

The sweet escape

We head to Lisbon to discover there's more to Portuguese cuisine than piri piri chicken



Words: Rachel Ingram

Portuguese fast food, as marketed by Nandos, is the biggest bluff in modern gastronomy. While the chain may use Portugal's rooster emblem, the South African conglomerate's cuisine is far from an accurate representation of Portuguese cuisine. In reality, it's more about fresh seafood, sweet pastries and 'green wine' than piri piri chicken.

As we joined TAP Air Portugal on their inaugural flight from London City Airport to Lisbon Airport, it was immediately obvious that food would become an integral part of the journey. Awaiting our arrival at the airport were hundreds of pastéis de nata, the country's signature pastry delicacy (essentially a custard tart), which has become a bit of a hit in London in recent months. As I indulged in my first of what would become many sweet treats, I realised that when it comes to food, the Portuguese simply do it better. »



Pasteis de nata is Portugal's signature pastry delicacy

While the likes of Heston Blumenthal, Gordon Ramsay and Jason Atherton dominate the London food scene, in Lisbon there's one man who rules the roost – José Aveliz. He's one of the most prominent chefs in Portugal for good reason. He owns eight unique outlets in Lisbon, ranging from fine dining restaurant Belcanto (which has two Michelin stars) to a burlesque bar (Beco) in a former chapel, where guests can enjoy dinner and show. Arguably the most intriguing of his establishments is Bairro do Aveliz, a multi-outlet venue with several outlets all dedicated to food and drink. Bairro do Aveliz is a Disneyland for epicureans with a taberna, a páteo, a mercearia, and more, hidden in little alcoves.

In Portugal, dining is about the freshness of the produce and the quality of the cuisine rather than showy presentation as chefs strip back to basics and let the flavours speak for themselves. This style of cooking is particularly evident at Delfina Restaurant, a characterful restaurant at AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado, close to the historic Praça do Comércio, where I received my first introduction to the cuisine. In one lunch, the myths of 'Nandos' Portugal' were dispelled. Instead of piri piri chicken, we were served fresh seafood, delicious tapas and Vinho Verde – 'green wine', followed by the most delicious chocolate mousse I've ever tasted.

Higher up the hill in the ancient district of Alfama, we discovered another hidden gem in Memmo Alfama, where an outdoor terrace lounge serves up delicious, traditional Portuguese tapas (similar to Spanish tapas but with seafood displacing meat) over incredible views over the bay, which are particularly stunning at sunset.

It's at this brand's sister property, Memmo Principe Real, however, where we got an authentic taste of the new, new Lisbon. At Café Principe Real, Portuguese cuisine is given a contemporary, global twist. The menu is a melting pot of international flavours, with influences from Brazil, Africa and East Asia, where many Portuguese have settled. Bringing these flavours back home to the mother country, chefs present a colourful menu taking guests on a journey

“ BARRIO DO AVILLEZ IS A DISNEYLAND FOR EPICUREANS WITH A TABERNA, A PÁTEO, A MERCEARIA, AND MORE ”

around the world. Begin the voyage with a starter of mini-taco tartar, Asian oysters or chicken kefta before moving on to grouper and coconut curry, sweet and sour pork chops or Asian duck. Even the dessert menu is given a twist – local favourite Pão-de-ló de Alfeizerão, for example, is served with homemade matcha tea ice-cream.

The five-star hotel itself is also worth a mention. Interiors are classic and highly stylish as minimalist décor is complimented with magnificent statement lights, while windows open up to a stunning view over the city. Service is also second to none – at nights, the concierge team leaves guests notes in bowler hats, while bathrooms are filled with luxurious Hermès products and rooms are decorated with hand-blown glass lamps and art by Portuguese artists.

In each room, guests are greeted with a signature Portonic cocktail (white port with tonic water, ice and mint). In fact, the welcome treat seems to be a common theme in Portugal, as we also discovered at AlmaLusa Baixa/Chiado where a slice of chocolate cake awaited us every evening.

Outside of the hotels, Lisbon's culinary scene gets even more exciting. The city is filled with quirky dining establishments, highlights of which include Time Out Market Lisboa, a food hall not unlike London's Borough Market, and LX Factory, a Brooklyn-esque dining and shopping complex set within a former factory that's filled with art galleries, independent boutiques and eateries.

For a taste of the more traditional, don't miss Pastéis de Belém, the oldest bakery in the city, which claims to have invented pasteis de nata.

