



Portal EC1

£45 **223**

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Portugal. What springs to mind? Golf and beaches rather than haute cuisine.

It has its Port industry, of course -- and produces half the world's cork (used mostly for... you guessed it). And in fact the name for this excellent Smithfield newcomer comes from a family-owned wine-maker in the Douro Valley. Drink is a theme -- from the bar (through which you enter) to the interesting Iberian-led wine list; the Port list; and the attractive bottle-lined private room (for 10).

The place is much more than a glorified wine bar, though, even if an extensive and interesting-sounding menu of petiscos ('tidbits') is available. Occupying the attractive, rambling site, vacated by Cafe Lazeez City, it's an impressive all-rounder, equally suited for business lunching (of the not too formal variety) or dining when you're paying your own way.

Much of the main dining area, at the rear, occupies a large metal-framed conservatory-type room, looking on to a small yard and a surprisingly characterful stone wall. Its stylish but unstuffy atmosphere was enlivened on our visit by a (subdued) jazzy background soundtrack. Two thirds of the dining room was besuited.

If you didn't know the food was Portuguese-inspired, you'd just think that finally, hallelujah, someone (in this case, Ricardo Costa) had created a modern European menu that didn't just round up the usual suspects. Iberian 'notes' -- such as a bacalhau crust to a fish dish -- pepper menu descriptions, and the dishes I experienced were interesting and deeply flavoured. The same could be said of the Quinta da Portal white (a Moscatel and Malvasia blend), but not the coffee (which was surprisingly poor).

Service was in some cases of the charming English-as-a-second-language variety. Any incomprehension was immediately efficiently overcome, though, and only added to the genuine atmosphere that runs through the whole venture.

 www.portalrestaurant.co.uk

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