

THE  
*epicurean maturation*  
of Porto



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PORTO MAY BE THE LESSER KNOWN OF PORTUGAL'S CITIES, BUT IT'S BECOMING A STAR ON THE FOOD AND WINE SCENE.

Words **Emily McAuliffe**

Porto, which takes its name from northern Portugal's economy-driving seaport, was traditionally regarded as little more than an industrial workhorse. As Lisbon's blue-collar cousin, it lacked the cultural clout of the capital, and this was only intensified by a king hit during the global financial crisis that left streets bare and spirits low.

But Porto isn't a city to easily falter and its historical tenacity earned it the nickname *Invicta*, or 'undefeated'. Whereas it once resisted monarchists, it is now resisting cultural demise, and has bounced back to attain this year's title of Best European Destination (an honour it has held twice before).

In tandem with this surge of social energy is a lifting of the city's gastronomic scene. In 2017, Porto and its cross-river city Vila Nova de Gaia were awarded three new Michelin stars, bringing the tally up to five.

Despite this epicurean maturation, however, one of the most appealing things about Porto is that residents – including the city's top chefs – still maintain strong food traditions.

"I think we should fight to keep our traditions," says Pedro Lemos, who in 2015 became Porto's first chef to reach Michelin status, and now retains his star for a third year. "When you

travel, you want to visit the monuments and experience the history, including through the gastronomy, so I'm not afraid to show our roots," he says of his exclusively Portuguese menu.

Therefore, while the culinary diversity of other Western European cities might fool you into thinking you were in any number of countries, Porto has a way of always reminding you you're in Portugal. And that strong sense of place provides precious insight into the city and country's identity.

#### SIMPLE FARE

The people of Porto are known to eat every part of the pig bar the squeal and are hence dubbed *tripeiros* or 'tripe eaters'. Although a reference to 'poor man's food', the locals wear the label with pride and the dish *Tripas à Moda do Porto* is still widely available on menus across the city in line with a 600-year-old recipe. In the culinary archives, it sits alongside dishes such as the *Francesinha*, a greasy multi-decker meat sandwich blanketed

in cheese, and dried codfish *Bacalhau à Gomes de Sá*, which are prime examples of Porto's penchant for simple soul food.

"The food in Portugal has history, it's an important part of our story and culture; it's our grandmother's food," says Rui Paula, who attained his first Michelin star at Casa de Chá da Boa Nova this year. Hence, he and other high-level chefs still frequent local-run *tascas*, where the *prato do dia* (plate of the day) is commonly seen scribbled on paper in restaurant windows. In these establishments, dining out remains a boisterous affair where family recipes are served and devoured with contentment and pride, and it's an endearing example of the Portuguese saying, 'there is always room at the table for one more'.

#### RAISING THE BAR

Porto's old-style comfort food is still evident at every turn, but a sign of gastronomical progression came in 2011 when The Yeatman Hotel's restaurant, located in Porto's neighbouring city

Clockwise from left: A Casa de Chá da Boa Nova morsel; The view from the Casa de Chá da Boa Nova dining room; Capela Incomum.

of Vila Nova de Gaia, was awarded a Michelin star under the leadership of Ricardo Costa, who proved his salt with a second star in 2017.

In addition to this formidable two star feat, Porto's smaller players are offering stiff competition in the culinary stakes, with the quaint destination restaurants of Lemos, Paula and Vítor Matos of Antiquvm part of the star spangled club.

"We used to say 'we're lost in Foz'," says Lemos of his restaurant's obscure location down a cobbled backstreet in Porto's fringe suburb of Foz. But a steady stream of locals, followed by travellers, started sniffing out his food creations. "At first people said I was crazy," says Lemos. "But I wanted my restaurant to grow from its value, and now, the fact it's a street restaurant makes me even more proud. People don't stop at the restaurant because they pass it on the street, they come here specifically for us."

Paula, one of the three judges of *MasterChef Portugal*, is equally chuffed. "It can be difficult to get a Michelin star outside a hotel, so I'm very proud to have achieved it here," he says from his 30-seat restaurant hidden amongst the sea rocks in Porto's coastal outskirts.

"More and more tourists are coming to Porto and it's pushing for better dining options," he continues, referencing the city's growing number of refined restaurants.

#### REGIONAL INFLUENCE

Some of Portugal's best produce is found in the north, so Porto's restaurateurs can easily tap into quality supplies.

Renowned Portuguese food and wine critic José Silva, whose accolades include television presenter, guidebook writer and columnist, cites the smoked meats of Trás-os-Montes as the best in the country, for instance, and Paula, Lemos and Silva all credit the cold vegetation-rich waters of the North Atlantic for producing second-to-none seafood.

Though top-notch produce is readily available, local chefs aren't wedded to northern produce, preferring to draw on regional strengths. "I'll use local where I can, but I'm not fundamentalist," says Lemos. "Besides, Portugal is a small country, so really, everything is local."

Costa agrees, saying he prioritises regional products where possible, but also scours the country to find Portugal's best, such as seaweed from the Algarve region and cheese from the Alentejo.

#### A FINE DROP

While port has long been a household name, Portugal's table wines are starting to break international barriers as people discover the 14 principal wine regions, including Porto's nearby Douro Valley.

"In the next few years I think places like the Douro will be one of the 3–4 most important regions in the world for both port and still wines," says Silva.

Francisca Lobão from Porto's beautiful chapel-turned-wine bar Capela

Far left: Antiquvm. Left: Capela Incomum's wine selection. Below: A meal at Casa de Chá da Boa Nova.

Incomum agrees. "People already have worldwide references of Italian and French wines, for example, and Portugal is on that path," she says.

Confidence in Portugal's table wines also led husband and wife team Filipa Garcia Fernandes and Moisés Cardoso Campos to keep the focus away from port wine at their riverside bar, Wine Quay. The gamble paid off, as they have since expanded to include the Quay Market next door for patrons wishing to purchase wines offered at the bar.

"People are starting to take Porto more seriously when it comes to food and wine," says Fernandes. "We have good food, good wine and nice people, and I'm not just saying that because I'm Portuguese," she laughs. "Oh, and of course, Porto is a beautiful city," she gushes with true tripeira pride. And, really, what more could you want?"

## + Info

- Pedro Lemos Restaurante** [www.pedrolemos.net](http://www.pedrolemos.net)
- Casa de Chá da Boa Nova** [www.ruipaula.com](http://www.ruipaula.com)
- The Yeatman** [www.the-yeatman-hotel.com](http://www.the-yeatman-hotel.com)
- Antiquvm** [www.antiquvm.pt](http://www.antiquvm.pt)
- Capela Incomum** [www.facebook.com/capelaincomum/](https://www.facebook.com/capelaincomum/)
- Wine Quay Bar** [www.winequaybar.com](http://www.winequaybar.com)