

Food with flair

THANK goodness there is more to Portugal than blooming Cristiano Ronaldo. As the sleek midfielder was being booed like a pantomime villain during his team's last stab at a place in the World Cup final, Portal in St John Street was quietly going about its business in celebrating some of the nation's more desirable offerings.

Portal is a sexy and handsome restaurant which locks neatly into the Clerkenwell eating scene. One of the backers of the venture is an architect, and the result is an eating place which is light and upbeat in parts, and moody and brooding in others. A bit like Ronaldo, I suppose.

While waiting staff in sharp black shirts dally nimbly around tables which are fitted in thick white linen, customers are left to ogle a menu which carries nuggets of traditional Portuguese fare.

Players include white anchovies, salted cod, mashed morcilla sausage, chorizo, and most impressively braised bisaro – a relation of wild boar – which is marinated for a whole day in red wine before being allowed to leave the kitchen.

While the food may have a laid back and amiable character in its homeland, at Portal attempts are made to elevate it to serious London standards, with some mixed results.

My fish soup with olive oil and garlic bread dumplings (£6.50) was cracking, and had a smooth sweetish finish that had lost the little gravelly bits often found in similar dishes. It wasn't like I had to scoop around in the depths of a murky bowl looking for the goodies, as here was a large and beautiful piece of cod, a mussel and a massive prawn for me to enjoy straight up.

I was enthralled, but my friend less so with her salad of grilled squid, mixed peppers and chilli vinaigrette (£6.50), which she thought dull and



By **ALISON CAMPSIE**

boring with no real sign of flavour.

Foie gras garnache was a whipped up treat, mixed with a luxurious chocolate finish, which was much more approved of, and served with a sensational fig chutney (£6.50).

The main courses were greatly anticipated, and guinea fowl stuffed with morcilla, was tasty – though a bit dried out and small – served with mushroom risotto and colourful veg (£15.50). The bisaro pork with chorizo and butter bean puree (£18) was possibly the star of the night, and the meat had been so nicely cooked that it could not stand up to the lightest touch of a fork.

Another proud dish saw three pieces of cod, a staple of the nation, cooked in three different ways and was presented like a trio of tiny sculptures.

Portal is named after one of the biggest and most popular vineyards in northern Portugal and the restaurant is doing a brisk trade in wines from this neck of the woods. Many of them are transferred to decanters at the table in an operation both highly skilled and theatrical. Again, like that chap Ronaldo.

The manager, who was very bright, keen and able, likes the drama of the procedure and has obvious faith in team Portal to deliver the goods.

And maybe, like Portugal's national football squad, this restaurant will go pretty far – but a sometimes impressive, though ultimately mixed performance, means that a big gold trophy will remain just out of reach. For the time being anyway.



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