



PORTUGAL

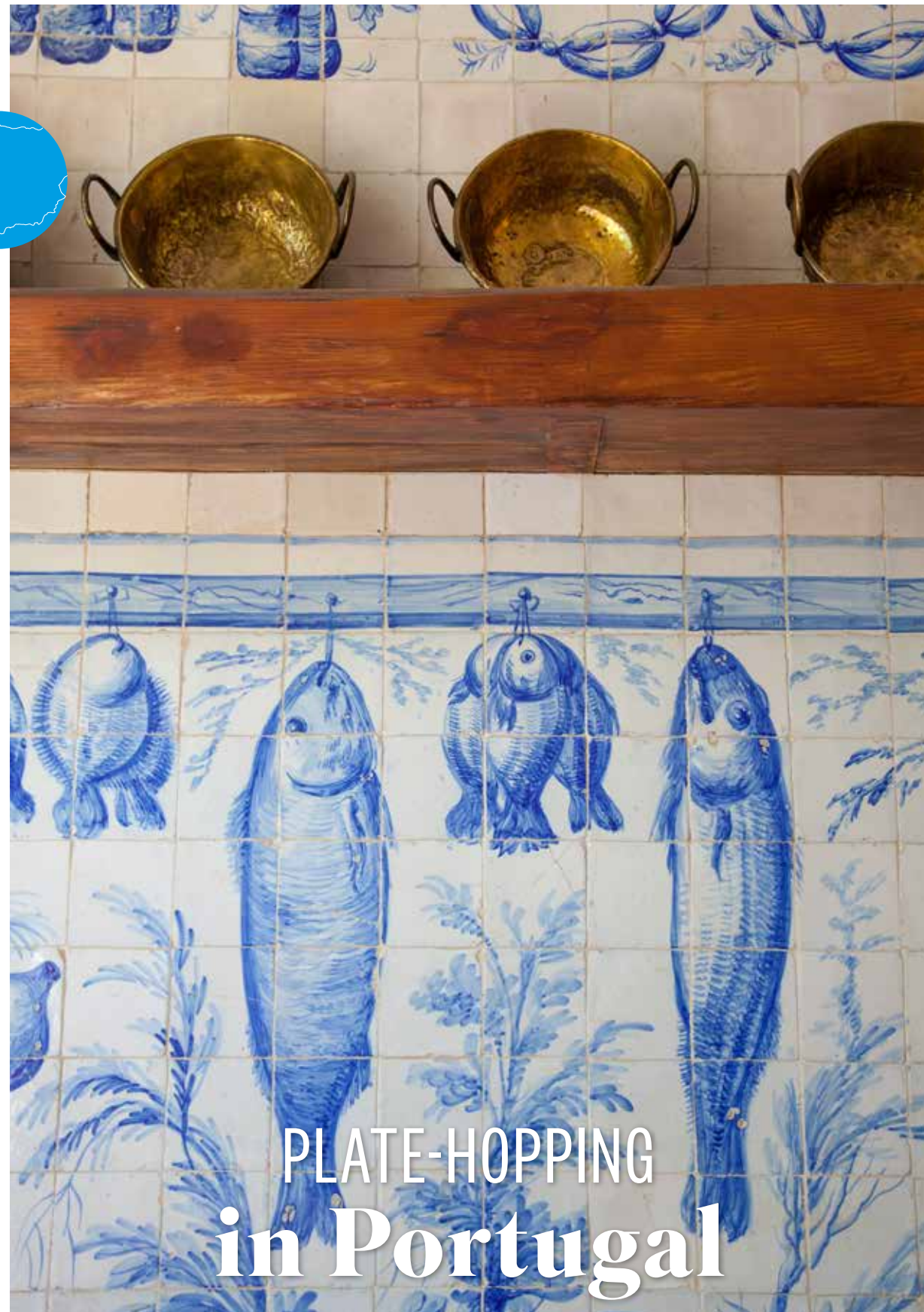


PLATE-HOPPING in Portugal

From traditional dishes that make the most of a plentiful supply of fish to the flaky delights of a classic Portuguese tart, Catherine McGregor discovers the vibrant flavours of Portugal.

