



Asian codfish in miso butter with shitaki pakchoi

Café Colonial

Memmo Príncipe Real, Lisbon

Words: Harry McKinley

In recent years Lisbon has been nicknamed the ‘hipster capital of Europe’, the ‘new capital of cool’ and ‘Europe’s trendiest city’. Whilst such monikers are often to be taken with a pinch of salt, when it comes to the largest metropolis in Portugal, there’s more than a grain of truth.

A low-rise and historic sprawl on the banks of the Tagus Estuary, it combines sleepy coffee shop culture with a high-octane bar scene. But it wears its modish credentials in a rather quiet and unassuming way. Like the coolest person in the room, it perhaps garnered its many admirers by not trying too hard.

Príncipe Real is one of the city’s hottest neighbourhoods and it is here that many of the native bright young things and European visitors come to work, play and relax.

Adjacent to Barrio Alto, a district famed for its rowdy nightlife, Príncipe Real is characterised by its classic architecture, array of design and lifestyle-led stores, and its numerous outdoor spaces – ideal for short coffees during long afternoons. It’s also the site of the latest hotel from Memmo Unforgettable Hotels, now a trio of properties that includes a hotel in Lisbon’s Alfama and another in the Algarve.

As is true of the other hotels in the family, Memmo Príncipe Real prides itself on fitting in with its surroundings and the attitude of the local neighbourhood. But it’s

also somewhat like the city at large: discreet at first but increasingly revealing new layers of excitement.

A new build from architect Samuel Torres de Carvalho, it is stylistically enigmatic; a sleek four-floor structure that evokes the mid-century modern period with its angular silhouette and integration into the hill on which it perches. Its striking façade is only revealed after passing through an arched alleyway – the hotel located on a plot detached from the main street and obscured by buildings of a more traditional nature.

The hotel’s restaurant and bar occupies most of the entry floor; the lobby curving into the dining area and lounge, and a large terrace providing a spot for guests to absorb the arresting views. Here too the look is one of nostalgic modernity, with the interior overseen by Torres and João Correa Nunes. Pieces of furniture designed specially by Torres live side by side with vintage finds. Contemporary paintings by Miguel Branco hang on the walls.

Whilst this 41-key boutique is the first five-star in the neighbourhood, the restaurant and bar, Café Colonial, isn’t primarily intended to appeal to the influx of tourists to Lisbon, hip or otherwise. Instead General Manager Rodrigo Machaz has his sights set firmly on the resident crowd.

“Café Colonial is our first restaurant targeting the locals,” he says. “The food, service, atmosphere and pricing

were considered to attract the local community and to be part of the neighbourhood day by day. Hotel guests are always welcome, but we want to make sure that they get in touch with the people of the area and don't just have dinner in one of touristic restaurants of the city."

It's little surprise therefore, that whilst the hotel is regularly at full occupancy, locals make up 90% of the trade at the 55-cover restaurant, which in turn already represents around 35% of Memmo Príncipe Real's revenues. It's a percentage Machaz, and Executive Assistant Manager Eduardo Consiglieri Pedroso hope to grow, as the venue cements itself as a destination restaurant and important lifestyle spot.

Tapping the local set requires a particularly sensitive approach to cuisine and at Café Colonial dishes are intended to reflect Portugal's influence around the world, whilst still offering an original take on the region's favourites. It is a thoughtfully conceived menu, from Chef Vasco Lello, that not once veers into cliché territory.

"This is a place for conversation, a sense of community and melting pot of Portuguese heritage," Machaz continues. "In many ways it's a Portuguese journey around the world, with influences from Brazil, Africa and Asia, combined in contemporary dishes that linger in the memory. This is a very different concept from the other restaurants in the area."

A starter of fried chicken wings with peri peri sauce, okra and peanut is infused with the spirit of Angola, a former Portuguese colony. On the mains menu, meagre with Bulhão Pato rice, razor clams and cockles represents one of the country's most enduring and popular flavour profiles. For dessert there are tastes of Brazil, in the Quindim with passion fruit ice cream and lime; and São Tomé, in a decadent chocolate creation with banana and caramel praline. The dishes are confident and speak to the broad culinary legacy of a former empire, but also to the forward-looking character of today's Portugal.

Throughout the day the restaurant evolves. Mornings are exclusively for guests, who can choose between light and flavoursome à la carte options, or set themselves up for the day at a breakfast bar well-stocked with cereals, cold meats and crowd-pleasing Pastéis de Nata; served on

plates from Costa Nova. In the afternoons light meals and bar snacks are available, whilst in the evening the restaurant opens for main service along with the signature cocktail bar.

During the opening of the hotel, the team collaborated with Luís Domingos, owner of drinks company Black Pepper & Basil, on the development of the cocktail menu. As in the restaurant, there is a local sensibility. Mixes like Port Tonic and the Amarginha Sour – made with a Portuguese almond liqueur – provide a suitably regional twist on international favourites. The hotel partners with Diageo and stocks multiple brands from the company's portfolio, with a spiky cooper Absolut Elyx pineapple adorning the bar.

For most city hotels, and certainly design-led boutiques, creating a destination restaurant and bar that succeeds in being just that, is perhaps the holy grail of contemporary hotel F&B. At Café Colonial it is so far mission achieved, and the restaurant is on an upward trajectory. But it's still early days for this new hotel in an increasingly lauded portion of Lisbon, and Machaz has plans. Capitalising on the dramatic skyline vista, the terrace will soon play host to DJs and a sundown happy hour. On the currently unutilised roof there's scope for private cocktail events and room for 60 guests.

Memmo Príncipe Real is a member of Design Hotels, and this year the group's Arena conference will be held in the city. The hotel is set to host attendees for the welcome cocktail and there's little doubt that many will be taking notes. After all, it's only fair that the city that captured the attention of Europe's 'coolest' should share some of its secrets.

www.memmohotels.com/principereal

IN A BITE Covers: 55 • Owner / Operator: Memmo Unforgettable Hotels • Interior Design: Samuel Torres de Carvalho, João Correa Nunes • Architecture: Samuel Torres de Carvalho • Executive Chef: Chef Vasco Lello • Head Bartender: Diogo Simões • Tableware: Costa Nova • Glassware: Nachtmann, Spiegelau • Cutlery: Cutipol • Menu Design: José Carlos Mendes • Uniform Design: Juliana Cavalcanti • Suppliers: Diageo

