



IN COD WE TRUST

This humble fish flavours a nation and its culture, writes **Kate Armstrong**.

The revelation that is the quality of cod comes in Lisbon. It's one evening in 2003 when my language school's host mother, and very good traditional Portuguese cook, dishes up bacalhau com natas, a rich oven-baked dish of shredded cod and cream. I'm hooked.

This experience sets me on a journey. I devour Mark Kurlansky's book, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* and, on each visit to Portugal, I consume more cod than a Portuguese at Christmas, when it's served as the traditional meal.

I gradually discover that this rather plain-looking fish, that's salted and dried, represents 500 years of Portuguese history, politics and identity; these days, cod remains Portugal's national and cultural symbol (Atlantic cod being the most consumed).

And, whether you're aware of it or not, it's integral to any travel experience in Portugal, as I'm reminded on my recent visit.

For although Portugal is renowned for its

codfish, these "fishy" encounters are less about the Instagram snaps (custard tarts, anyone?). Instead, like the Portuguese themselves, they reveal themselves unassumingly. Such as when you catch a passing whiff of something so strongly "marine" it makes your nose scrunch (chances are it's dried cod). Or when the word bacalhau (cod) appears repeatedly across your restaurant menus.

For a filleted version of the country's cod chronicle, Lisbon's Interpretative Centre of the History of Cod is a hi-tech museum that opened in 2020 and pays homage to cod fishing. The museum is big on special effects, but small on actual boats or fishing equipment (for this, don't miss the fabulous Ilhavo Maritime Museum, 200 kilometres north-west of Lisbon). Rather, virtual cod "swim" across dinner tables and fishermen share their hardy adventures at sea through recordings. Cod-focused facts – such as the number of fins (six), species (200) families (10), and weight (up to 44kg) – are delivered

quirkily on a microwave oven screen and hanging cardboard cod cut-outs. But you soon get the picture. And it's fascinating.

During the Age of Discovery in the 15th century, Portuguese sailors headed to the coast of Newfoundland where Atlantic cod were abundant. The fish were salted and dried; this preserved food was perfect for expeditioners and was popular among the upper classes. By the 1800s, however, this "loyal friend" as it was nicknamed, had become the primary food for ordinary people.

In 1934, Portuguese dictator, Salazar, established the "Codfish Campaign". His plan? Cod would provide Portugal's staple food, employ locals and feed the masses. The propaganda was overwhelming. To whip up national pride, Salazar even compared the cod fishermen to the early navigators.

But cod fishing was alarmingly dangerous and gruelling work. The fishermen set off in luggers that towed small, flat-bottomed dories. From these they used the longline





Clockwise from main: a Portuguese fisherman hangs the catch of cod up to dry; preparing the cheese-filled pasteis de bacalhau; a shop selling cod in Lisbon; bacalhau com natas (cod with cheese and potatoes); pasteis de bacalhau; and chef and author Vitor Sobral, the 'cod god' outside his Lisbon restaurant. Photos: Alamy

Portuguese consume around 20 per cent of the global cod catch

fishing technique while facing massive Atlantic swells, fog, and even icebergs as they hauled in around 900 tons of cod at a time.

By 1957, Portugal was the greatest cod fish producer in the world, though Salazar's goal was never reached: the country consumed only 70 per cent of production. Finally, in 1974, with the fall of Salazar, the last cod fishing fleet set sail for Newfoundland. Nevertheless, the Portuguese taste for bacalhau never wavered. It had become part of their DNA.

These days, Portuguese consume around 20 per cent of the global cod catch, most of which comes from Norway.

The best way to touch and smell an actual dried cod is in Lisbon's Rua do Arsenal at one of eight traditional mercearias (grocery stores) remaining in this historic strip that supply locals with dried cod.

And to try some of the city's best bacalhau head to Tasca da Esquina whose owner/chef Vitor Sobral, is famous for having first put Portuguese cuisine on the international map. He's also author of the definitive recipe book on cod, *As Minhas Receitas de Bacalhau; 500 receitas* (My Codfish Recipes).

This "cod god", as I secretly refer to him, visited Norway on and off for over two years where he spent time among fisherfolk and on fishing boats to research his bacalhau bible. "The book was created for the Portuguese as a mark of what we are known

for and to show them that there are many other ways of cooking codfish besides the traditional methods," he says, before praising cod's virtues: sustainability (you can eat all of it), health (it is protein-rich and a lot more) and versatility.

I'm well sated after polishing off a generous dollop of Chef Vitor's bacalhau a bras, codfish with potato straws and egg; a delicious meal (my favourite) fit for a fisherman.

It takes an entire day before my full belly can cope with my next cod expedition, this time for pasteis de bacalhau, cod cakes. For these, head no further than the snack bar-cum-pastelerias; these simple spots prepare excellent home-style dishes. And it doesn't end there.

Even Michelin star restaurants feature cod on their menus to showcase their cultural symbol. At Alma, a two-star Michelin restaurant, Chef Henrique Sá Pessoa's serves up calcada de bacalhau, a deconstructed and very artistic version of bacalhau à bras. In his version, the ingredients are assembled to resemble a stone from Portugal's calcadas, cobbled pavements.

Depending on who you talk to, cod can be prepared in masses of ways: 365 (one for each day of the year); 500 (Vitor Sobral's creations) or even 1001 (meaning, not even the Portuguese really know).

That's a lot of excuses for repeat explorations to this beautiful country. **T**

THE DETAILS

FLY

Qantas flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Lisbon via London. See qantas.com

STAY

At Hotel Britania, it's all about the original Art Deco design and excellent service at this atmospheric place. Rooms from \$150 per night. See lisbonheritagehotels.com
The recently-opened luxurious Hotel Ivens, part of the Marriot Autograph collection, features quirky explorer themed decor. Rooms from \$300 per night. See theivenshotel.com
For an all-out splurge, nothing beats the style and service at Lisbon's luxury spot, the Four Seasons Hotel Ritz. Rooms from \$900 per night. See fourseasons.com/lisbon

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traveller.com.au/portugal
visitlisboa.com

Kate Armstrong was a guest of Turismo de Lisboa, Tasca da Esquina, Alma, Hotel Britania, Hotel Ivens and the Four Seasons Hotel Ritz.

FIVE PLACES TO TRY COD IN LISBON

O BURACO SNACK

For your basic cod cakes, look no further than this spot in Lisbon's Baixa district. They claim to have "the best cod cakes in Lisbon" and they're not far wrong. 415 Rua de Santa Justa 29. No website.

TASCA DA ESQUINA

Owned by Chef Vitor Sobral, this is the perfect place to try *bacalhau* treats and view his cod recipe book. Rua Domingos Sequeira 41C. See tascaesquina.com

ALMA

This two star Michelin restaurant takes cod very seriously. The *bacalhau bras* is a menu mainstay. Rua Anchieta 15. See almalisboa.pt

RESTAURANTE LAURENTINA

Since 1976 this traditional spot, a favourite among locals, has specialised in cod in its many edible guises. Avenida Conde Valbom 71A. See restaurantelaurentina.com

COVA FUNDA

A 10-minute ferry trip takes you to Cacilhas where Cova Funda serves up some of the best *bacalhau lagareiro* south of the Tagus River. Rua Cndido dos Reis 101, Cacilhas. No website.