Words by — CATHERINE MCGREGOR



OPPOSITE PAGE: Fish and nautical designs are found throughout Portugal. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Salt cod; Ribeira, the old town of Porto; graffiti art adds colour in Lisbon; beautifully presented tins of fish make lovely mementos.



Let me tell you about the Portuguese and fish. In this nation, hitched along Europe's western edge, fish are everywhere. They're underfoot, incorporated into the design of Portugal's distinctive mosaic pavements. They're above your head, painted on to glazed *azulejos* tiles and coiled around stone columns in gloomy Gothic cathedrals. They're celebrated in small-town museums, with popular folk songs and at festivals like Lisbon's Feast of St Anthony, an annual bacchanal of drinking, dancing... and sardine eating. The festival officially memorialises the local-born saint who, legend has it, preached the gospel to shoals of awe-struck fish. But mostly, it's an excuse to eat. Alfama, the city's oldest neighbourhood, is transformed into an all-night barbecue block party, the narrow streets lined with grills cranking out seemingly endless servings of charred sardines, slid on to paper plates or squished between two halves of a soft bread roll. We ate at makeshift tables under balconies draped with coloured lights and streamers, the air thick with charcoal smoke and laughter. The people of Portugal are the world's third-most voracious consumers of fish. They get through around 57 kilograms a year per capita, well

over twice the amount New Zealanders typically eat, and find all sorts of creative ways to serve it, like *caldeirada*, a bouillabaisse-like muddle of seafood and filleted fish, or *amêijoas na cataplana*, a clam and chorizo (in Portuguese, *chouriço*) stew. But by far the most common way to eat fish in Portugal is also the simplest: a whole fish, gutted, slashed and chargrilled until its skin starts to curl and flake. It arrives at your table doused in olive oil and with half a lemon to squeeze over; on the side there'll almost certainly be a grandma-approved trio of boiled potatoes, boiled carrots and a cursory lettuce salad. The presentation may be unimaginative, but boy is it delicious, the fish ocean-fresh and smoky from the grill, the boiled vegetables offering a perfectly starchy foil. Even the most basic restaurant menu offers four or five choices of fish, including the ubiquitous grilled sardines. These either get the boiled potato and carrot treatment, or are served on a slice or two of cornbread to soak up the fishy, lemony juices. Even more than the sardine, the fish that defines Portugal is *bacalhau*, or salt cod. In every supermarket there are stacks of the kite-shaped fillets, stiff as cardboard and looking – at least to these eyes – just as appetising. The Portuguese evidently disagree: a study found most eat

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It's the rare visitor who finds *bacalhau* anything more than an interesting acquired taste, but you can't come to Portugal and not give a couple of dishes a try.



THIS PAGE: The interior and exterior of the *Pasteis de Belém* – a famous pastry shop renowned for its rich custard tarts, known as *pastel de nata* – or Portuguese Tarts; (bottom right) the Time Out Mercado da Ribeira.



FROM TOP: A street food stall in Lisbon preparing freshly caught sardines; A Ginjinha Registada, Lisbon's oldest specialty store selling *ginjinha*, a popular liquor made from cherries.

bacalhau in some form at least once a week. They say there are 365 ways to prepare it, one for every day of the year.

It's the rare visitor who finds *bacalhau* anything more than an interesting acquired taste, but you can't come to Portugal and not give a couple of dishes a try. My advice: start with *bolinhos de bacalhau*, the cod croquettes popular as bar snacks and appetisers. Dining at A Tendinha, an historic restaurant famous as a hangout for Lisbon's fado music community, I followed my *bolinhos* with *bacalhau à brás*, shredded cod mixed with potato matchsticks and scrambled egg. A little more challenging, but not too bad with a glass of cold Sagres beer on the side.

