

The grape and the good

They offer more variety, informed advice and even wine tastings, but can the independent wine shops beat the supermarkets? Our wine special starts with this superior wine bar and restaurant, Portal, on page 49



MING TANG EVANS

NEW REVIEWS

Time Out reviews anonymously and pays for meals

Portal

Portuguese-accented vinho and victuals near Smithfield

Not as in: portal to another universe; or even a portal to the information superhighway (remember that?). The name derives from Quinta do Portal, the Portuguese winemakers.

None the wiser? Portal are a Douro-based wine company who appeared in the mid-1990s, and won immediate critical acclaim for their beautifully-made wines. While most wine producers in the Douro region make traditional and predictable wines, Portal learned from the New World approach and make gutsy, delicious table wines. Quinta do Portal's trademark even appears on this restaurant's plates. So this must be their flagship London restaurant, right? Wrong.

The owner of this new Clerkenwell restaurant, Antonio Correia, told us: 'Pedro Branco, the owner of Portal

'You won't find any Mateus Rosé on this wine list.'

wines, is my best friend. I asked him if I could use Portal's name and branding. He said yes. But there is no commercial connection.'

Despite this, the connection with Portugal, and Quinta do Portal wine, remains strong. Correia is an experienced restaurant manager, and a wine buff; express an interest and he'll indulge you with information and maybe a tasting glass or two. He even keeps his private wine cellar, displayed behind a locked glass door, at the restaurant.

As you'd expect, Portal's wine list is imaginatively chosen, unusual, and Iberian-accented. The wines are not the obvious bottles, grapes or styles; instead there are food-friendly grapes such as Spanish Albariño, Friuli from Italy, even Assyrtico from Greece. You won't find any Mateus Rosé on this wine list.

A good wine list alone doesn't make a good restaurant, but in most other areas Portal scores well too. The premises are



This 'wine cellar' sure beats a box under the stairs

spacious but broken into bar, private rooms, a huge glass conservatory and airy dining room. Service is professional yet friendly, the feel of the place very smart; there are more City suits than cab drivers. And the Modern European menu, both in the restaurant and the small dishes (petiscos) served in the bar, takes some inspiration from Portugal.

Bacalhau is a signature ingredient in Portuguese cooking, and you won't find salt cod much better than this: very thoroughly soaked and rinsed to get rid of excessive saltiness, but with a firm,

chewy texture, set on a disc of stiff houmous. Pork cheeks have been marinated in red wine for 12 hours then slow-cooked for nearly a day, this Portuguese technique called chanfana; the result is very tender yet full-flavoured, as the meat comes from Bisaro, a Portuguese race of semi-wild pig.

Some aspects of our dishes seemed curiously old-fashioned, such as the 1970s medley of vegetables served with the main courses, but we couldn't deny everything was done beautifully. The details were all correctly prepared, from a flavoursome complementary appetiser of duck sausage to a drizzle of Madeira sauce reduction. Cutting-edge food fashion and modernity aren't crucial when the basics are done right.

London's Portuguese restaurant scene was moribund until Tugga opened in Chelsea a few months ago (see p51). Now, Portal makes two good points of entry for the lesser-known Iberian cuisine. At last, new doors are opening to better Portuguese food and drink in London. *Guy Dimond*
Portal, 88 St John St, EC1M 4EH (020 7253 6950/ www.portalrestaurant.com) Farringdon tube/rail. Open Mon-Sat 12noon-10.15pm; meals served Mon-Sat 12noon-3pm, 6-10.15pm. Meal for two with wine and service: around £85.



Portal's owner, Antonio Correia