A classic fish restaurant in Oporto

27 Sep 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

It was a very cosmopolitan gathering around the dinner table in Oporto, northern Portugal. There were three Germans, a Pole, two Spaniards, five Portuguese and two English food and wine lovers, all kept in check by a patrolling dog, bigger and thicker of hair than the sheep it has been bred to look after.

On the table over the ensuing three hours were various items that make Portuguese cuisine so attractive. Bottles from Dão, Barraida and the Douro that invariably provide such good value on restaurant wine lists; a large, fresh sea bass, butterflied and cooked on a barbecue alongside the sweetest of tomato salads; and, at the end of the meal, bottles of Niepoort vintage port 1970 and a 1977 Garrafeira that provided me with a lesson I wish I had learnt as a restaurateur.

These two bottles were so rich and concentrated, and so filling too, that they were dessert in their own right. They didn't need to be matched with anything and I just wish I had had the courage to offer them on the dessert section of my menu rather than as one of the accompanying dessert wines.

Breakfast in one of the cafés by the river the following morning gave an intimation of how much this city has improved since I first came here in 1976 to argue over the price of cotton. Oporto is now so much cleaner and so much brighter, its streets full of small privately owned shops, that it is no surprise it has become such a magnet for tourists. And walking up and down its steep streets conveniently serves as an excellent prelude to lunch.

A 20-minute taxi ride along the river, past the lighthouse, takes you to Matosinhos, the suburb on the ocean that our Portuense friend proudly claims is home to the very best fish restaurants in the world. It brought us to **O Gaveto** (The Seagull) and even from the workaday outside of this restaurant I knew we would not be disappointed.

O Gaveto occupies a two-storey building at the apex of two streets, precisely the same location as occupied by Elkano restaurant in Guetaria, a 20-minute drive outside San Sebastian, northern Spain, one of my favourite fish restaurants anywhere. And while the large metal grills that are such a feature of Elkano's cooking are missing here, both restaurants share another crucial ingredient in their success: both are within spitting distance of the sea.

O Gaveto has been in the hands of Manuel Pinheiro (whose personal email appears most unusually on the restaurant's business card) and his two sons, José and João Carlos (pictured above by Pedro Lobo), for the past 29 years. Inside the restaurant, apparently unchanged since the 1970s, this continuity of ownership, combined with their obvious delight in serving their customers the freshest fish and shellfish, becomes immediately obvious.

The first room is home to several tanks full of lobsters and crabs and two elegant U-shaped bars, each able to accommodate a dozen in style and comfort. The original seats are made of dark wood and metal and swivel, allowing any customer a good look at whoever is coming or going.

On the far wall is that day's catch - cod, sole, sea bass - but an indication of just how well the Pinheiros have come to pre-empt their customers wishes and appetite is on display on the fridge's front counter. This holds about six metal trays packed with various combinations of tangerine-sized crabs (given a spicy kick after being cooked in water infused with piri piri); tiny orange shrimp; and goose barnacles. As the customers stop in front of this display and are greeted by one of the Pinheiros, it is impossible not to order one of these trays that is then promptly brought to your table.

That is how our meal began, with the intake of the sea from the shrimps and the goose barnacles prompting a comment that eating these was 'almost like swimming but without getting wet'. Our Portuense friend smiled, nodded sagely and proudly explained that it was all down to the expanse of Atlantic outside, where the normally windy, cold and rough seas are the vital factors in providing such exceptional raw ingredients.

To prove that the first tray was no fluke, it was promptly followed by a second bearing a large crab, steamed and then dissected, with the dark meat from the shell served on thin toasts. Then came bowls of clams cooked with garlic, coriander and white wine accompanied by small green mounds of ramps cooked with olive oil, garlic, flour and milk.

The final dish was a house speciality. A large, firmly closed, metal container came to the table from which emerged a

steaming combination of rice and lobster. It was stunning, the richness of the lobster offset by the creaminess of the rice and both enhanced by the delicious soup that held them both together. The container went back to the kitchen empty.

The end of the meal brought two more insights into how the Portuense enjoy their food. The first, from a German now resident in Oporto, was a reference to their particularly rich desserts. 'Their dessert recipes', she explained laughing, 'always refer to egg yolks by the dozen and sugar by the kilo.'

The second, looking round O Gaveto, is how swiftly its happy customers take to toasting one another's health at the end of the meal. Next time, we will happily join in.

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