



Clockwise from this picture London's most chic, including Kate Moss, frequent the Chiltern Firehouse (right); custard with pork fat (*toucinho do céu*), literally 'heaven's bacon' at Café Lisboa; Asian beef tartare at Tartar-ia at Mercado da Ribeira; Nuno (right) and José (left)



SINCE ITS LAUNCH, THE CHILTERN FIREHOUSE HAS GARNERED MORE PRESS INTEREST THAN THE CELEBRITIES WHO FLOCK THERE EVERY NIGHT. HOWEVER IT'S THE RESTAURANT'S MICHELIN-STARRED 'GENIUS', NUNO MENDES, WHO IS REALLY THE STAR – AND HIS PASSION FOR FOOD STARTED AT HOME IN PORTUGAL. ZOE WILLIAMS ACCOMPANIES HIM, ALONG WITH THE CITY'S OWN SUPER-CHEF JOSÉ AVILLEZ, ON A TAPAS TOUR OF LISBON. PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK BAUER

# FROM THE FIREHOUSE TO THE FRYING PAN



It's 10 o'clock on a Thursday morning, and I'm inside the Pastéis de Belém – the well-known café where Portugal's famous *pastel de nata* custard tart was popularised in the mid-19th century. And it's slightly more Lisbon than you could ever imagine. Its blue and white Azulejo tiles collapse your sense of time: they look centuries old, and yet so new. Bottles of Madeira fill glass cases up to the ceiling, like trophies of good taste. And those custard tarts, hopelessly enchanting with their crunchy edges and immutable centres, pile out of ovens like a vision of plenty. They are perfect in the way that only an iconic food can be: change them in any way – even with the addition of icing sugar – and something is wrong with the world.

Standing at the bar is Portuguese gastronomy in human form: Nuno Mendes, the man who made the Chiltern Firehouse one of the only places in London to be seen eating – or for that matter, to be seen at all. He's the chef who turned his east London flat into the Loft Project, taking the supper club concept to wider acclaim and creating, in my opinion, the entire phenomenon of food as a thing of fascination, and of happenings where meals become banquets. When he arrived in London in the Noughties, he was famous for using Lithuanian dental tools to finesse his impossibly dainty edible mosaics. But that's not what makes him a genius. It's just the kind of thing that geniuses do.

Next to him is José Avillez, the bright light of Lisbon's restaurant scene, and the first chef in Portugal to have a restaurant (Belcanto in Lisbon's Chaido district) awarded two Michelin stars – a plaudit he received only last year. He has five places within a mile of each other, ranging from Belcanto to the exquisite Mini Bar. He talks like a poet – get him on the subject of what he learned at the infamous elBulli – and looks like a jockey, as thin as a whip.

## WE EAT PUFFS OF COD AS CHOPPY AS CLOUDS, LIKE THE MOST ETHEREAL FISHFINGERS

An American couple, enjoying the custard-flavoured fruits of retirement, stop the pair at the bar for a photo. I congratulate the wife afterwards – what a great spot, to see Mendes and Avillez, together, at such a famous bar. 'Oh, I didn't know who they were,' she replies. 'I just thought they were so handsome.'

It is wonderful to taste food with chefs – the things they notice, the things they rave over, the shy, understated praise they give to one another ('This is really yummy,' Nuno says to José, as we sat in the latter's Café Lisboa, eating puffs of cod as choppy as clouds, like the most ethereal fishfingers; his friend glows). But there is nothing quite like hearing the history of the world's eating habits through the thoughtful, hilarious, sometimes slightly baleful, retelling of Nuno Mendes.

Lisbon's Mercado da Ribeira was, in the late 19th century, one of Europe's most famous fish markets. Although it fell into disrepair years ago, the vegetable sellers remained, their produce so fresh and vivid



**Clockwise from left**  
Tapas including radishes, turnips and house-cured mullet roe butter at Taberna da Rua das Flores; André Magalhães with dried Moray eel; broad beans at Café Lisboa; Nuno savours marlin hearts



that, as you walk down the aisles, you get a riot of different smells in each nostril, like some bizarre sensory dualism they might try at London's Science Museum. In 2014, it was renovated to include a stall from every major chef of the country, plus one space for young guns, running a croqueteria. The result is an elegant, echoing cathedral of food. You would have to spend weeks here to really do it justice.

Mendes, back through the mists of time, has a farming background, he recounts after José disappears into the kitchen; when he arrived to study in the US 'they thought I was a bit of a specimen'. A lot of his fellow students had never seen a whole chicken before – only in the supermarket, divided into its constituent parts. The chef could tell the difference between a pig fed on acorns and one fed on chestnuts, with meat from the latter being sweeter,

more delicate. Indeed, I've never heard acorns trashed so thoroughly, yet subtly, than when discussing the relative merits of Spanish acorn-fed Iberico pork and Portuguese chestnut-reared Bisaro pork: 'It's a little gentler, a little sweeter. It really is quite special.' José suddenly reappears. 'Sorry, the egg lady grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. Look at it, it must be 20 kilos. That is a big pig – more like a cow pig.'

What you have to remember is that Portugal has a culinary story as far-reaching as it is century-spanning: 'We have so much history to tell through our food,' Mendes says. 'A lot of Goan cuisine is actually based on old Portuguese dishes. When you go through Goa or Malaysia, these are all Portuguese dishes, adjusted for the ingredients that they had.' And that's not all: through some compelling etymological explanation,

Nuno tells me that the Portuguese also invented bread, croquettes, sausages and fermentation. If you like it, chances are this is where it started. 'You can sense this energy from Portuguese cooking,' he continues, 'our offer is quite varied. We have tropical [from the Azores], subtropical, volcanic... You can sit in a restaurant and eat pineapple, and it will have come from Portugal.'

