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# JOSÉ AVILLEZ:

## PORTUGAL'S RISING CULINARY STAR

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Born on October 24, 1979 in Cascais, the elegant sea resort just west of Lisbon, where he still lives, José Avillez wanted to be a chef from early childhood. His dream came true after graduating from university with a degree in business and marketing when he met Maria de Lurdes Modesto, Portugal's best-selling cookbook author, who instantly encouraged him to follow his heart. She's been his mentor ever since.



From 2001 until 2004 Avillez trained in the kitchens of several luxury hotels: Fortaleza do Guincho in Cascais, under Chef Marc Le Oudec and gastronomic consultant, Antoine Westerman (one Michelin star); Carlton Palace in Lisbon; and Le Bristol in Paris (2 Michelin stars). In 2004 he opened his own restaurant, 100 Maneiras, in Cascais, which was voted by the Revista de Vinhos (Magazine of Wines) "Revelation Restaurant of the Year," but continued to take courses with Alain Ducasse, Bruno Goussault, and Ferran Adrià.

In 2005/2006 Avillez gave weekly cooking lessons on the television program Boa Mesa, won the award "Chef d'Avenir" (Chef of the Future) from the International Gastronomy Academy in Levallois-Perret, France, and published his first cookbook: **José Avillez: Um Chef em sua casa** (Chef at Home), now in its third edition. Last year he published his second: **Pestacar com Estilo** (Nibble with Style) and set up his catering business, Life Style Cooking. In January 2008 Avillez accepted the invitation to become the Executive Chef and six months later a business partner of Lisbon's Restaurante Tavares, besides publishing his third cookbook, **Doces sem açúcar** (Desserts with no Sugar).

The oldest restaurant in Portugal and the second oldest in Europe after Casa Botín in Madrid, Tavares was originally a café named Talão, opened in 1779 by Nicolau Massa. After five years Massa moved it to its present address: Rua da Misericórdia 37, in Lisbon's atmospheric



bohemian Bairro Alto residential neighborhood. At the beginning of the 1800s the Talão changed hands many times before it was bought, in 1823, by brothers Manoel and António Tavares, who renamed it. However, Tavares's greatest turning point came in 1861, when the Caldeira family transformed the café into a luxury restaurant — decorating the interior with huge Venetian smoked mirrors, chandeliers, and exquisite wood carvings, covered in gold leaf. Over the years its illustrious diners have included King Humbert of Italy, President Eisenhower, General Montgomery, Hailé Selassié, the art collector Calouste Gulbenkian, King Juan Carlos of Spain, Willy Brandt, Federico Fellini, Cary Grant, and James Mason. In this beautiful setting, immortalized in the literary works of the great 19th-century Portuguese novelist Eça de Queiroz, in mid-September Lucy Gordan, a guest of the Portuguese National Tourism Office of New York, interviewed José Avillez exclusively for Epicurean-Traveler.com.



**Our tastes in food are closely connected to our childhood — your first memories of food?**

**JA:** Eating typical Portuguese dishes, in particular my favorites: rice soups and oven-roasted duck topped with sausages, at my maternal grandmother's house in Cascais, the sea resort just outside Lisbon, where I grew up.

All my important memories are food-connected: aromas as well as flavors. My lifeline is a thread of many different flavors. I have ten favorite dishes, almost all Portuguese, and my favorite restaurants are all here in Portugal. Portuguese cuisine brings tears to my eyes. We eat a lot of soups and fish. Oh, to go to Alentejo in the south to a small, family-run restaurant, to eat any typical dish from there; there's nothing like it! It's not only the food there; it's the aromas of the place. A meal is not only the food and its flavors; it's the company, the environment, the other people in the restaurant; the service. The best *caldo verde*, a *couve galega* or kale soup I've ever eaten was in Minho in northern Portugal. I don't think you can eat good Portuguese food outside of Portugal.

**Other chefs in your family?**

**JA:** No, I'm the first. During his short life my father owned three restaurants: one in one in Mirabella, one in Madrid, and one in Cascais. He didn't own them all at the same time. In each case, he was the owner, not the chef. I only remember the one in Cascais. Unfortunately, he died when I was only six. He was a very hard worker.

**How did you decide to become a chef? Who were your mentors?**

**JA:** I've always loved to cook. Every day when I got home from school, I'd go straight to the kitchen to check out what was cooking there. My mother never cooked and still doesn't, but we had a housekeeper. I used to spend three or four hours a day with her in the kitchen from when I was four to fifteen-years-old.

When I was around ten, I started to make cakes to sell to my family and our friends. Probably not very good cakes, but my relatives were very supportive; my mother paid for all the ingredients and I got to keep the money from the sales.

After school I went to university to study marketing, but decided to drop out in my last year. I decided my vocation was cooking, but first I took an intensive course to become a sommelier.

