

wine list

by **tim atkin**

preacher man

Antonio Correia is evangelical about Portuguese wine. In fact he's made it a virtue with the birth of Portal restaurant and bar in Clerkenwell, London

When Antonio Correia was trying to think of a name for his new Clerkenwell-based bar and restaurant, he spent a few hours brainstorming with friends. Someone came up with Portal, which also happened to be the name of a friend's winery in the Douro, Quinta do Portal. 'I got on the phone to Pedro Branco to ask his permission,' recalls Antonio, 'and he said "of course you can have it". It was fortunate that I liked his wines, wasn't it?'

As it happens, Pedro did rather well out of the deal. He now supplies the house red, white and rosé at Portal, as well as a Viosinho white, four estate reds (a Reserva, Tinto Roriz, Touriga Franca and Touriga Nacional) and eight ports, making 16 wines in all out of a list of around 100 bins. For a Portuguese wine producer more accustomed to relative obscurity in the UK, that's certainly not a bad hit rate.

Antonio's catering background was as a partner in the successful, French-oriented Café du Marché on the other side of Smithfield market, where he was also in charge of the wine list. But as a native of Coimbra and a fan of his country's wines, he had always dreamt of opening a bar and restaurant with a Portuguese theme. A suitable site came up at the end of last year (it used to be an Indian restaurant called Café Lazeez) and after Mackay & Partners had done the stylish urban design, the builders moved in. In eight weeks the place was complete, using 42 builders and nine members of Portal's staff. There's nothing like fostering a bit of team spirit from your staff.

Design is not part of my brief in CLASS, but this is one of the smartest spaces in London, combining wood, glass, lighting and open space to spectacular effect. It's a very welcoming place to have a drink, whether you choose to sit in the front bar, the little tapas room (called Petiscos) or the restaurant in the conservatory.

As you'd expect in this part of town, Portal's clients are a mix of lawyers, PR and media people, Stock Exchange traders and local residents. The wine list at Portal makes a virtue of Portugal, which is great news for those of us who feel the country is under-represented in the UK.

Apart from the Quinta do Portal wines, there will soon be another 20 Portuguese wines on the list, many of them available by the glass, and ranging from inexpensive whites to Barca Velha, Portugal's most famous red and the chosen tipple of Chelsea



manager Jose Mourinho. 'I'm an evangelist for the top Portuguese wines,' says Antonio. It's great to see wines from producers like Quinta de Cabriz in Dão, Reguengo de Melgaço in Vinho Verde, Vinho Pera-Manca in the Alentejo and Casa Ferreirinha in the Douro on a restaurant wine list.

Portuguese wines appear to be selling, despite the presence of many good bottles from elsewhere on the list (of which more in a moment). As manager, Lourdes Manrique, puts it: 'Most people who come here drink Portuguese wines. They come here prepared to try something different and that gives us a chance to interact with our customers. We're happy to give them a glass of a wine they don't know to taste.'

Antonio buys the Quinta do Portal wines through Great Western Wines, but sources all the other Portuguese wines himself. From wines from the rest of the world, his suppliers are Fields/Morris & Verdín, Robert Rolls Fine Wines and Champagnes et Châteaux.

He has also ransacked his own private cellar to add a few mature fine wines to the list: 1995 Latour, 1982 Mouton-Rothschild, 1990 Chave Hermitage and 1987 Vega Sicilia Unico, for instance.

If you're going to drink something fancy, make sure you enquire about the price first, as some of these wines are better value than others. The best bottles at Portal sit behind glass doors on the shelves of the restaurant's private dining room. The temperature probably isn't ideal in there, but the visual effect is impressive.

So, too, are the framed labels on one wall of the restaurant, which help to enhance the wine-focused feel. Fine wines apart, the rest of the list is Spanish and French focused. There's a smattering

