



Go Porto

MARK HEDLEY HAS A BUG-FREE EXPERIENCE AT THE CITY'S PREMIER LEAGUE PORTUGUESE RESTAURANT

SINCE the World Cup, anything associated with Portugal has left a bitter taste in my mouth. So my patriotic palate was sceptical about a trip to an out-and-out Portuguese restaurant.

But fortunately, Portal is no back-alley dive with Portuguese Republic flags draping the walls and Sagres sloshing on the floor. Instead, the Iberian eatery is immaculately crafted and thoughtfully designed. But then, you'd expect high standards from Jose Mourinho's favourite restaurant.

Portal hit the headlines last month as a secret bugging device was found at one of the corner tables. Thought to be left over from when the Chelsea manager was plotting to buy the former Arsenal winger Ashley Cole, the device was discovered as kitchen staff tuned their radio and heard a conversation being held by diners.

So just to be on the safe side, we chose a table in the conservatory area. Withstanding any bugs in my soup, I reckoned we were safe. The conservatory is walled with glass and gives it an airy and bright atmosphere. But the solid roof ensures it doesn't feel like you're eating in a greenhouse. At the end of the dining area through double glass doors sits The Adega Room. Chiefly designed for private dining, it doubles up as a fine-wine cellar. With vintage bottles of pomerol and pauillac lining the walls, a regulated temperature, and a table that seats eight, it's a unique room for an intimate party.

Whilst I mused over the eclectic wine list, we were presented with an amuse bouche. I can only describe it as a testicle on a stick. I closed my eyes, bit down and thought of England. I

still couldn't tell you exactly what it was, or what it tasted of, but it wasn't at all unpleasant.

Despite the temptations of the French labels, I opted for a more appropriate bottle of Quinta do Portal Reserva. It's no coincidence that this red from the Douro is so named; the restaurant's proprietor is best friends with Pedro Branco, the man who owns the Quinta do Portal wine company. The table next to us chose the more costly Portal Gran Reserva, and were served from a captain's decanter. I was jealous. I admit, I had decanter-envy. Serves me right for choosing the cheaper bottle.

Throwing convention to the wind, we decided to accompany the red wine with a seafood selection. And it worked. The charming Douro complemented rather than confused my cod and prawn carpaccio, which was light and delicious. My guest was easily pleased with her Algarve salad - basically finely-chopped peppers, onions, tomato and cucumber but still presented with aplomb.

Our main courses were delivered directly and kept up the quality level set by our first courses. My partner's wild sea bass was roasted with a traditional bacalhau crust, leaving the fish tasting meatier and the skin positively toothsome.

I chose a special: scallops with talharim pasta and Mediterranean

vegetables. I can't believe I'm going to bestow this accolade upon any restaurant in London, or in England for that matter, but they were the best scallops I have ever tasted: soft, succulent and profoundly delicious.

It's only a shame that the desserts didn't match up to the rest of the meal. My brownie was stodgy, dry, and a little stingy on the chocolate sauce. My companion's strawberries were fresh, but again a little short on the brown sticky stuff in which they were meant to be coated.

Whilst we waited for coffee and relaxed into our seats, it was clear the staff never have much chance

to take a similar break. It's Wednesday night, and the restaurant is nearly full. The youthful team are energetic, friendly and always eager to help. In the middle of his troops stands Antonio Correia.

I closed my eyes, bit down and thought of England. It was actually rather pleasant

The restaurant's owner is a fanatic, a perfectionist and a great personality: the perfect recipe for a successful maitre d'. He injects his enthusiasm into every aspect of the restaurant, and it pays off. Portal has only been open for 15 months, but runs as effortlessly as if it's been there for 15 years.

Sipping on a glass of Portal's Colheita '94 Port, sucking in the atmosphere, I decided all is forgiven. Even if Ronaldo came and sat at my table, I think I'd still enjoy an evening at Portal. **7.5/10**
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