



TOBY YOUNG IS THE...

Restaurant Spy

PORTAL

is a restaurant that deserves to be noticed

Talk about great publicity! Earlier this month, a listening device was uncovered at Portal, a Portuguese restaurant in Clerkenwell, said to be favoured by Jose Mourinho, the infamous Chelsea manager. The following day, this discovery made headlines around the world. Indeed, it was usually the same headline, translated into a dozen different languages: 'Waiter, there's a bug in my soup.' Overnight, Portal was transformed from an obscure little bistro into a Top People's Restaurant, and it's not an exaggeration to say that it has been booked ever since.

Naturally, my first thought on meeting Portal's owner – an inscrutable Portuguese gentleman called Antonio Correia – is to try to work out if he's a PR mastermind or just a very lucky guy. 'I swear it's 100 per cent true,' he laughs. 'I installed a radio in the kitchen so the staff could listen to music and it started picking up snippets of conversation in the restaurant. I called in a private security firm and they found the bug.'

In Correia's defence, listening devices have been discovered in numerous restaurants across the Atlantic, mainly those favoured by Wall Street types in Lower Manhattan. Portal is only a ten-minute walk from London's financial district, making it a popular destination for investment bankers and their clients, so it's conceivable that it might have been bugged by some unscrupulous 'City Boys' hoping for some inside information. Whatever the explanation, the owner now has the restaurant swept for bugs at regular intervals and – so far, at least – he has yet to find another one.

It would be churlish to begrudge Portal all the attention it has been



Hot dish

Originally from Portugal, **Leandro Pacheco** has been bar manager at Portal since it opened last year. A keen traveller, the 25-year-old moved to London 13 years ago and has lived in Shoreditch ever since. He sees the restaurant as combining 'the traditional flavour of Portugal with a touch of modern cuisine.' Unlike competitors, they do not reset tables, allowing customers to 'relax and enjoy the great atmosphere'. Leandro recommends the bisaro steak with fennel mash, green cabbage and Madeira sauce.

getting since it is a restaurant that deserves to be noticed. As you step through the door, you could be forgiven for thinking you've entered a modest little tapas bar, but keep going through a passageway at the back and Portal opens up into a large conservatory with seating for 94 people. Ken Mackay's interior design is hardly the most original I've ever seen – it could be described as 'Pompidou Centre Lite' – but there's no doubt that he's made excellent use of the available space.

My lunching companion was Camilla Wright, the 35-year-old editor of Popbitch, so every time I imparted a bit of gossip I had to get her to

promise she wouldn't use it. (The boot is nearly always on the other foot, so that made a pleasant change.) She started with warm tomato soup with poached quail's egg and truffle oil, while I had the pan-fried foie gras with a pistachio crust and port-marinated nectarines.

As these rather 'long-winded' descriptions imply, the food at Portal is what many Americans would describe as 'fancy

schmancy', but both starters passed muster.

For her main course, Camilla had the trio of cod and I had the meat special, which turned out to be the Portuguese equivalent of a full English: fried pork, fried egg and fried potatoes. I'm not sure I'd choose my dish again, it was a little too rustic for my tastes, but Camilla enjoyed her cod.

As you'd expect from a restaurant that has recently been de-bugged, Portal attracts a fairly high calibre of customers. ITV's controller of entertainment was at the next-door table having lunch with a ravishing brunette, while various investment bankers were whispering to one another in the private dining room, possibly in the hope of not being overheard. There was no sign of Jose Mourinho, but then, according to the owner, he's never actually been to Portal. The reason his name was linked to the restaurant in all the news reports of the bugging incident is because he singled it out as one of his 'favourites' in a recent interview. Perhaps he was just being loyal to his homeland, Portal being one of only two high-end Portuguese restaurants in the capital.

I have no idea what Portal was like before it hit the headlines, but it's now a hot, buzzy restaurant that I have no hesitation in recommending. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if Jose Mourinho himself pays a visit before very long.

Table Talk PORTAL

88 St John Street, E1 (020 7253 6950)

Who goes there?

Lawyers, footballers and stockbrokers. Alan Rickman (left) has tested the bacalhau (salt cod).

Why? Portuguese food with a Mediterranean and French twist.

What to order? Begin with gazpacho with fresh goat's cheese and croûtons. For main, try the trio of cod which includes bacalhau confit with sautéed

turnip greens, poached cod with alvarino, and bacalhau with a coriander crust and morcilla rosti – but this is not for the faint-hearted. Finish off with roast figs and passion-fruit ice cream.

Best table Table eight seats two, and has the best view of the restaurant.

Cost £30-£45 a head without wine (and don't expect to find Mateus Rosé on the list).

Restaurant manager Antonio Correia.



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