



## Portal steps up to the plate

Ready for a change? At his new restaurant in EC1, Antonio Correia is pushing hard for Portugal

**\* When I meet Antonio Correia he's full of beans.** He has just read the *Time Out* review of his recently opened restaurant, Portal, and it was very favourable indeed. "What I like about Guy Dimond [*Time Out's* restaurant critic] is that he has made the effort to understand what the concept is."

So what is the concept? Portal is a restaurant and bar situated in London's Clerkenwell. The bar serves petiscos (a Portuguese version of tapas) and the restaurant has a Modern European menu with a Portuguese bias. "We serve good Portuguese cuisine with a French influence, and all the simple elements that make us love food."

"With all due respect to my contemporaries, I felt we

needed something a bit more high-end in this area without costing the earth, and why not have that with Portuguese food? I think that petiscos will be the new sushi."

Portugal is at the heart of the restaurant's ethos; the crockery and glasses were all sourced from the country, as was the head chef Ricardo Costa. "He wasn't easy to get. It took me nine months and a lot of flights." The restaurant's name is even taken from the Portuguese winemaker Quinta do Portal. Wine is Correia's passion, so much so that he keeps his personal collection displayed in the restaurant's private dining room. Having come to England from Portugal as a textile engineer in the early '80s, working in Fulham but residing in Clerkenwell, his love of wine made him a regular at local favourite Café du Marché, which he joined as Bar Manager in 1991. In 1995 he became General Manager and his 14-year relationship with the diners of the area has established a great love of the district.

"Even when I am in Portugal, I miss London. I've seen many changes since I first came to this area. There was nothing – just a steakhouse in Charterhouse Square. I'm pleased with the way it has developed, but there are a few places that just want to make a quick buck. But making money in this industry isn't easy, that's why you've got to do it right."

For Correia "doing it right" involved picking a site that was adaptable and spacious. "I looked at this site, then this site, then this site. The layout of the building was perfect, each of the separate spaces [the bar at the front, the main restaurant, the outside courtyard and the private dining room] has its own personality."

For such a large space it would have been tempting to squeeze in more covers and extend the bar, but for Correia it's not about packing the punters in. "I want people to have space. When the architect asked me how I wanted it, I said that anyone who comes in, whether for a quick drink or a full meal, must feel like they're going to be looked after."

And people are looked after. Several times during our chat he is interrupted by customers coming in and greeting him warmly on first name terms; not bad for a restaurant that's been open a matter of weeks. "They've followed me from Café du Marché. It's Portal's seventh week and it has been busy since the opening."

Correia is a consummate Maitre d'. Later that evening I watch him waltzing around the restaurant, checking that everything is in order and giving cocktail quaffing ladies from the bar a guided tour of the premises. His style is distinctly old school, and as his petit frame bobs and weaves in and out of the starkly designed tables and chairs, the media slaves and City suits, he brings a touch of old-fashioned flair, warmth and flamboyance, to this rather cool, urban space. ●

### Portal

#### On the menu?

Octopus Patanisca, Potato Salad, Tomato Pesto; Foie Gras and Fig Terrine, Raspberry Sorbet; Roasted Sea Bass, Bacalhau Crust and Sun-dried Tomato Risotto; Fried Banana Raviolis, Lemon Sorbet, Rum and Raisin Sauce; Bellini 'Portal' Muscat Anglaise.

**Size?** 80-cover restaurant. Private dining room seats up to 12. Bar seats 30.

**Where?** Portal Restaurant and Bar, 88 St John Street, London EC1M 020 7253 6950, [www.portalrestaurant.com](http://www.portalrestaurant.com)



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