

by ANDREW HARRIS

I'M HAVING a bit of a cataplana issue. Cooking isn't really my strong point and the kitchen is not a naturally compatible environment for me, although I'm a hell of an eater.

The world of pots, pans, and 'yes chef' is one that I've always felt is best absorbed from the comfort of a dining table on the other side of an open kitchen. But today I'm in the thick of it, under the attentive ministrations of head chef Lucia Ribeiro, who runs a very tight culinary ship. Her beady eye is already focusing on a potential cataplana calamity.

Anyone familiar with Portuguese cooking will know about the cataplana, the clam-shell copper dish, popular in the Algarve. It's almost certainly derived from the Moroccan tagine and one of the many aspects of Portuguese culture lingering from the long period of Arab occupation. The name Algarve itself derives from Al Gharb — the West, in Arabic.

Lucia, an Algarvian native with a wealth of experience in Michelin-starred kitchens, now presides over the new, impressively designed and beautifully bright Mimo Algarve cookery school at Pine Cliffs, a Luxury Collection Resort near Albufeira. Mimo specialises in culinary walking tours, cooking classes and all things gastronomic, and has its origins in the Basque country's San Sebastian, a small town with a wealth of Michelin stars.

BY WAY of mitigation for any incompetence in the kitchen, I would refer to Lucia's colleague, accomplished sommelier, Cristiano Pereira, who had a glass of exceptionally good espumante, Portugal's under-the-radar and under-appreciated sparkling wine, in my hand as soon as I stepped over the threshold, quickly followed by another.

Slipping silently around the work-stations, plying me, my partner Kelly and my fellow wannabe chefs with some truly spectacular Portuguese pairings for whatever gastronomic gates Lucia was attempting to guide us through, Cristiano has a lot to answer for.

Pine Cliffs, a five-star resort, hugging some of the Algarve's most desirable coastline, is vast, stretching across 179 acres. Mimo represents but one of an array of sophisticated recreational diversions available to guests, many of whom hardly set foot outside the resort's gates.

Being the Algarve, there's a particularly picturesque nine-hole golf course wrapping itself around the cliff top, upon which the resort sits. I've never really embraced the game, but amid the autumn sunshine, en-route to the beach, I was momentarily mesmerised, watching the shots flying over the Devil's Parlour, a rather tricky 200-yard drive across a ravine.

It was tempting to take a lesson, but not learning how to cook probably didn't need compounding by not learning how to play golf. Tennis instruction at the Annabel Croft Tennis School sounded a more viable option; the former pro makes regular appearances throughout the year.

It quickly becomes apparent why the resort — originally conceived in the 1990s, but subjected to a €50 million makeover in 2016 — exerts such an all-consuming



Try a different kind of holiday in the Algarve, with a lesson from a Michelin-approved chef and her trusty – and generous! – sommelier

Whisk-taker!

Portuguese perfection: Top, stunning views from Pine Cliffs; below, Kelly and Andrew with Lucia Ribeiro; and a cataplana

appeal. From spectacular Falesia beach framed by pink cliffs, with its own beach club and restaurant, accessed by a glass-sided lift, to the expansive, and sumptuous Serenity, The Art of Wellbeing spa, this is all a carefully-curated journey toward a self-contained universe of upscale seclusion.

There are basically three access routes into this not-so-secret sanctuary. The Pine Cliffs Hotel with its traditional feel, crafted from hand-painted tiles and white walls has 217 rooms; the plush Pine Cliffs Ocean Suites offering 148 one, two and three-bedroom apartments, incorporating fully-equipped kitchens, and the Pine Cliffs Residence. This latter option offers larger properties ensconced in woodland brimming with birdlife where private family holidays still retain access to all the resort's amenities.

Among other names of note, this latter option is apparently a firm favourite with Michael O'Leary who, in spite of a bulging property portfolio, has been known to favour the Residence's villas for

family vacations. Undoubtedly, one of the principal attractions for Ireland's 19th richest individual, is the Porto Pirata children's club, the largest in the region, covering 2 acres. It's got mini-golf (this is the Algarve, even the kids are at it), pirate ships, two swimming pools and lots more besides. There's also a Junior Club for older children.

YOU don't need to be an aviation A-lister to appreciate the family-friendly disposition of Pine Cliffs though, it's clearly popular across a wide spectrum of guests with children. The ability to offer a diverse range of stylishly presented recreational offerings remains at the core of the resort's enduring popularity.

Mimo's choice of Pine Cliffs for its first cookery school (Portugal's largest) outside of Spain, underlines the resort's culinary credentials, which is probably why so many guests choose not to go for-

aging for food outside. The choice extended by 12 restaurants and bars makes driving to dinner a rather pointless pursuit.

Our standout venue was probably the fish restaurant O Pescador, nursing aperitifs on the terrace, watching ex-fisherman Rui Encarnação, as he skilfully prepared ultra-fresh sea bass, octopus and tuna for the kitchen. In addition to Mimo's cookery classes, it's also possible to sit around Lucia in a kind of close-up culinary magic show, where she demonstrates how each of the constituent components of your meal is created.

As my own endeavours to acquire some vaguely credible kitchen skills approached their conclusion, we were all busy with a rather tricky undertaking involving an almond tart. And not just any old almond tart, this one is made to Lucia's grandmother's recipe and requires turning the baking tray quickly upside down and bashing it out in one go, hopefully avoiding a fall-apart-tart situation — as Cristiano doles out a selection of delicious dessert wines.

The final manoeuvre for the aspiring master-chefs involved very, very carefully rolling the tart up like a swiss roll, but by this stage, we were all simply rolling about with laughter. If I'd known learning to cook was this much fun, I'd have had a stab at learning to play golf as well.

TRAVEL FACTS

How to get there: Ryanair flies Dublin-Faro year-round, three times per day from summer 2020. Fares from €18.99 one-way (ryanair.com)

Where to stay: Pine Cliffs Resort, rates from €78 in low season (pinecliffs.com)

