Dinner of the Year

Phil Harris



In 1987, a year after Portugal joined the EEC and 13 years after its revolution, I landed in Lisbon intent on writing the great novel. The city was then – a couple of years before the fall of the Berlin Wall – among the cheapest places in Western Europe for the British. And Lisbon was lovely: beautiful, safe, and with friendly, interesting people. I found myself an attic room for around £2.50 a night, discovered a bar that sold absinthe, and bought myself a notebook that I soon filled with nonsense.

More productive was the time I spent wandering the backstreets of Lisbon, searching for cheap restaurants. These were abundant, basic and full of wonder for a 25-year-old English boy. The menus were simple. Meat, usually pork, was marinated, fried and served with chips, occasionally with clams throw in; fish was exquisitely fresh, unadorned, and served with boiled potatoes and a basic salad. Exceptions to this norm were hearty stews – feijoada (pork and beans, beloved of Brazil) and dobradinha (tripe) being my favourites – and dishes that manifested the Portuguese obsession (then and now) with bacalhao, salted cod, available in all manner of guises. Oh yes, and sardines, barbecued al fresco over coal in the narrow winding streets of Alfama. I can still remember that aroma now. This was peasant cuisine par excellence, but many international diners saw it as rudimentary, especially when compared to the multifarious cooking to be found in regional Spain.

The great novel unwritten, the money depleted, I returned to London where Portuguese restaurateurs (EEC newcomers) were starting ventures cooking the food of their homeland. I managed to get work on the *Time Out London Eating & Drinking Guide* reviewing these establishments, and my haphazard adventure as a food writer began.

Leap forward almost 40 years, and Portuguese cuisine has been transformed. This year, 11 new restaurants in the country were awarded a star in the 2026 Michelin guide. And in London, stellar chefs such as Nuno Mendes (formerly of Bethnal Green's Viajante and Fitzrovia's Lisboeta) and Henrique Sá Pessoa (Joia Restaurant & Bar overlooking Battersea Power Station) have moulded and modernised the cooking to match their glamorous crowd-pulling venues.

But rather like British chefs of the 1980s and 90s, the pull of home remained strong. Both Mendes and Sá Pessoa are now helping to fuel the burgeoning restaurant scene in Portugal, which on October 24th was celebrated with the inaugural 'Dinner of the Year', held in a stupendous setting by the Belem Tower near Lisbon.



Three 'hosts' including Sá Pessoa but also Noélia Jerónimo (an acclaimed chef from the Algarve), and Rui Paula (creative force behind the two-Michelin-starred Casa de Chá da Boa Nova, north of Porto) had invited four overseas chefs to collaborate on the menu for the night.



French-born Claude Troisgros and his equally accomplished protégé Jéssica Trindade had flown in from Rio, while Rodrigo Oliveira – celebrated for elevating North-eastern Brazilian cooking – had arrived from São Paulo. Completing the international line-up was Michael Schwartz of Miami's 'Michael's Genuine Food & Drink' and a major player in the South Florida restaurant industry.

‘Dinner of the Year’, a supremely glitzy event, opened with Portuguese fado music, before Brazilian rhythms, musicians and dancers took the stage, the chefs often joining in (with occasionally questionable results).



The five-course menu, paired with top-quality Portuguese wines, emphasised transatlantic collaborations and flavours, some astoundingly successful others less so. An unalloyed triumph – among the assembled food writers – was the opener: a version of ceviche created by Noélia Jerónimo where chunks of ultra-fresh marinated seabass were paired with spicy, tangy mango gazpacho (more a sauce than a soup). ‘Fish with banana’ to follow, courtesy of Trinidade and Troisgros, divided opinion. No complaints about the impeccable fillet, nor its accompanying foamy pond of coconut cream, but was the banana supposed to be ‘undercooked’? I for one, adored its pulse-like, almost crunchy texture. Next, langoustine with cassava bobó, also featured a striking contrast of textures: the shellfish fillets taut, glistening, resilient (no mean feat at a mass catering event), resting on a smooth cassava purée of almost caramel-like consistency: a thumbs-up for co-creators Paula and Oliveira.



By now, many of the assembly, seduced by introductory canapés, were flagging, so the hefty main course of veal cheek with an intricately wrought plantain millefeuille and a red cabbage ’slaw, might have been better appreciated without so many precursors. Nevertheless, collaborators, Sá Pessoa and Schwartz, scored highly for their panache on the stage.

Tradition ended the evening, with a faultless rendition of Algarve almond cake, moist and rich, from Jerónimo who finished as she had begun, on a southern Portuguese crest.



Next year the entire event is due to take place again: in Rio.

All this is an ocean away from my perambulations of Lisbon's backstreets in 1987. But for a devoted lusophile, it is gratifying to see Portuguese cuisine take its place in the Mediterranean sun. Our four-day press trip also encompassed manifold aspects of the country's food system: from a visit to a 14th-century wine estate in the Alentejo, to a trip to a Lisbon food bank run by the remarkable Isabel Jonet – and not forgetting being shown the entire production process (apart from the secret recipe) of pastéis de Belem, the original of the pastel de nata, Portuguese cuisine's long-time gift to the world.