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VÍTOR SOBRAL:

MR. PORTUGUESE CUISINE AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Vítor Sobral's impressive curriculum vitae is six pages long. It's divided into several categories: his studies, his internships, his professional experience as a chef, consultant, teacher, cookbook author, jury member, and television celebrity; the awards he's received, and his participation as Portugal's culinary ambassador worldwide: in Spain, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Italy, Germany, Macao, France, Switzerland, and Guinea. During her five-day trip to Lisbon in mid-September (courtesy of the Portuguese National Tourism Board's office in New York City and the Tourist Board of Lisbon), Lucy Gordan interviewed him over a tasting-menu lunch, at [Terreiro do Paço](#), where he is a part-owner and Executive Chef.

Lunch included starters: shrimp "croquete" with watercress salad, lemon compote and coriander emulsion; and braised foie gras with caramelized pineapple and hot jelly, accompanied by green wine Muro de Melgaço Alvarinho 2007; entrées: sautéed codfish; Atlantic snowy grouper baked with mussels, emulsion of fish stew and potato gratin; caramelized duck breast with ginger cream, baked banana, peas and foie gras with manioc flour, accompanied by Quinta dos Carvalhais colheita 2004 red wine; and for dessert: "Abade de Priscos" egg pudding with cold tomato and passion fruit soup, accompanied by Domingos Soares Franco 1998 Moscatel.

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

VS: The aromatic herbs of Alentejo where I come from. For example chives, coriander, wild mint, rosemary, parsley, and others which cannot be found elsewhere so only have Portuguese names: *poejos*, *hotelã da ribeira*, and *beldrogas*. Also very important are the many varieties of bread and of fish. Everyone thinks we Portuguese eat only sardines and codfish. This is a misconception. We have a very long coastline and lots of different types of fish.

Other chefs in your family?

VS: No, but my mother is a very good cook and I think I inherited my talent from her.

When did you decide to become a chef? Who were your mentors and what did you learn from each of them?

VS: When I was seven or eight years old with my mother's support. I started attending the food and beverage course at the Estoril Hotel School when I was sixteen. After graduation I went to the Lyons Higher School of Pastries and studied at the Alain Ducasse Foundation in Paris, which works for the European Space Agency to develop astronaut meals to be taken into space, and with the chef Jean Luc Valentin. I did internships at the restaurants "Quincaillerie," a top brasserie located in a former hardware store in Brussels, at "Dock's Café" in Antwerp and at the Sofitel hotel chain in France. I had no mentor; I created my own style and all my professional experience has been in Portugal.



Lombinos de porco preto migas de tomate e emulsao de bivalves (Wild pork loin on a bed of sliced tomato and shrimp sauce)

Why is your restaurant called "Terreiro do Paço"?

VS: It refers to the ground floor of the Royal Palace. It was part of the Royal stables and storage rooms. Here on the mezzanine, called "Do Paço" I serve Portuguese specialties; "Terreiro" below us specializes in steaks. The Royal living quarters were on the three floors above us.

What are the essential qualities for being a top chef?

VS: To be organized, to know how to lead and designate responsibility, to know how to run a kitchen, to cook so that you give your clients pleasure, to know which foods combine well together and with which wine.

What do you like best about your profession?

VS: The creativity involved. To experiment and combine different flavors.

The least?

VS: To prepare food for people who don't appreciate my imagination.

Your culinary philosophy?

VS: To promote Portuguese cuisine and use olive oil in many different ways. In over ninety percent of my dishes you'll find olive oil. To cook fresh ingredients from Portugal in olive oil.



Cerne de improviso con azeite de coentros (Grouper on a bed of coriander and fruits)



Creme de coentros: queijo fresco de ovelha e azeite de noz-moscada
(Cream of Coriander with fresh sheep's cheese and olive oil seasoned with nutmeg)

In a nutshell, how would you define your cuisine?

VS: Fresh Portuguese ingredients, but also ingredients from Brazil and other ex-Portuguese colonies.

Your signature dish and other specialties?

VS: I'm not known for one dish in particular, but as the defender and promoter of Portuguese flavors, both at home and abroad. My most famous dish (which is a national, not a regional, one) is *Arroz de Cabidela* or Rice with Chicken Blood. I won an international prize for it in 2006. The dish is called *Cabidela* because in Portuguese "cabos" means the entrails of birds/chickens (such as gizzards, hearts, and livers).

What award you are most proud of? Any others?