When we visited Lisbon, we weren't expecting to go on such an extraordinary gastronomic journey, but after a taste of the city's best restaurants, we'll certainly be back for seconds. [T](#)

[flytap.com](#)



Chef Vasco Lello at Memmo Principe Real



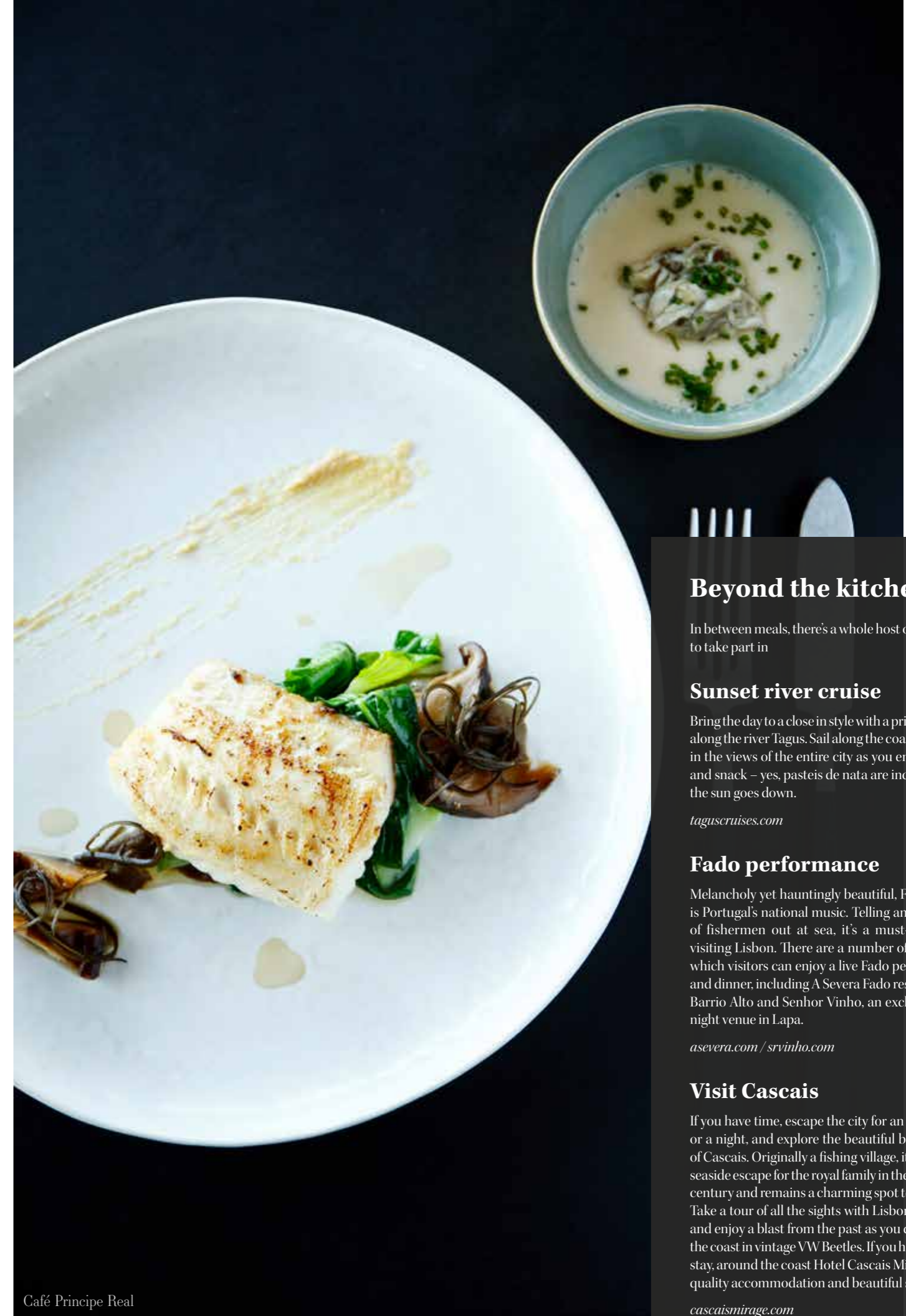
José Aveliz



Delfina Restaurant



Café Principe Real



Café Principe Real

Beyond the kitchen

In between meals, there's a whole host of activities to take part in

Sunset river cruise

Bring the day to a close in style with a private cruise along the river Tagus. Sail along the coast and take in the views of the entire city as you enjoy drinks and snack – yes, pasteis de nata are included – as the sun goes down.

[taguscruises.com](#)

Fado performance

Melancholy yet hauntingly beautiful, Fado music is Portugal's national music. Telling ancient tales of fishermen out at sea, it's a must-see when visiting Lisbon. There are a number of venues at which visitors can enjoy a live Fado performance and dinner, including A Severa Fado restaurant in Bairro Alto and Senhor Vinho, an exclusive late-night venue in Lapa.

[asevera.com / srvinho.com](#)

Visit Cascais

If you have time, escape the city for an afternoon, or a night, and explore the beautiful beach town of Cascais. Originally a fishing village, it became a seaside escape for the royal family in the early 20th century and remains a charming spot to this date. Take a tour of all the sights with Lisbon by Beetle and enjoy a blast from the past as you drive along the coast in vintage VW Beetles. If you have time to stay, around the coast Hotel Cascais Mirage offers quality accommodation and beautiful sea views.

[cascaismirage.com](#)