Afterwards I was looking for another course which emphasized how to select the right wine



to go with the choice of food. I had the great fortune to meet Maria de Lurdes Modesto, the author of *Portuguese Traditional Cooking* and many other books. Her *Portuguese Traditional Cooking* is the title which sells the most copies in Portugal after *The Bible*. It's been translated into English. I asked Maria de Lurdes Modesto to give me the name of a chef who could help me learn how to accompany food with the right wine. While I was talking to her, I confessed for the first time ever that maybe I wanted to be a chef. She answered, "That's a great idea" and I looked shocked and said, "It is?" I explained that I was almost finished with my university degree, so should my ambition really be limited to becoming a chef? She answered, "Yes, being a chef is a wonderful profession." That was seven years ago. A month after our conversation I was an intern at Antoine, in the Hotel Fortaleza do Giuncho in Cascais; it has one Michelin star.



Salmonete

So Maria de Lurdes Modesto was my inspiration. I'm still in close contact with her. I lunched with her last Friday. She is a very good friend of mine. She is 77-years-old, but she is THE AUTHORITY on Portuguese cuisine. She had a food program on national television for 12 years and she has written the most important cookbooks in Portugal. She's my mentor.

"My lifeline is a thread of many different flavors"

**Since January 2008, you have been the Executive Chef of Tavares, a very top restaurant in Lisbon, the oldest restaurant in Portugal and the second oldest in Europe after Casa Botín in Madrid. That is a tough role to play, especially since you are only 28-years-old. What changes do you plan to do to the appearance and the cuisine of this Portuguese national monument, closed now since mid-July for renovation until mid-October?**

**JA:** Since Tavares is a national monument, we are limited in what we can do to change its appearance. Of course we're leaving but restoring the gorgeous gold-leaf wooden carvings. We're painting the walls and ceiling a slightly lighter color. We've removed the red carpeting and are putting down a parquet floor. We will have fewer tables—only 50 seats--and the chairs will be black leather instead of upholstered. We've also moved the bar and installed a state-of-the-art kitchen.

On the menu I have some 4 or 5 typical Portuguese traditional dishes, but I also offer my own inspirations which I call "Apparent Simplicity" — dishes which look simple to make, but instead can take me several days to create. These are more creative and more contemporary.

My foreign customers mostly order the Portuguese traditional dishes, which they feel completes the special traditional atmosphere of Tavares. My traditional dishes are recipes typical of Lisbon and central Portugal, because I think if you want to eat typical southern Portuguese food, you should go to the South. The same is true for northern Portuguese dishes. For example, if you go to Alentejo, you sense the aromas of the wild herbs and of the flowers. You shouldn't eat something from there in Lisbon. It's difficult to recreate dishes out of their context, so I don't try.

**Is the best Portuguese cuisine from Alentejo?**

**JA:** We have five or six very different kinds of cuisine in Portugal. We are a very small country, but we have very different foods from region to region. For me, yes, Alentejo because of its genuineness and the Algarve, because of the fresh fish there, are the best places to eat in Portugal. Alentejo has a very creative cuisine, even the traditional dishes, because it was a very poor region, so they had to be inventive with the produce and herbs they had.

**What are the essential qualities of being a top chef?**

**JA:** First of all I don't consider myself a top chef. There's a big difference between being a cook



and a chef, much less a top chef, especially if you have your own restaurant. First you need to love your work, but that's poetry and you need more than that. You need to work hard, to know how to build a team, because a restaurant can't exist "by chef alone." You need to teach your team in the kitchen how to reproduce your recipes perfectly because you might not always be there every day. Chefs are artists, but they also need to think. More than artists, perhaps we are fashion designers.

If you are an artist, you can live your whole life by yourself as a painter. In the kitchen, that's not possible; you need a team trained to think like you. You could be a very good cook, but a very bad chef, because you don't know how to transmit your knowledge to the people who work with you. That's my biggest challenge. I'm lucky though, because I love people; I love to work with people and share my skills with them.

Besides being the Executive Chef of Tavares since January 2008, I have my own catering company, Life Style Cooking, with 20 permanent employees — the cooks and the office and sales staff. We do food-to-go, catering for events, and cooking courses. In July the owners of Tavares offered me a partnership, so now I'm already one of the owners of Tavares.



*Bife Tavares*

#### **What do you like best about your profession?**

**JA:** One: To see a smile on the face of a person who is eating my food. Two: To give others less fortunate than me a chance at a better life. So in my kitchens, both at Tavares and Life Style Cooking, I employ young people who are going through some hard knocks. For example, their parents are both in jail and they don't know what to do, so I give them work.

They need to help me in the kitchen, but if they help me, I'll help them to better themselves and become good cooks, and one day good chefs. Maybe because I basically grew up with no father, I grew up faster than my friends. Perhaps I am a young father to my team. Believe it or not, I'm not the youngest. One of my cooks is only 18; my oldest cook is 29. The oldest member of the team is 37 years old.

#### **What do you like least about your profession?**

**JA:** When people don't like my food.

#### **How can you manage to be the Executive Chef of**

#### **Tavares and own a catering business too?**

**JA:** Because of my team. I started building it seven years ago when I was only 21. Some members of my team have been with me already 5½ years. It's important to work with people you trust. They are helping me to build something special and important.