VS: When in March 2006 I was decorated by the President of the Republic of Portugal with the *Office of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator* because of my work in promoting Portuguese cuisine and Portuguese food products abroad. Of course, I'm also very proud of the award I received in the 1st World Rice Recipe Competition, held in March 2006 at the International Gastronomy Academy in Castellon, Spain, for my dish "*Cabidela Rice*."

The professional experience you are most proud of?

VS: I'm very proud of being the consulting chef for many important international Portuguese companies like our national airlines TAP. Sovena, Silampos, the Casino at Estoril not to mention being a professor at the ISHTE, Portugal's university of tourism.

How often do you change your menu at "Terreiro do Paço"?

VS: Every three months, every season.

This is your only restaurant?

VS: For now, yes, but I'm opening another one in San Paolo in Brazil. It will be called "Divinus". I will commute back and forth every two weeks.

How many meals do you serve here per day? The size of your staff here?

VS: We serve eighty meals. I have two partners in the kitchen: Luis Espadana and Hugo Nascimento and another ten cooks.

Your typical day?

VS: I don't have a typical day. I do lots of consulting work for TAP, the Portuguese national airlines, and cater lots of executive dinners for different Portuguese businesses.

What do you believe is the reason for your success?

VS: Hard work. My tenacity. My ambition to do the best I can. I believe in myself and my talent and want others to appreciate it.



Crème Brûlée de aranja
(Orange Crème Brûlée)

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

VS: *Arroz de Cabidela* or Rice with Chicken Blood.

Your favorite wine?

VS: Paulo Laureano from Alentejo, Luís Pato from Bairrada, Anselmo Mendes from the Dão Region, and Roboredo Madeira [winery] from the Douro Region.



Bolo de Chocolate com morangos e azeite de pimenta verde (Chocolate cake with strawberries and vinegar with green pimento)

Flower?

VS: Daisies.

Color?

VS: White.

A dish you don't like?

VS: Fast food, even Portuguese fast food, and ketchup.

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

VS: Watches, especially the brands JWC, Jaeger-Lecoultre, and Riviera.

What zodiac sign are you?

VS: Capricorn/Aquarius. My birthdate is January 21, 1967, on the cusp. Capricorn for tenacity; Aquarius for creativity.

Where do you like to go on vacation?

VS: Hot climates. Brazil, in particular. I go there every two months.

Have you ever been to the United States?

VS: Yes, several times to New York and Washington, D.C.. The last time was in 2004. I didn't go for work, but I did some mini-consultancies for a few restaurants and some catering for friends.

You have written several cookbooks; have they been translated into other languages?

VS: Yes, I've written six cookbooks of my own and seven others jointly. Sadly, they're only available in Portuguese.

Are you writing a cookbook now? If so, it's title?

VS: My latest cookbook, *Entre tachos e tabuleiros* (Between Pans and Trays) was just launched on November 26th. Another book by me about pasta will be published at the beginning of 2009.

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

VS: They are fundamental to a chef's success, but they must be honest. Sometimes food critics don't understand the pleasure that chefs get just from cooking for other people. This pleasure is also fundamental to a chef's success.

Other chefs you admire?

VS: Alain Ducasse, Pierre Gainer, Santi Santamaría, and Ferran Adrià. My favorite restaurant in Italy is "Al Sorriso," in Soriso, outside of Novara in Piemonte, but I don't have one particularly favorite chef. Perhaps I haven't been to Italy often enough to choose one.

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; and José Avilliez a carpenter; what about you?

VS: A judge.

Anything you would like to add?

VS: I would like to thank you for interviewing me because Portuguese cuisine isn't well-known abroad except for sardines and codfish. This is very unfair. We have superb shellfish; our native black pig from my native region, Alentejo, raised on acorns; excellent cheese, and rice and olive-oil of the highest quality. Not to mention that our wine is not limited to Port.

What about desserts? You didn't mention any?

VS: I'm not a sweet-tooth. My favorite dessert is called "*suspiros*." It's a kind of custard. My mother makes it so deliciously. She uses "*pinion*" (meringues).

So which region of Portugal has the best cuisine?

VS: Alentejo, but not just because I'm from there. It was a very poor region, so the housewives had to use an enormous amount of imagination in the kitchen to invent new recipes with only a small number of wild herbs and ingredients from their gardens.



Gelado de queijo da serra con compote de tomate (Fresh mountain cheese ice cream with tomato jam)