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## Portal, London EC1

### Portugal goes global

By Thomas Sutcliffe

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In restaurant terms you can go an awful long way without ever going abroad; Chinese, Indian and Italian restaurants have all been so thoroughly domesticated (aka bastardised) that no sense of foreign travel attaches to them. But some cuisines still require a mental passport. I don't suppose anyone has ever uttered the words "Let's go for a Portuguese", for example, and I don't think the term is likely to make the move from adjective to noun any time soon, despite the fact that London has two relatively new Portuguese restaurants aiming at the upper end of the market - Tugga in Chelsea and Portal in Clerkenwell.

Portal has the most appealing dining room I've been into for months, a spacious industrial conservatory which looks on to a raw brick wall and a spotlight screen of bamboo plants. Inside there, naked air-conditioning ducts, more raw brick and unconcealed girders. In other words, a design cliché, but one that's been very neatly expressed here and which excludes another kind of cliché - the hand-cut oak and parchment-lightshade bodega effect which is the mark of more traditional Iberian restaurants. This isn't a leather wine bottle and cartwheel type of place. Indeed it describes itself as "modern European" rather than strictly Portuguese, with a menu that tries to balance an essentially rustic kitchen tradition with something a bit more globe-trotting. You can get sushi of bacalhau, for instance - an unlikely marriage of a dish that prizes absolute freshness with an ingredient so effectively preserved that you could build a garden fence out of it. You also get a jumble of amuse-bouches, including a shot glass of cucumber soup and chickpea tapas.

I passed on the bacalhau in favour of another Portuguese-Japanese cultural exchange, tuna tataki on acorda with vegetables escabeche (£7.50), a kind of deconstructed version of a popular Portuguese bread soup. It was excellent - the doughy heft of the spring onion-flavoured corn-bread matching up rather well with the seared fish. An asparagus consommé with crab ravioli (£6.50) was also good, but two other starters disappointed; a creamed green tomato soup was a little bland and a terrine of smoked sardine with tomato confit was overchilled and a little strident in its flavours. I don't much care for sardines at the best of times, but my usually wife loves them and this dish defeated even her ardour.

She didn't have much more luck with her main course, having helpfully volunteered to try braised chanfana, a pork dish marinated in red wine and slow-cooked for hours. The implicit promise was of meat you could eat with a spoon but a marlinspike might have been more appropriate because the dish was reminiscent of a well-flavoured section of mooring hawser. I don't know what cut of the Bisero pig they'd used but my wife was pulling strands of it from between her teeth for some time after. My rib of Mirandesa beef (£29.50 for two) arrived so tense and tight from the cooking that I felt like ordering it a shoulder massage before starting - but it detectably relaxed as we ate. I'd have preferred it to do this in a warm place in the kitchen before coming out to meet us - but the quality of the beef couldn't be faulted. My daughter's red pepper crusted lamb, served with ratte potatoes and a ginger sauce (£14), was much more tender and a magret of duck caramelised with lemon and lime (£14), served on a nutty mix of wild and white rice was also good.

Desserts play a similar game with native tradition and modish influence. I ranked the fried banana raviolis as a no-score draw - the accompanying coconut ice cream (not citrus sorbet as on the menu) being excellent but the discs of crisp pastry rather overwhelming the fruit inside them. The chocolate semi-cuit was excellent though and a Leite creme - a Portuguese crème brûlée - was served with a shot of kir royale to give it an extra kick. The selection of desserts (£6.50) allows you to try all three and throws in a cinnamon-dusted custard tart as an extra, the most straightforwardly Portuguese touch in the whole meal and one of the best.

*Portal, 88 St John Street, Clerkenwell, London EC1 (020-7253 6950)*

Food ★★★★★

Ambience ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

*Around £30 a head without wine*

## **SIDE ORDERS: PORTUGAL CALLING**

*By Caroline Stacey*

### **Tugga**

Across the river from London's little Portugal, this groovily florid pink and purple version of a tapas bar is a Chelsea hotspot, though opinion divides over the jellied pig's ear.

312 King's Road, London SW3 (020-7351 0101)

### **A Cozinha**

Ian MacFarlane's single-handed paeon to Portuguese food has moved from central Bristol. The big draw is still the knockout cataplana of pork, chorizo, seafood, potatoes and peppers.

40 Alfred Place, Kingsdown, Bristol (0117 944 3060)

### **Lisboa Antiga**

The owner once ran the venerable O Fado in London. In rural Kent they go for steaks cooked on a hot stone at the table. But bacalhau, rabbit casserole and prawns piri piri keep wines company in a bright, cosy spot.

The Square, Hadlow, Kent (01732 851489)

### **Alvorada Restaurant**

Connection between Portuguese cooking and Cornwall? The freshest seafood. Monkfish, fresh cod (not salt) and clams, cooked with pork and chorizo are local. End exotically with fig and walnut chocolate cake.

Mevagissey, Cornwall (01726 842055)

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