

London gets a Brazilian

27 Jan 2007 by FT/ Nick Lander

The team which has enabled restaurateur David Ponte finally to open Mocotó, his large, stylish Brazilian boteco (bar) and restaurant in Knightsbridge is almost as diverse as his own background.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1964, on the day a military junta seized power, to a French/ Moroccan father and an English mother, Ponte went to school at Eton before an obviously formative year aged 18 spent in Brazil. In Paris he met Mourad Mazouz with whom he came to London to open the highly successful Moroccan restaurant, Momo in 1997 although they have recently parted company. For good measure, his wife, whose support, he admitted has been essential over the past two years (Mocotó is a year late and a million pounds over budget), is Dutch.

The rest of the cast list includes: Isay Weinfeld, one of Brazil's leading architects; a Jordanian backer who has put up half of the £5 million it has taken to open Mocotó together with eleven others; Darryl Healey, an English Head Chef who has spent the last six years honing his skills with Hyatt in Australia and China and, last but not least, a team of Polish builders which has been responsible for the skilful fitting of the numerous different varieties of reclaimed wood, cinnamon, ironwood and grey alder into the restaurant's striking interior. Their presence has struck a particular chord for Weinfeld as his father emigrated from Poland to Brazil in 1947.

As I was sitting in the boteco with Ponte and Weinfeld one dark afternoon as the waiting staff, many of whom are Brazilian, were eating their staff meal I was reminded of a sentiment Ponte had expressed 18 months before when we initially discussed his new venture. I had wanted to know why this obviously successful restaurateur had taken over such a large and hitherto unsuccessful site (it had previously opened and closed as Isola) that is close to a bus stop. "Brazil is such a large country," he explained, "with so many different culinary influences I just felt I couldn't open the Brazilian restaurant of my dreams on a small scale. It wanted somewhere that would reflect the size of the country and with room for 150 in the boteco and 100 seats in the restaurant I think I have found the most appropriate location."

Standing in the huge kitchen that was also one of the attractions of taking on this site amongst a kitchen brigade that includes numerous Brazilian and Portuguese chefs as well as Paulo König, a talented Brazilian pastry chef, Ponte continued, "There is really no such thing as Brazilian cuisine as the country is so vast and the influences so varied, from Africa, Portugal and the Caribbean, with large Japanese and Lebanese populations in the cities and many Italians down in the south making wine. And the produce from the forests and rivers is so different from anything we see in Europe. We know that right now we are only scratching the surface of what Brazil has to offer."

As sous-chef Pietro Limarocha went off to prepare a few of the dishes that will feature on the opening menu, Ponte recounted how, unlike most restaurateurs at present, he has had no trouble recruiting staff. "I knew that there was quite a large number of Brazilians living here (the Embassy tells me it may be as many as 250,000) and as soon as we let the word out there were queues at the door. Many, I have to admit, had more enthusiasm than the requisite knife skills we were looking for but I think we have put together a great team. My only fear is that each of them is going to believe that only their grandmother's recipe is the best but it is Darryl's job to sort that out."

A major part of Healey's job is also to translate the fundamentally rustic nature of Brazilian food into dishes that are just as much fun but more refined for the London market. The boteco will concentrate on dishes which in true Brazilian style are best eaten with your hands: salt cod fritters; a sandwich known as a Beirut, due to the strong Lebanese influence, that comprises toasted pitta bread stuffed with thin slices of steak, cheese, tomato and oregano and for authenticity has to be exactly the same size as the plate it is served on; and pastéis, crisp fried parcels filled with numerous different ingredients such as palm hearts with onions, garlic and parsley or spiced mince with hard boiled eggs, and sold on every street corner. Healey spoke with great admiration of the dexterity of the pastéis street vendors he had watched in action and their ability to identify each customer's particular order as they cooked for 90 seconds in large containers of boiling oil.

Although Weinfeld admitted that there was nowhere like Mocotó in Brazil, it incorporates all the vital Brazilian elements. In the boteco these include tiled tables, the US \$18 chairs straight from the factory in Rio and their seat covers made from chita, the multi coloured cloth, and a fridge set at -4 degrees C to ensure the beer is suitably cold. To this he has added Brazilian street lights above the bar and an extraordinary range of old cachaça bottles (the spirit for those strong caipirinhas) that he has been collecting for Ponte since the project began.

The design elements in the restaurant downstairs are even more striking. The chairs, made of jacarandá, were built in 1959 for the opening of Brasília and across the bar are eight Sergio Rodrigues chairs on rollers. Weinfeld has had the level behind the bar dug down so that as you sit in one of these chairs you can look the barman in the eye as you order. And perhaps imagine the beach and the ocean in the distance although sadly there are in fact only three rows of plastic banana plants instead.

Healey's menu here is more formal: Romeo & Juliet, his version of the Brazilian dish of processed cheese and guava jelly, but in this case using goats' cheese; picanha, the hugely popular cut of rump steak served with cassava chips, vinaigrette and ground manioc flour and a warm chocolate and brazil nut cake whose richness was cut by an intriguing graviola, or soursop, sorbet.

But what most poignantly distinguishes Mocotó (which translates as shin of beef or marrow but can also be applied to a shapely set of calves on an attractive woman) is that no-one involved in the restaurant can precisely describe in English why they are so excited about its opening. When we first met Ponte explained that, profitability aside, his driving emotion can only be explained by the Portuguese word, saudade, which encapsulates the emotion that one feels as one recalls the happy times spent in Brazil. As we walked round Mocotó Ponte asked Weinfeld and his chefs whether they could better describe saudade for me but the nearest we came was when Weinfeld put his hand to his heart and said for him 'it is when you miss very, very much everything that is from Brazil.'

Ponte hopes that Mocotó will deliver this for him and for many others. But as an experienced restaurateur he appreciates that for the moment at least the greater part of his role is over. "What the place needs now," he said as we parted, "is for some Brazilians to come and add their magic."

Mocotó, 145 Knightsbridge, London SW1, 020-7225 2300,
www.mocoto.co.uk Closed Sunday.
Boteco 0900-2400; restaurant lunch and dinner.