

BRINGS A NEW GOLD RUSH

Gourmet demand for a forgotten flower's precious spice is bringing hope, and work, back to Spanish farms. **Dale Fuchs** reports

Jose Martinez, a 24-year-old plumber, never imagined himself crouching in the dirt on a blustery field, delicately plucking purple flowers. But he has been out of work for two years, so even the brief saffron harvest, which ended this week in the Spanish region of La Mancha, is a welcome opportunity to earn some money.

"I'll work at anything," he said while gingerly wrapping his fingers around the stems to avoid damaging the crocus petals and their valuable red stigmas. "I don't know what they'll pay me yet - I don't expect more than €7 an hour - but it's better than nothing."

The worldwide recession has burst Spain's housing bubble, devastating the job market and pushing the unemployment rate to a painful 20 per cent, but it has been accidentally kind to a fragile, once-forgotten crop: saffron.

Those spindly aromatic filaments that give paella its characteristic golden glow are a centuries-old tradition in the torrid plains of La Mancha, the fictional stamping ground of Cervantes' Don Quixote, a dusty land of wind turbines where ambitious construction plans have evaporated like the mirages of the deluded knight's imagination.

Until recently, this cottage industry - which sprouts for about two weeks of planting in spring and two weeks of harvesting in late autumn - seemed to be withering as quickly as a plucked saffron crocus. But now, amid the bleak economic landscape, it is blossoming once again.

Jose Martinez, who picked a basketful of purple buds outside the town of Madridejos on Monday, is among the newcomers to the back-breaking harvest season, initiated into the somewhat secretive, family-dominated field by a veteran grower's son. But many former saffron producers, who abandoned their fields years ago for promising jobs in the now-ailing construction industry, are also seeking refuge in

those precious purple flowers. Other growers, inspired by historically high wholesale prices of €3,000 per kilo (more than double in stores), have expanded their plots.

"Rural people are returning to their roots," said Antonio Garcia, president of the province-wide Regulatory Commission for the Denomination of Origin of La Mancha. "With the prospect of long-term recession, the former farmers are willing to assume the risks of planting now that they see the risks of other sectors such as construction, which once looked more stable."

Until the 1990s, about 60 per cent of La Mancha families grew the treasured spice. The income from the wispy filaments were not enough to live on, but they allowed an olive farmer or grape-grower to afford a few luxuries. Many people squirreled away the dry red stigmas in closets or secret places as though they were gold nuggets, to be sold

Prices have doubled to €3,000 per kilo and the collapse of the construction market is bringing rural families back to traditional cottage industries

during hard times, always behind closed doors lest the neighbours catch wind of their agricultural riches. But then, in the heat of Spain's housing boom, relatively high-paying construction jobs beckoned.

By 1999, only 40 humble farmers in the entire La Mancha region still bothered to plant the saffron flower bulbs, and production had dwindled to 100 kilos per year. "Imagine, it almost disappeared," Mr Garcia said. Prices plummeted because some saffron-sellers mixed the Spanish variety, highly valued by spice connoisseurs, with cheap import from Iran, he added.

But production started picking up again after the La Mancha region instituted a saffron certifying process, with detailed criteria for everything from colour and

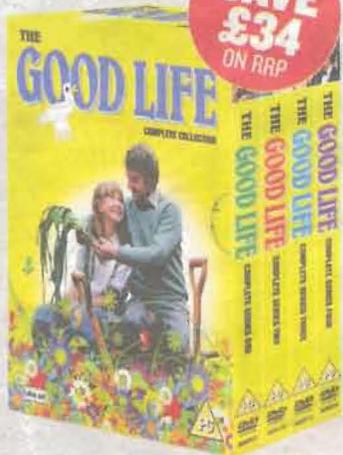
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Far left: harvesting is back-breaking. Left: Ana Cabra Carrasco separates the delicate stamens which give paella the famed golden glow. Right: Jose Martinez counts himself lucky to find work
DALE FUCHS; REUTERS



purity to the stigma arrangement (they must look like a three-pronged pitchfork in miniature). Every farmer was even given a number that appears on the saffron label. The move cut down on the swindles by rogue distributors.

Today, 440 state-certified saffron growers, most of them families, churn out 1,500 kilos year. At €3,000 a kilo, the delicacy is double the price paid four years ago, Mr Garcia said. At the gourmet counter at Spain's El Corte Ingles supermarket, a 10-gram gift pack fetches €102. After so many years, again in La Mancha, people are talking about "red gold".

Gregoria Carrasco Sanchez, whose six children and nine grandchildren harvest seven or eight kilos of saffron each year, said: "Here in Madridejos, the majority of the homes were built with saffron. When I was young, we saved the saffron in the house and used it for weddings and trousseaus. When I got married, we furnished the kitchen and the bedroom with it. You don't live on it day to day, but it certainly is a big help."

The saffron renaissance has taken such hold that there are not enough saffron bulbs to go around. Their price shot up to €5 apiece. And prospective farmers need to buy a lot of them. It takes 250,000 flowers to generate each kilo of savoury filaments. "We used to let the bulbs just sit there in the ground, because it wasn't worth digging them up," said Jesus Moreno, a 40-year-old farmer in the La Mancha town of Consuegra, who has harvested saffron flowers since he was four and now fills his basket with enough crocus buds to produce four kilos with the help of his two small children and an unemployed sister. "Now unemployed farmers who want to return to saffron can't afford to buy the bulbs."

The regulatory commission has a waiting list of more than 60 families eligible for free bulbs, subsidised by retailers hopeful of future profits. International demand for Spanish saffron has recently risen in part because of the US embargo on the Iranian variety. Spain's rising status as a foodie haven, bursting with Michelin-starred chefs, also helps. "We have so much demand that we would have to produce 10 times as much as we do to satisfy it all," Mr Garcia said.

The children of veteran growers used to groan at the annual date with hand cramps and yellow-stained fin-



gers. After all, stooping in the dirt and peeling flowers with mum is not everyone's favourite way to spend a two-week holiday. But with the poor economy, even the younger saffron generation is performing their familial duties with renewed vigour.

"We're harvesting with gusto," said Ana Cabra Carrasco, one of Ms Carrasco Sanchez's daughters, as she gingerly peeled the petals from a mound of recently picked flowers. Seated around a table with her family, she extricated the slender stigmas and set them in a small pile. Her mother dried them on a silk-covered drum over a traditional heater.

"The extra money comes in handy now," her sister, Valentina Cabra Carrasco, chimed in. "With the crisis, we're making an extra effort."

With prices high, the family hopes to eventually turn the annual plucking party into a retail business with hired pickers. Each year, instead of selling left-over bulbs, they extend their plots, which are rented and rotated every few years.

During the harvest, the sisters work five hours a day in the field, then separate filaments until 1am with an hour break for meals - usually their mother's potato stew seasoned with a handful of crushed home-grown saffron. Their toil will eventually earn each of them about €2,500, they said.

But first, the handiwork is paid in filaments, divided into three red piles, one for the worker, whether relative or friend; two for the owner of the crop. "It's always been paid like that," said Ms Carrasco Sanchez, the matriarch, who often acts as a liaison between saffron exporters and the distrustful townsfolk. "Here the people don't want the money, they want the saffron. It's like a treasure, a jewel."

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