Portal

Glass/bottle	CHAMPAGNE
28.00	Parxet 'Cuvee 21' Brut Cava, N.V.
55.00	Joseph Perrier 'Blanc des Blancs', N.V.
170.00	Krug Grande Cuvee, N.V.
Glass/bottle	ROSE WINE
4.50/14.00	Quinta do Portal Rose, Douro, 2004, Portugal
25.00	Otto Besten Cabernet Tempranillo Rosado, Somontano, 2004, Spain
7.50/30.00	Sancerre Rose, Domaine Lauerjat, Loire Valley, 2003, France
Glass/bottle	WHITE WINE
4.00/11.50	'Frontaria' Branco, Douro, 2004, Portugal
23.00	Penon Park 'Pacific Pin' Dry Riesling, California, 2003, USA
27.00	Pinot Blanc 'Barriques', Domaine Oberstag, Alsace, 2003, France
7.50/30.00	Sancerre, Domaine Vincent Delaporte, Loire, 2004, France
32.00	Filiboa Albarino, Rio Baicos, 2004, Spain
45.00	Meursault 'Les Narvaux', Domaine Coutoux, Burgundy, 2002, France
49.00	Saint Joseph 'Vieilles Vignes', Domaine Ebene Guigal, Rhone, 2000, France
58.00	Condrieu, Domaine Etienne Guigal, Rhone, 2002, France
65.00	Meursault 'Les Tessens', Domaine Caillot, Burgundy, 1999, France
120.00	Puligny Montrachet 1er Cru 'Pacelles', Paul Pernot, Burgundy, 2000, France
165.00	Bienvenue Batard Montrachet Grand Cru Paul, Pernot, Burgundy, 1999, France
Glass/bottle	RED WINE
4.00/11.50	'Frontaria' Tinto, Douro, 2001, Portugal
17.00	Fincas La Parades Barbera, San Rafael, 2002, Argentina
20.00	Casa Castillo 'Vendimia', Monastrell & Tempranillo, Jumilla, 2003, Spain
6.25/25.00	Cairanne, Santa Duc, Cotes du Rhone Villages, Rhone, 2000, France
25.50	Valentin Bianchi, Malbec Reserva, Mendoza, 2002, Argentina
37.00	Meursault 'Les Duzelois', Joseph Roby, Burgundy, 2002, France
39.00	Quinta do Portal Tinto Roriz, Douro, 2001, Portugal
42.00	Rosso di Montalcino, Colleoni, Santa Maria, Toscana, 2001, Italy
48.00	Chateau La Tour Martillac, Pessac Leognan, 1999, France
65.00	Vino Tironia Gran Reserva, Rioja Alta, 1985, Spain
80.00	Chateau Gloria, Saint Julien, Bordeaux, 1985, France
160.00	Bonnes Mares, Joseph, Burgundy, 1970, France
350.00	Charles Heidsieck Grand Cru, Hubert Lignier, Burgundy, 2000
400.00	Hermitage, Domaine Chave, Rhone, 1990, France
550.00	Chateau Mouton Rothschild, Pauillac, Bordeaux, 1982, France
Glass/bottle	PORT
4.00/26.00	Quinta do Portal 'Fine White Port', N.V.
7.75/55.00	Quinta do Portal '20 Year Tawny', N.V.
135.00	Graham's 'Vintage' 1966
Glass/bottle	DESSERT WINE
4.00/22.00	Quinta do Portal Moscatel, N.V.
11.00/55.00	Oremus Tokaji Aszu '5 puttonyos', Mad, 1999, Hungary (50 cl)
95.00	Chateau Rieussec, Sauternes, Bordeaux, 1998, France

frontaria branca, douro

As house whites go, this has to be one of the most interesting in London. It's a blend of Moscatel, Viosinho, Malvasia and Gouveio from a region that is better known for full-bodied reds, but it proves that the Douro Valley has the potential to make aromatic whites as long as the grapes are grown at altitude. This wine is ripe and fruity with notes of aniseed and orange zest.

pinot blanc d'alsace, barriques

André Ostertag in Epfing is among Alsace's leading producers, making first class Riesling, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir, as well as wines from lesser grapes, such as Sylvaner and Pinot Blanc. Pinot Blanc isn't popularly produced in Alsace, but this barrel-fermented example is really interesting. Maybe it's down to the fact that Ostertag is committed to biodynamic viticulture (a belief system based on the influences of the solar system) or maybe he's just a very good winemaker.

cairanne

It's not as famous as Châteauneuf-du-Pape or even Gigondas, but Cairanne makes some of my favourite southern Rhône reds. Like its neighbours, its wines are rich, flavoursome reds based on the Grenache grape, but they tend to be quite a bit cheaper. So they make a good alternative if you're shocked by the prices of Châteauneuf. 2000 and 2001 was an excellent vintage.

quinta de portal tinta roriz

There's a bit of a debate going on in the Douro Valley at the moment. Is Tinta Roriz, one of the staples of port, the same grape variety as Spain's Tempranillo? In the end, I'm not sure that it matters that much if the wine is as good as this. It's not quite as exciting as the same producer's Touriga Franca, but it's a very good alternative to a Ribera del Duero.

of wines from New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Chile and Argentina, but you sense that Antonio is happier on European ground than he is in the New World. Yet even here he manages to avoid safe choices, challenging his customers to try something different. It's nice to see a list without a single Chardonnay from the Southern Hemisphere or the United States.

From the Old World, too, there are a number of unusual wines, many of them at enticing prices. Things like a Côte de Duras white (£19), a barrel-fermented Alsace Pinot Blanc (£27), a Calatayud Garnacha (£15), a Saint Chinian (£26) and a Jumilla Monastrell/

Tempranillo (£20) are exactly the sort of things that I like to see on wine lists. The fact that Portal's mark ups are reasonable can only encourage people to experiment. 'I need to feel comfortable with what I'm charging,' says Antonio, 'because there is no point in taking the mickey. People are pretty well informed these days. They know what the prices are.' They also, I would suggest, know a successful bar and restaurant when they see one. Portal more than lives up to expectations. ■

Portal Bar and Restaurant

Address: 88 St John Street, London EC1M 4EH

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Website: www.portalrestaurant.com

Owner: Antonio Correia

Manager: Lourdes Manrique

Opening times: 12 noon to 11.30, Monday to Friday; 6pm to 11.30pm, Saturday

Wine suppliers: Great Western Wines; Robert Roll; Fields/Morris & Verlin; Champagnes et Châteaux