#### **In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?**

**JA:** I don't like to categorize my cuisine, so let's just call it "inspiration cuisine," because then I can be inspired by many different things: art, people, flavors, tradition. I have 22 commandments for my cuisine. The most important is the flavor, then fresh produce, then the technique of making the product. We use the technique to make the product, and not the product to make the technique. I think I was the first Portuguese chef to be invited to a big international Cuisine Congress in Madrid last January. I went to present two of my dishes that I call "Apparent Simplicity." "Apparent Simplicity" because their presentation makes them simple to prepare, but their recipes are three pages long and very complicated to prepare. That's a trick I enjoy playing on the habitués of Tavares — to serve them dishes that look very simple to prepare, but they don't realize that it took us two days to prepare. For example, sometimes you read a very good writer and you think, "Oh, it's so clearly written, it's so simple to understand." It's so well written that it's seems simple, but it wasn't easy to write, like Tolstoy for instance. It's not the bad simple; it's the good simple.



**Your signature dish and other specialties?**

**JA:** I feel I'm very young to have a signature dish. I'm particularly proud of my *cordeira da leite*, or baby lamb with a chickpea puré and glazed squash, and my *pastel de nata en mil-folhas con gelado de canela*, or *mille-feuille* custard with cinnamon ice cream. It's easy to create a new recipe, but it's very difficult to create a concept. For example, the person who invented pizza was a genius, not a cook who tops his pizza with pineapple. I think when you've invented a concept, and I haven't yet, that's when your name is cited in the history of food like Ferran Adrià with his molecular cuisine, his hot jellies, his foams, his salted ice creams...He's an inventor, not just a creator.



Pastel de Nata en mil-folhas con gelado de canela, (mille-feuille custard with cinnamon ice cream)

**How often do you change your menu at Tavares?**

**JA:** I change about 70% of my menu three or four times a year — with each change of season.

**The size of your staff?**

**JA:** We are ten in the kitchen and another 12 in the dining room and bar.

**What do you believe is the reason for your success?**

**JA:** Hard work.

**Up to now you have told me about José Avillez the chef, but my readers and I would like to know more about you. For example, what is your favorite food?**

**JA:** *Bacalhau à Brás*, Lisbon's most typical dish. It is shredded codfish cooked in olive oil with garlic, and topped with matchstick potatoes and fried eggs.

**Your favorite wine?**

**JA:** Quinta do Monte d'Oiro and Quinta do Bacalhôa.

**Flower?**

**JA:** Orchids.

**Color?**

**JA:** Not one color in particular. Delicate shades of all colors that are found in foods. For example, beige, cream, soft reds, pale yellows.

**A dish you don't like?**

**JA:** Peppers.

**Chefs are well-known for having collections, often of motorcycles, fast cars, or watches; what about you?**

**JA:** Perhaps I'm too young. I don't really have a collection except I'd like to add to my father's stamp collection, but now I don't have time, so it's in my bookcase.

**Have you written a cookbook?**

**JA:** Yes three, but only one has been partly translated into English. Its recipes for starters are organized by the four seasons.

**Are you writing one now?**

**JA:** Yes, its working title is *Dining with José Avillez*. It will include the "art of the table," "of hospitality," not just recipes, but how to organize a special meal and make sure your guests enjoy themselves. That doesn't mean you have to kill yourself preparing days in advance. A special event can be built around a simple salad with top ingredients. This book was supposed to be finished by the end of this year, but I have asked my editor for an extension because I've been too busy with the renovations at Tavares to write.

**What are your feelings about food critics and restaurant guides? Have they been a help to your career, or have they added unnecessary stress?**

**JA:** Before closing in August for renovations, I'd been the Executive Chef of Tavares for seven months. We had many excellent reviews, especially from Spanish food critics. I think food critics help us to get known and to get to know other chefs. Since we've been closed for two months for renovation, all my young cooks are all doing internships that I found for them through guides. My chef de cuisine is at the Hotel Bristol in Paris which has two Michelin stars and where I interned. He will also be going to Mugaritz, a restaurant 20 kilometers outside San Sebastian, which the British magazine *Restaurant* classified as no. 4 of the 50 best restaurants in the world (El Bulli is always number 1).



Vieiras (scallops)

**Other chefs you admire?**

**JA:** Ferran Adrià because he's a genius, one step ahead of the times; Michel Bras, who runs a hotel and restaurant in Laguiole in the Aveyron region of France, whose restaurant is rated number 6 by *Restaurant*, and Andoni Luiz Aduriz at Mugaritz, which has two Michelin stars. Andoni apprenticed at El Bulli.

**If they hadn't become chefs, Heinz Beck wanted to be a painter; Gualtiero Marchesi a pianist; Thomas Keller the shortstop for the New York Yankees; Vitor Sobral a judge; what about you?**

**JA:** A carpenter.

**NOTA BENE:** Tavares reopened on October 16th. For reservations: tel. 011-351-213421112. The prix fixe lunch menu: 37.50 euros; the tasting menu: 75.00 euros and the surprise menu of ten dishes: 95.00, none including wine.