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eat like a local

insider tips for a foodie weekend in Leeds, plus Hong Kong's obsession with eating out

Marina O'Loughlin eats

Lisbon

Marina fell in love with Lisbon's ancient quarters, beautiful tiled buildings and gorgeous food years ago. Would the city live up to her rose-tinted memories?



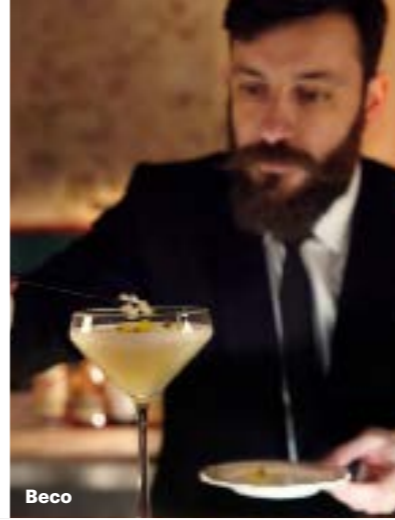
Pastels de nata



Cascais marina



Carabineros prawns



Beco



Time Out Mercado da Ribeira

eat like a local
lisbon



Manteigaria Silva



Cascais lighthouse



Tinned sardines



Lisbon Cathedral

It's been years since I've been able to get back to Lisbon. In the meantime, the city has been hit hard with the foodie stick. When I first went, local superstar José Avillez was a mere twinkle on the culinary firmament: now he has seven restaurants in the city, with an eighth on the horizon. Many of the city's other celebrated chefs – Henrique Sá Pessoa of Alma, Susana Felicidade of Pharmácia and more – have concessions in the newish Time Out Mercado da Ribeira (more of which, later). Messieurs Michelin have paid due attention. But how to get a sense of the city's less obvious gems? Hello, Culinary Backstreets (culinarybackstreets.com). I'm not usually a fan of food tours, but make an exception for this lot.

Their star Lisbon guide is Célia Pedroso, a journalist and food expert I first 'met' on Twitter when she insisted that Portuguese acorn-fed ham was as fine as its famous Spanish counterpart. She was right, of course: a trip to classic Manteigaria Silva (manteigariasilva.pt) in downtown Baixa confirms its silken nuttiness, the slight granularity of the super-aged version. The major difference is that the Portuguese machine-cut the ham into whisper-thin leaves rather than carving by hand. And the cheese... How come Portuguese cheese isn't better known? It is fantastic stuff, especially the

tiny, thistle-rennet ewe's milk barrels, almost liquid, enchantingly whiffy. I'd happily eat these beauties like ice cream.

A tour of traditional Lisbon

We head for the Madragoa district, where once every corner boasted a convent. Here, Célia shows us the one of city's oldest coffee producers, Flor da Selva, where intent, blue-coated men rake fragrant beans as they belch out from the vast roaster, wood-fired in the old-fashioned way. The aroma is incredible, as is the coffee: rich without over-fruitiness, the perfect bullet to kick-start the day.

And what better breakfast but a glass of light, refreshing alvarinho from specialty wine store Garrafeira de Santos (garrafeiradesantos.pt), served with crackers of Portugal's beloved tinned sardines: locals insist these should only be eaten fresh in summer. We leave with a crate of beautiful, mostly Douro wines winging their way to our home address.

The tour takes in several restaurants, a course here and there in each: soupy monkfish rice at a traditional tasca; fiery meat samosas and cult, labour-intensive bebinca cake of layered pancakes, dark sugar, egg-yolk ghee and coconut milk at Goan restaurant Zuari; seafood and our first prego – the wonderful steak sandwich – at Palácio. My favourite is Último Porto

(‘Shh, don't tell anyone about it!’ says Célia), down at the docklands, where in an old boat station surrounded by shipping containers, two vast charcoal barbecues churn out flawlessly fresh mullet, bream and octopus, charred chunks of bacalhau, squidgy barrels of toasty hake roe, creamy squid, its tentacles blackened to delicious crisps – all served with bitter, oily turnip tops and platters of chips, sunshine-yellow from their olive oil bath. The tour winds up in a delicious slice of old Lisbon: Sr João's nameless shop in Alcântara, where he cuts us fat slabs of oozing sheep's milk cheese from Beira Baixa and serves tiny glasses of ancient port in a crammed little shop that looks as though time has stood still.

