



Clockwise from main: Alma's Henrique Sa Pessoa in his kitchen; Jose Avillez at work in Belcanto; a deconstructed strawberry-tomato tart from Belcanto; and a dish of sea flavours and citrus from Alma.



FOOD | PORTUGAL

Tastes to take you to the stars and back



Embark on a sensual culinary journey created by two of Portugal's top restaurants, writes Kate Armstrong.

In a mere few hours I traverse Portugal: I snack on grapes in Alentejo, hike in the mountains of Serra da Estrela and plunge into the waters of the Azores. At least, that's what it feels like from where I'm seated, at two different restaurants on consecutive days in Chiado, Lisbon.

Such are the culinary and sensual journeys created by two of Portugal's top restaurants: Belcanto, a two-star Michelin (that's also rated 46 on the 2022 World's Top 50 Restaurant List) owned by Jose Avillez; and Alma, run by Henrique Sa Pessoa, which has maintained its two-star Michelin rating since 2018.

As these stellar chefs will attest, it took years of hard work and experimentation to earn these gongs, and they're rightly proud.

Both chefs are from Portugal. Both reinvent Portuguese classics using fresh local bounty – from seafood and greens to grapes and cheeses. And both intend to take you on journeys, as stated on their menus. Yet, as their gastronomic adventures reveal, their itineraries are miles apart.

Avillez's degustation menus, Evolution and Belcanto (plus there's an a la carte list) reinvents some of his country's emblematic dishes, combining flavours (it's said he "collects" them), textures and sensations, in

a way that will go down in food bibles as "Avillez-esque". And they are eye-popping works of fantastical culinary art.

Take a simple amuse bouche – a tuna tartare that is topped with bright purple petals and a "pearl", a shiny white sphere of brine that explodes in your mouth. When the waiter announces, "Here is your taste of heaven", he's right. This delightful mix comes in an oyster shell. Other less conventional serving pieces include wooden boxes and quirky ceramics. One longstanding offering, "The Garden of the Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs" (eggs, bread, mushrooms) is covered in gold leaf.

The remaining items, delivered by discrete and professional staff, continues along the same quirky track, while the outstanding selection of over 350 (mainly Portuguese) wines is overseen by head sommelier, Nadia Desiderio.

The next day, I continue my voyage, this time at Alma, whose smart interior – historic stone and contemporary dark wooden trim – forms a relaxing backdrop for what's to come.

As well as an a la carte menu, Alma offers two tasting menus: the first pays tribute to the local fish and shellfish while "Chef classics" feature traditional dishes that Sa

Pessoa transforms into imaginative and artistic works (many have an Asian twist). And the creations of this gastronomic guru make for a magical trip.

One of the first items – a mouthwatering piri piri pork crackling – arrives propped on a bed of stones. Our waiter cautions, "The stones are decoration; don't eat them". It's a worthy warning, because a main dish, calcada de bacalhau, indeed resembles one of Portugal's pavement stones; it's a deconstructed riff on a cod classic, bacalhau a bras. It's both fun and clever.

But for me, one dessert alone exemplifies his skills in delivering otherworldly tastes, textures and culinary art. "Sea flavours and citrus 2.0" so accurately renders a sea bed it looks like it's been plucked from the local aquarium. The plate pops with vivid pink, yellow and purples, colours of the crystallised seaweed, yuzu sorbet and sponge. It delivers a wonderful crunch, fizz and lingering citrus tang.

By the time I complete my six courses – excluding additional "chef's surprises" – with a glass of Madeira Verdelho, one of many Portuguese wines in his extensive cellar, I'm floating.

If these restaurant adventures were trips they'd be groundbreaking expeditions, and luxurious, if valued, pleasures.

Yet while all-star chefs Avillez and Sa Pessoa both take you on their own, exceptional journeys, they undersell their "travel agency" skills; their offerings don't take you merely around Portugal, but to the stars and back. **T**

Kate Armstrong was a guest of Turismo de Lisboa, Alma and Belcanto.

THE DETAILS

FLY

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

EAT

To book a table at either Alma or Belcanto, use the reservation button on their website; there is ample availability for Belcanto in June; Alma allows reservations three months in advance.

ALMA

Five-course tasting menus (excluding wine matching): \$278; a la carte mains from \$69 to \$92 (Rua Anchieta, 15; almalisboa.pt). This is Sa Pessoa's flagship, but he runs excellent eateries elsewhere. On a budget, head to his kitchen at the Time Out Market.

BELCANTO

Tasting menus (excluding wine matching): \$348 (Evolution) and \$300 (Belcanto); a la carte mains from \$69 to \$85 (Rua Serpa Pinto, 10A; belcanto.pt). Many of Avillez' other restaurants are themed. The easiest ones to access are those within Bairro do Avillez (see joseavillez.pt/en).

MORE

traveller.com.au/portugal
visitlisboa.com
visitportugal.com