

On-track LUXURY

After almost 50 years in retirement, Portugal's royal train, *The Presidential*, has been resurrected as a Michelin-starred restaurant, taking passengers on a luxury journey through the spectacular tiered vineyards of the Douro Valley.

WORDS BY EMILY McAULIFFE

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— Gonçalo Castel-Branco

There's a certain buzz at Porto's São Bento train station today. As well as the usual tourists snapping the building's floor-to-ceiling tile murals, a huddle of curious onlookers have gathered at Line 6. Here, the words 'special service' scroll across the board overhead; for the sleek, blue train they reference is special indeed.

Quietly resting on the tracks is a train built in 1890 to transport the court of King Carlos I of Portugal. Throughout its working life it went on to carry dignitaries such as Pope Paul IV, Queen Elizabeth II and Portugal's heads of state until its retirement in 1970. It was shelved in Portugal's National Railway Museum in Entroncamento, north of Lisbon, and to many, the existence of this historical masterpiece was unknown. A visit by Portuguese entrepreneur Gonçalo Castel-Branco in July 2015 would change this though.

A CRAZY IDEA

While Castel-Branco is the visionary and creator of the experience, it was his 10-year-old daughter who came up with the concept. "I visited the railway museum, saw the train, and it was love at first sight," remembers Castel-Branco. "I thought, how does this exist and nobody knows about it? It needs to be seen and it needs to be heard." He voiced his frustration to his daughter who suggested turning it into a restaurant. Immediately dismissive, Castel-Branco woke during the night and thought she was absolutely right.

Once set on the dining idea, Castel-Branco was intent on making *The Presidential* not just any restaurant, but one with the best chefs in the world – they would all have Michelin status.

Turning a 19th century heritage-listed train into a fine dining restaurant was no easy task. It took three months to convince the management at Portugal's two-Michelin-star restaurant Vila Joya to get behind the idea. In September 2015, head chef Dieter Koschina begrudgingly accompanied Castel-Branco to the museum, thinking the idea farcical but, once there, the old train's majestic aura captured another heart. Just like that, Koschina was on board as chef for *The Presidential's* maiden journey in 2016.

THROUGH THE VALLEY

The *Presidential's* culinary craftsmanship is passed between Michelin-star chefs from around the globe, who are given the freedom to design and plate a four-course menu of their choice. Today, chef Esben Holmboe Bang from Norway's three-Michelin-star Maaemo is scheduled as our head chef, however unforeseen circumstances mean sous-chef Halaigh Whelan-McManus steps up at the last minute. As his team preps in the small kitchen, retrofitted in the train's old baggage compartment, we settle into candy-stripe seats in a peppermint green carriage, and the train gradually gathers speed as the city fades from view.

Just after midday, around half an hour into our nine-hour trip, we're ushered into a dining carriage by maître d', António. Along with the onboard sommelier, he has been handpicked from one of Portugal's best restaurants – in this case, the two-Michelin-star Il Gallo D'Oro in Funchal. As food service begins, rolling green hills whoosh by outside and the train clacks mere metres from the deep blue waters of the Douro River.

A colourful plate of sliced asparagus drizzled in butter sauce and topped with delicate elderflowers soon hits the table. "It seems a shame to eat it," says one of my fellow passengers as she examines the artfully plated dish.



FAST FACTS

Qantas flies Sydney to Lisbon from \$1800 return, with TAP Portugal offering connecting flights to Porto. *The Presidential* will run 10 journeys in April/May and 10 in September/October 2018. Tickets are €500 (AUD \$790) per person. Visit thepresidentialtrain.com.

WINE AND DINE

A stopover at Quinta do Vesuvio estate to taste the wine; luxurious dining awaits aboard the *The Presidential*.



As we dine on mackerel and apple, pigeon and wild mushrooms, and a fancy take on strawberries and cream, our glasses remain filled with quality Portuguese wines. Many are produced in the very valley we're traversing, which is not only jaw-droppingly beautiful, but is also the world's first demarcated and regulated wine region. "I think I've only spent 10 minutes without a wine glass in my hand," laughs a co-passenger as we sip a Niepoort red made with a blend of grapes from 50-year-old vineyards.

And there's more wine to come. At 3pm the train stops outside the Quinta do Vesuvio estate for a private tasting. This includes two still wines and a vintage port, plus a bonus not-for-sale port straight from the barrel. We then mingle and sip 20-year-old tawny on the riverfront property's lawn until a 5.30pm train toot signals our return.

As the train approaches São Bento station I pass chef Whelan-McManus in the hall. He looks exhausted but wears a big grin. "Pretty amazing day, no?" he says, and I nod in agreement. "I've done plenty of events but nothing beats this mad adventure. I mean, where else can you do something like this?" he says, gesturing from the tiny kitchen he's just come out of to the elegant rows of white linen-topped tables. A group of smiling guests raise their glasses towards the chef as they emerge from the lounge where a pianist has been entertaining them. Cool night air suddenly rushes through the carriage doors, so we gather our gift bags, ready to disembark.

As I walk across the platform, I look back at the old girl and think that to experience such history is a gift in itself. *The Presidential* is a train that needs to be seen and needs to be heard. Castel-Branco's idea wasn't so crazy after all. 