The burgeoning new wave

We're not hitting the 'fine dining' temples, but it would be madness not to check out at least one of José Avillez's burgeoning empire (joseavillez.pt). Our choice is Páteo, hidden at the back of his bustling gastrodrome, Bairro de Avillez, a sprawling, 13th-century former townhouse and convent reimagined as his 'neighbourhood'. The seafood that issues from the open kitchen is breathtaking: vast, scarlet carabineros, grilled so their heads create a smoky

sauce; sea bass with a purée of potato that would put Robuchon's to shame. And the rich, murky pungency of black rice with cuttlefish and aioli will stay with me for some time. But the restaurant is also responsible for the finest version of Lisbon's beloved pastel de nata I've ever tasted – yes, better than the famous Belém or Manteigaria: multi-layered crisp pastry, custard in a miraculous state between liquid and set. On leaving, we're given a sneak peek through a hidden door at the back of the room to sultry new club-cabaret Beco: one for next time.

The new wave of restaurateurs is internationalist and forward-thinking without ever straying too far from their Portuguese roots. Chef André Magalhães of Taberna da Rua das Flores, enchantingly set up like a vintage merceria (grocery store), uses fine local produce, frequently with Asian or Latin American flourishes: there might be tartare of Atlantic horse mackerel with ginger & apple on the daily-changing blackboard menu; or ceviche of local corvina with lime, coriander & avocado. Or refined versions of super-rustic ancient classics: a dish where creamy chickpeas nudge up against tripe of both cod and cow – chewy, slippery, humming with aromatics. Matching wines are never anything other than exquisite.

No reservations, sadly, so queues are inevitable – and it's so busy that people are even eating on a short staircase during our visit. Not sure I'd be quite that dedicated.

Stepping back in time

One of the city's best features is how quickly you can hit the seaside. We take the train to Cascais and Mar do Inferno (mardoinferno.pt). This airy restaurant, perched by the dramatic cove of the same name, is a perfect distillation of the region's love for seafood. We watch in astonishment as our fellow diners plough through course after course of the freshest fish and crustaceans, platters of fruits de mer the size of tables, gallons of frisky Douro white wine. We do the same: soupy rice studded with prawns served with fat slabs of pearly hake in light tempura batter (the Portuguese introduced tempura to Japan – as well as chillies to India and coffee to Brazil). Then squid in fragrant olive oil with little boiled potatoes; clams with ham, coriander and gigantic quantities of garlic. And afterwards? We copy our fellow diners and order a whole crab, rammed with sweet meat (my idea of dessert).

Back in town, we have to check out the Time Out Mercado da Ribeira in Cais do Sodré (timeoutmarket.com) – I think it's

the law for anyone vaguely food-obsessed. It's perfect for visitors with limited time, a curated assembly of some of Lisbon's best. We have foie gras tarte tatin with quince from Marlene Vieira, plus more of Silva's exquisite ham with Super Bock beer, and wines from a number of in-house bars. But it's a little sanitised for me.

For drinking I prefer hitting the edgier bars: sultry former brothel Pensão Amor with its baroque, burlesque styling (facebook.com/pensaoamor); the bohemian, vintage-furnished 'creative space' Casa Independente (casaindependente.com), with its secret courtyard, petiscos (the local version of tapas) and cocktails in a newly remodelled city square just staggering distance from Ramiro; or By the Wine (jmf.pt) with its roof of glittering bottles, exquisite José Maria da Fonseca wines and delicious (cheap!) fizz. Or gin palace Gin Lovers (ginlovers.pt), for gigantic goblets of niche spirits, perfect for a few snifters after visiting the beautiful A Cevicheria (facebook.com/ACevicheriaChefKiko) with its sparkling raw fish creations in Príncipe Real, one of Lisbon's hippest districts.

I allow myself one nostalgic trip, back to Cervejaria Ramiro (cervejariaramiro.pt), which I found long before Anthony Bourdain and his film crews descended

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A view of Lisbon from
São Jorge Castle



on the place. This is a victim of its own success: I'm not saying the seafood is any less pristine, the prawns pil pil any less hectically garlic-drenched, or the experience any less essentially Lisboeta, it's just that you now need a high tolerance level for crowds and queuing – even with a new floor seating more than 200. Next time, I'll head for A Marisqueira do Lis, just a few doors up the road; or Palácio for my prehistoric-looking percebes hit, where live lobsters wrestle each other in their tanks and the prego (steak sandwich) for pudding is every bit as garlicky. They just aren't as well known yet.

In Lisbon, nearly every square boasts a newly restored quiosque for horchata, Sagres beer or café mazagran (coffee with lemonade!); the streets are studded with sugar-heaven pastelarias and tiny, antique boites for shooting a cherry brandy ginjinha at breakfast time. Every corner might open up to a dazzling miradouro with views down to the sea, and shop fronts are perfectly preserved slices of the past. Even the humblest tasca offers a sparkling array of petiscos.

Does my love for Lisbon survive? Hell, yes. This is a dazzling city – even if has been well and truly discovered. But there's always an upside: the eating is now even better.

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'Every corner might open up to a dazzling miradouro with views down to the sea'



Páteo



By the Wine



Dessert at Último Porto