

Eat up Keith Austin

Atlantic notion

Portuguese food happily means more than salted cod – an acquired taste.

Silvas Portuguese Traditional Charcoal Chicken

SHOP 1, 82 NEW CANTERBURY ROAD, PETERSHAM. TEL: 9572 9911.

Open 9am-9pm (last orders).

Tried Caldo verde (\$6.50), sardinhas portuguesas (\$11.95), espetada a madeirense (\$23.50), bacalhau a lagareiro (\$23.50).

Bottom line for two \$65.45

I should have been listening to the waiter. But when dining and swords are mentioned in the same sentence my mind turns to Damocles, musing on what a sword hanging over your head and held by a single hair would do to your appetite.

As a result, I am sitting at a mostly untouched plate of salted codfish called bacalhau a lagareiro.

Popsi Bubblehead, meanwhile, tucks greedily, and noisily, into a feast of meat that makes my mouth water just looking at it.

“Didn’t you hear him?” she says around a chunk of medium-rare rump that makes her look like a lioness chewing the head of a small gazelle. “He tried to steer you away from the bacalhau; said it was a taste best acquired from childhood.” Like Vegemite, then, only not quite as awful.

To be honest I would have gone the bacalhau anyway, because it is the de facto national dish of Portugal (closely followed by sardines), and I like a bit of cod. Unfortunately, something happens when it is salted, making it chewy – not so much codfish as codpiece.

It comes as a huge pile of fish on a plate swimming with olive oil, garnished with little roast potatoes and literally smothered in slivers of roast garlic. We smelt it before the waiter even exited the kitchen. This is the dish to have if you’ve got a cold coming on or you want to get rid of an unwanted beau.

Part of my problem is, of course, that I have overdone things with my entree of sardinhas portuguesas. Four lovely grilled sardines have swum happily down my Gregory Peck and I am too stuffed to do more than pick at the main course.

Popsi describes her caldo verde – a soup of potato, shredded greens, a soupçon of olive oil and a slice of garlic sausage – as charming and wholesome, with a bit of meat in the middle. “Just like me, then,” I say to deafening silence.

And we both enjoy the theatricality of the espetada a madeirense, essentially a huge kebab served on a sword-like skewer. This is then hung from what looks like a short hat rack in the middle of the table, with the juices dripping onto a small plate to be soaked up with a slice of bread. It comes with grilled polenta, a simple salad and garlic bread.

Silvas looks very much like one of those take-away charcoal chicken places – and indeed it does a brisk take-away trade – but do not be fooled. There is a varied menu (so you don’t have to have the dreaded bacalhau) and there is beer (the Sagres cerveja is not bad at all).

I am also much taken with the musical selection (Roxy Music, David Bowie) until Popsi says: “Yeah, old blokes’ music.” She is lucky that sword still has meat on it, I tell you.



Illustration: John Shakespeare