



THE ALGARVE FOR GOURMETS

Portugal's Algarve may not be recognised as a foodie destination, but there's a lot more to this sun-blessed region of Portugal than sardines and chicken piri-piri, writes Bruce Hawker

When British food critic Giles Coren decided to label Portuguese food, 'the worst on earth,' last summer in *The Times* there was uproar here in Portugal, for the Portuguese are, after all, rather proud of their gastronomic heritage.

But if we compare Portugal to the likes of France, Italy and even Spain, it's fair to say that the country pales in comparison.

Much like Britain, Portugal until recently, was not taken very seriously when it comes to good food, and in the Algarve, where much of the food is in fact sub-standard, many tourists must leave with an opinion little better than Giles Coren's.

In Praia do Carvoeiro, the small seaside town where I live, there are well over 100 restaurants to choose from, but I can count those that get my custom on one hand. The problem of course, much like in tourism destinations the world over, is that tourists (and especially us Brits) seem happy to eat poorly when on

holiday so the restaurants that cater to them get lazy.

The Algarve however, unlike many tourist destinations, has always attracted an element of the more discerning class of visitor whilst the quality of the fish and seafood, fresh from the Atlantic ocean, is as good as you will find anywhere.

The result over the years has been the advent of a small but serious gourmet scene. A little known fact for instance is that the Algarve, at a fraction of the size, has more Michelin stars than the whole of the Costa del Sol with two two-star restaurants and three one-star establishments against just three one-stars on the Costa.

But good food over here is not really about Michelin stars. Most food lovers who live here or visit regularly are if anything, more appreciative of simply cooked fish and seafood and the traditional local dishes like a good 'cataplana' of pork and clams or an 'arroz de marisco' (seafood rice), which Giles Coren obviously did not get the chance to sample.

Here, in no order of preference and listed west to east, is my personal top 10 selection of Algarve restaurants.

O Sueste, Ferragudo

For the ultimate in fresh fish, charcoal-grilled to perfection, head for O Sueste at the end of the fisherman's quay in Ferragudo. Simple surroundings with soft jazz ambient music and great sunset views across the river to Portimão. Reservations not accepted so arrive early to avoid waiting for a table.

Open all day. Closed Mondays. Tel: 282 461 592

Rei das Praias, Ferragudo

Located on Caneiros beach between Carvoeiro and Ferragudo. Rather than a typical beach restaurant, this is a high quality fish and seafood restaurant which just happens to be located on a beautiful beach. There is always a great selection of prime fresh fish on offer that can be either plain grilled or oven roasted and then de-boned at your table. For a special treat, ask for the fresh giant carabineiros (scarlet prawns) or the lobster rice. The restaurant also features an excellent selection of wines and champagnes. Reservations are essential.

Open daily for lunch and dinner. Tel: 282 461 006

Bon Bon, Sesmarias (near Carvoeiro)

Chef Rui Silvestre and owner Nuno Diogo have their eyes firmly set on winning Carvoeiro's first Michelin star and they are well on their way to getting it. Since the early nineties, Bon Bon has been well known as one of the best restaurants in the Carvoeiro area for dining in an intimate ambience but since Nuno took over in 2013 the standards of food and service has continued to improve. A menu of modern Mediterranean cuisine is backed up by a solid wine list of Portuguese and foreign labels.

Open for dinner only. Closed Wednesdays. Tel: 282 341 496



Rui Silvestre, Bon Bon



O Sueste, Ferragudo

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Terroir, Carvoeiro

A welcome addition to Carvoeiro's food scene, Terroir Wine Shop & Kitchen opened last year and has taken the village by storm. This unpretentious wine bar-cum-wine shop-cum-restaurant gives the word tapas a whole new meaning, serving traditional Portuguese dishes made for sharing, using seasonal, high-quality, local produce. This bright, sophisticated setting is a haven for wine lovers, with an excellent selection of distinctive labels that can't be found elsewhere (available by the glass or by the bottle, to drink in or take away). Co-owner manager João Marques previously worked as a sommelier in London for Gordon Ramsay.

Open Monday to Saturday for dinner only: Tel: 282 354 024

The Ocean, Vila Vita Parc **

The two-star Michelin gourmet restaurant at Vila Vita Parc, The Ocean, enjoys a prime location set just back from the cliff top with stunning views both from the terrace and from the inside. The ambience is refined with discreet service and exquisite tableware, setting the scene for a special occasion. Diners are offered a choice of two tasting menus prepared by Austrian chef Hans Neuner and his team with optional wine or champagne selections to accompany each dish. The cooking is a blend of Austrian and Mediterranean with a strong focus on locally caught fish and seafood.

Open for dinner only, closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Tel. 282 310 100



Marisqueira Rui, Silves

Marisqueira Rui, Silves

The Algarve’s most famous seafood restaurant. The food here is as fresh as it gets and the ambience both relaxed and noisy from the sound of crab-cracking at the tables (guests are given wooden mallets). A vast selection of seafood is cooked to order along with speciality dishes such as the legendary seafood rice and great cataplanas. Very popular with locals at the weekends so arrive early for a table.

Open for lunch and dinner. Closed Tuesdays. Tel: 282 442 682

Vila Joya, Albufeira / Galé **

The two-star Michelin rated restaurant Vila Joya is in fact a luxury boutique and spa hotel with palatial suites and well-appointed rooms. A few tables in the restaurant are available for non-residents but need to be booked well in advance. À la carte or a fixed tasting menu at lunchtime and degustation menu in the evening. Spectacular beach front setting with large terrace. Chef Dieter Koschina earned his first Michelin star 20 years ago and today is justifiably recognised as the big daddy of Portugal’s starred chefs.

Open every day for lunch and dinner. Tel: 289 591795

São Gabriel, Vale do Lobo/ Quinta do Lago *

São Gabriel held a Michelin star for many years but lost it briefly in 2014 after a change of ownership and chef. But the star was given back in the 2015 guide and today shines brighter than ever with the innovative and often daring cuisine of chef Leonel Pereira. Enjoy contemporary cooking based on prime local ingredients in an enchanting atmosphere. Well located in lush gardens on the road from Vale do Lobo to Quinta do Lago, there is a separate restaurant on site serving authentic Thai cuisine (February to November).

Open for dinner only, closed Mondays. Tel: 289 394 521

Florian, Quinta do Lago

This charming restaurant, located on the Vale Verde development close to the entrance to Quinta do Lago offers a standard of cuisine that belies its relaxed and informal atmosphere. Dutch chef Pieter Warink bases his bistro style cooking on fresh local produce, using light sauces and well-defined flavours. Speciality dishes include his famous home smoked salmon and fabulous steaks. Piet has a great passion for Portuguese wine and a policy of sensible pricing.

Open everyday except Thursdays, for dinner only. Tel: 289 396 674

Gusto, Conrad Algarve Hotel, Quinta do Lago

Gusto is the signature restaurant of German chef Heinz Beck, who has three Michelin stars to his name. As consultant chef, Beck helped form the menu and the Gusto team, headed by the Italian chef Ivan Tronci. Focusing on exceptional Italian cuisine made with the best ingredients, the atmosphere at Gusto is elegant and the service informal yet efficient. If you have never tried Heinz Beck’s world famous fagotelli carbonara (with the sauce on the inside) enjoy it here and save a trip to Rome or one of his other outposts.

Open Wednesday to Sunday from 7pm. Tel: 289 350 700

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Hans Neuner, The Ocean



Dieter Koschina, Vila Joya