As a seafaring country with some of the best fresh seafood in Europe, it's odd that Portugal has such a thing for preserving fish. As well as dried cod, the Portuguese are crazy for tinned fish of every description: tiny sardines, high-end tuna belly, Atlantic mackerel, plus anchovies, octopus, mussels, cockles and squid. For more than a hundred years Portugal was a world leader in canned fish; in the 1980s this country of 10 million people boasted an astonishing 153 canning factories. But by the end of that decade the industry was in a nosedive as younger generations turned their noses up at this sometimes-stinky food.

Now the hip kids are rediscovering this unique part of local culinary culture. At Sol e Pesca, a former fishing tackle shop in Lisbon's bohemian Cais do Sodré quarter, you pick a

tin from the extensive menu, or simply choose one from the shelves. It arrives at the table accompanied by cornbread, salad and possibly a carafe of *vinho verde*, the cheap and cheerful local wine. A quick, tasty and healthy snack, ideal for pre-dinner or late-night drinking. The tins' gorgeous retro packaging make for excellent souvenirs, too.

Shopping at canned fish emporium Conserveira De Lisboa, where saleswomen ring up purchases on a vintage cash register and tie your packages with brown paper and string, is like stepping back in time to 1930s Portugal. Also in Lisbon, A Vida Portuguesa is a treasure trove of Portuguese-produced products, including a kaleidoscopic display of fish tins, local olive oils, condiments, confectionery and more.

It may not seem like it at first glance, but there's a lot more to Portuguese food than fish, fish and more fish. In Porto, my culinary to-do list included seeking out a restaurant serving *tripas à moda do Porto*; not for nothing are Porto locals known as *tripeiros*, "tripe eaters". But I'll be honest: I never even came close. In the heat of summer, I realised I'd rather be on the deck at Graham's – one of the many historic port houses still based here – eating acorn-fed Iberian ham (*porco preto*, what the Spanish call *pata negra*), sipping a glass of bone-dry white port, and drinking in the spectacular view of the Duoro River and the city beyond.

Porto is also the home of the gut-busting *francesinha* ("little Frenchie"), a modified croque monsieur sandwich with layered steak,

ham and sausage that's become a hugely popular fast food meal. Covered in cheese, smothered in a thick tomato and beer sauce, and accompanied by french fries, *francesinha* is the sort of dish that makes your arteries harden just thinking about it. For something lighter – and glory be, with green vegetables – seek out *caldo verde*, the popular soup made from potato puree, chiffoned collard greens and hunks of *chouriço*. I had a bowl at Time Out Mercado da Ribeira, a giant gourmet food hall near the banks of the river Tagus in Lisbon. It's a great place to try both classic and creatively reimagined Portuguese foods in a casual setting, as well as drinks like *ginjinha*, a cherry liquor which is one of Lisbon's favourite after-work tipples.

Savoury cuisine in Portugal is (mostly) delicious, and always surprisingly affordable, but my lasting food memory of the country is sweet. Portugal is secretly one of Europe's best producers of sugary treats; wander into any pastry shop and you'll find glass counters groaning with pastries like *pão de Deus*, a sweet bread filled with coconut paste, or *malasadas*, doughnut-like pastries dipped in sugar.

Easily the most famous of Portugal's pastries is the rich custard tart known as *pastel de nata*. If you're in Lisbon, you have to make a pilgrimage to the upmarket suburb of Belém, where these flaky morsels were first made by nuns from the Jerónimos Monastery more than 200 years ago. The bakery that makes *pastéis de Belém* (as they're called in Belém) is today one



of Lisbon's most popular tourist destinations. The bakery's enormous output – an average of 20,000 *pastéis* per day, rising to 40,000 in the height of summer – means the tarts are served straight from the oven, the custard still feather-light, warm and wobbly. You can eat them at the in-house cafe, or take them to go, packed into blue and white boxes and placed carefully into smart paper carrier bags. It's a nice touch, but all that fancy packaging seems somewhat superfluous. If your *pastéis de Belém* make it back to your hotel – heck, if they make it to the next street corner – you've a lot more willpower than me. ○