'The Azores is the most pure nature in Portugal,' José says. 'It's like Hawaii – it has this breathtaking, volcanic aesthetic, but it's not touristic.' Later on, we arrive at Sol e Pesca, possibly the most idiosyncratic bar I have ever come across. Basically, they do local wines, beer and tinned fish, in epic quantities – beautiful cans, whose graphics haven't changed since the 1930s, deck their walls. You pick them out, then eat the fish with slices of apple or thyme leaves. It's open until three in the morning, and scenesters come here after a big night out to eat anchovies and sardines; if they know their





tinned fish, they always choose something from the Azores.

Both chefs were young starters who had established themselves in the restaurant world by the age of about 12. If I wanted to meet a man for whom food was a life's pilgrimage, a passion simmering underneath other, totally unrelated careers, José tells me, I should meet André Magalhães, co-owner and chef at Taberna da Rua das Flores. He used to work in films. Four years ago, he unleashed his food on Lisbon: his tavern is a packed, beautiful little place in the yellow-stone centre of the city. 'He smokes his own eel, then deep-fries it. It's like bacon of the sea,' says Mendes.

'That sounds disgusting,' Avillez reprimands, 'say something that makes it sound nice!' Apparently it's the most delicious thing you could conceive; fisherman in the south eat it as a bar snack.

Apart from thigh-length fish carcasses hanging from the ceiling, Magalhães has pots fermenting everywhere in his flat. The daikon is a sensation, the marlin hearts, fermented for a year, are unique. After tuna, turnip, chickpeas and chitterlings, he unleashes the beast: a *botelo* sausage. To make one of these you take rib and spine cartilage from a pig, mix it with paprika and wine, and stuff it into an intestine. Then you leave it for some time. Not only did the Portuguese allegedly invent bread, this is where the word 'botulism' comes from. It tastes delicious, though.

There is such a sense of ancient provenance and of place here: the way you can trace not just the city, but the topography of the country, through its specialisms; the way you can understand its

## LISBON'S FOOD HOTSPOTS

### **Cantinho do Avillez**

Try the scallops and the green beans in batter. [cantinhodoavillez.pt](http://cantinhodoavillez.pt)

### **Pastéis de Belém**

A custard tart. Obviously. [pasteisdebelem.pt](http://pasteisdebelem.pt)

### **Mercado da Ribeira**

Bisaro (suckling pig) and *serra da estrala* (a beautiful cheese). +351 21 359 3100

### **Taberna da Rua das Flores**

Order the cured marlin and tomato rice – sounds boring, is anything but. +351 21 347 9418

### **Sol e Pesca**

Order goat's cheese with fig and *muxama* (dried tuna fillets), or go for the elephant tuna. [solepesca.com](http://solepesca.com)

### **Cervejaria Ramiro**

Have prawns, clams or anything else that looks alive when you walk in – if you've never eaten goose barnacles before, this is

the place to rectify that. [cervejariaramiro.en](http://cervejariaramiro.en)

### **Jesus e Goes**

Chef Jesus Lee does all the cooking himself, then stands front of house explaining his gorgeous Goan stews and patties. +351 21 154 5812

### **Mini Bar**

Be sure to sample the sliders. [minibar.pt/en](http://minibar.pt/en)

### **Gambrinus**

Taste its famous steak sandwich. [gambrinuslisboa.com](http://gambrinuslisboa.com)

### **Café Lisboa**

Tiny pot-au-feu pies and clouds of cod – everything in here is wonderful. [cafelisboa.pt/en](http://cafelisboa.pt/en)

**The chefs' table**  
Scorching the foie gras for the beef tartare at Mercado da Ribeira (above); Nuno and José dining at Taberna da Rua das Flores (right)



changing place in the world, its ever-understated influence, through its exports – whether of cured meats in the 16th century or super-chefs in the 21st. But on the flipside, Lisbon is very modern: it has this rich backstory, but that doesn't constrain its culture or stop it changing.

Avillez's most recent opening, Mini Bar, is his take on the speakeasy. Here, you can get a basil cocktail with a prawn ceviche served on half a lime – one of those combinations that you never realised you wanted to try. The Bairro Alto Hotel has the standards of Los Angeles – a beautiful rooftop bar, the most charming staff ever – but the elegance of its own city. A contemporary mood emanates in Lisbon, not just from the interiors and the menus, but from the atmosphere of its restaurants, which are young, creative and collaborative. As Nuno tells me: 'Now, it's very fashionable to be a chef. When we started, it wasn't like that. If you wanted to be a chef, it was because you had failed at everything else in life and fell into a kitchen.'

'That's why there are some lousy cooks from those days,' José adds, laughing.

'Because if you don't like it, it's horrible,' Nuno agrees. 'Young chefs now do it because they love it.' ■

✈ @zoesqwilliams

*Abercrombie & Kent offer three nights in Lisbon, staying at the Barrio Alto Hotel, from £630pp, including BA flights from London Heathrow and a food walking tour (abercrombiekent.co.uk; 01242 855 179). For more on Lisbon, visitlisboa.com. Nuno Mendes opens Taberna do Mercado in London's Old Spitalfields Market this summer (tabernamercado.co.uk). For more on José Avillez, visit joseavillez.pt/en*



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**Sweet victory**

Over custard tarts at Pastéis de Belém, the chefs discuss their love for their native cuisine (main image); deep-fried dried Moray eel at Taberna da Rua das Flores (above)