Since Judaism also forbids eating pork, early cocido did not include it. In the 15th century, when Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or leave Spain, pork was added to the dish. By doing this, former Jews hoped to prove that they had truly given up their former religion.

*Paella cooked outside in a large pan called a paellera can feed many people.*



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