



MACAU GOVERNMENT TOURIST OFFICE

MIX IT LIKE Macau

You can't refuse a holiday that promises neon-streaked skies, Vegas-like instincts and a cuisine with an identity crisis. When in Macau, drink, eat, and make money. Careful, sometimes all of it is a gamble. **BY RAVINA RAWAL**

IF YOU'RE FUSSY about what or whom you eat, you could always ask what's on your plate. Then again, if you aren't fluent in Cantonese, all you're really left with is a solid prayer. Unfair, perhaps, to have an uninformed opinion on anything, especially cuisine. But for someone who doesn't venture too far from chicken and shrimp in the first place, Macau was a delightful scare.

The Macanese cuisine, much like anything else from the area, is half Portuguese and half Chinese, combining also African, Indian, Italian and Malay elements. Much like Bollywood, it has happily borrowed successful bits from here and there, tossed them up with a dash of local flavour, and applauded a hit remix. Arriving from Hong Kong, I was told I wasn't the only thing fresh off the ferry—Macau produces practically nothing of its own; all food and wine is imported.

As long as there's a good, clean room to come back to at the end of an explorative day in an unknown place, I could handle anything, I told myself. An indulgent room at the Grand Emperor Hotel offered me just that, in addition to a thrilling city view. Armed with the sort of enthusiasm only the first day of a holiday can bring on, I left immediately to find 'O Porto Interior', a highly recommended

Macanese restaurant. On my way out, I stepped all over gold bars displayed in alternate floor tiles in the hotel lobby, wondered at the significance of the ridiculously large television screen on one of the hotel's exterior walls, said hello to 'Royal Guards' positioned at the entrance (or exit, since I was going out)—they said hello right back, so much for authenticity—and marvelled at how confused everything seemed. En route to the restaurant, a befriended local shared fast facts.

Macau cannot have a place on the map yet, it is not complete. For years, amidst China and

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Portugal's administrative confusion, someone has kept it growing, steadily reclaiming land from a shrinking sea, wiping out the blue to make place for the other colours that make up Macau's zingy nights. And for years they will continue to do so, it seems, what with acting fast on dreams like the Cotai Strip to make place for unthinkable large gambling soirées that spill into Macau from the rest of Asia, and especially from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China.

The Cotai Strip? An under-construction gaming expanse between Macau's Taipa and Coloane islands, striving to be the last word in shopping, fine dining, and entertainment options. Roped in are big daddies Starwood, Sheraton,

Shangri-La and others, collectively offering close to 20,000 additional hotel rooms to relax in after long nights of guests going into overdrive.

"Drink up quickly, or you will have a punctured tyre on your plate," insisted an English-speaking well-wisher. I was staring at my soup, a white liquid steaming inside a round, hollowed loaf of bread, with little bumps hiding just beneath the surface that I suspected to be things I wouldn't fancy swallowing. But I had to make up my mind fast, I saw what he'd meant by a punctured tyre—the soup was steadily making its way through the bread walls, soaking it deliciously, but leading to its eventual collapse. Not wanting to be fussy in my first few hours here, I took a reluctant sip, and liked it. I could taste prawn and, as long as I didn't question the specific nature of the rest of it, I was happy to lap it up.

Pig's ear (ear? EAR?) salad was up next, though the soup was easily a meal in itself, followed quickly by balcalhau (cod fish) and African curry chicken with a coconut base. Psychologically allergic to coconut since childhood, and generally unwilling to try animal bits that didn't make unswervingly logical sense, I resolved to go ballistic on regular jam and toast upon returning to the room. I'd barely finished the thought when the Gods of Macau (and a fumbling waitress) decided to take it easy on me, and also added king prawns and pork to the table. The prawns were plump, juicy, and laced with garlic

and butter—a Macau favourite apparently, and immediately mine as well. The palatable pork was balchaõ, also very popular. Down to dessert, this was destined to get better.

'Pastel de natas'—ordinary-looking egg tarts with an extraordinarily long story about their adaptation from the Portuguese egg tart by a self-proclaimed innovative chap, Andrew Stow, who tweaked the recipe and gave it a permanent place on every Macanese menu. The 'serradura' was described to me before it came to the table and, frankly, it sounded like something I would imagine concocting years ago in boarding school—condensed milk, cream and a coat of crumbled biscuits.

"Sawdust," offered the well-wisher, chuckling as I inspected it. Gone in six seconds, it was simple, but thoroughly gratifying. Back at the hotel, I settled in for a thrilling night of 40-inch plasma television viewing, but fell asleep before I could change the channel.

Morning found me in the middle of Senado Square, surrounded by people eager to not understand a word I was saying. This is the central square, a place to get some action if you want to explore Macau's culture, history, music, or shopping. Tucking away my shopping list (for now), I braved an attempt to receive directions to the Ruins of St. Paul's from the locals, in vain. Basically, if they don't understand what you are

RECIPE

PASTEL DE NATA (FOR 12 TARTS)

► *Ingredients:* 1 cup milk; 3 tablespoons cornstarch; 1/2 vanilla bean; 1 cup white sugar; 6 egg yolks; 1 (17.5 ounce) packet frozen puff pastry, thawed

► *To make:* 1. Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C). Lightly grease 12 muffin cups, lining the bottom and sides with puff pastry.

2. In a saucepan, combine milk, cornstarch, sugar and vanilla. Cook, stirring constantly, until mixture thickens. Place egg yolks in a medium bowl. Slowly whisk 1/2 cup of the hot milk mixture into the egg yolks. Gradually add egg yolk mixture back to the remaining milk mixture, whisking constantly. Cook, while stirring, for five minutes, or until thickened. Remove vanilla bean.

3. Fill pastry-lined muffin cups with mixture and bake in preheated oven for 20 minutes, or until crust is golden brown and filling is lightly browned on top.

saying—that is, if you are attempting dialogue in English—the older generation of the small population of Macau ignores you in a way that makes you want to fantasise about using your invisibility to create mayhem in the city. To be fair, the younger ones are willing to decode desperate sign language and they are chatty, but all in Cantonese, which is, again, maddeningly unhelpful.

With most of my time spent walking around in circles, looking for places on a rapidly deteriorating map, a perpetually empty stomach was but warranted. Lunch was usually at one of the small Portuguese or Macanese (or both) restaurants lining the area. Garlic king prawns, I found, are

fantastic anywhere in Macau, so every meal included them. There was also a full plate of clams every now and then that I avoided paying attention to for the first half hour the first time, after which I got adventurous and surprised myself by devouring it between bites of fantastic warm bread. Nothing fancier than our very own *pav* here at home, this bread is perfectly crisp outside with a super-soft middle. For best results, wash down bites with Portuguese red wine that doesn't waste time shooting immediately to your head, and ready your belly for dessert. A cup of serradura and generous bites of chocolate mousse later, I was invariably well-fed, happy, and ready to get into bed.

Of course, that wasn't an actual option—there were things to be seen, places to be explored, clothes labelled "extra large" to be challenged. Convinced about the restaurants, it was time for Taipa's food street, a short drive over the Friendship Bridge. The street itself is only about seven shops long, but it has all of Macau's famous munchies and bakery delights packed in. Everything here can be sampled before buying—a good idea, given that not everything is what it looks like, and a label with an English translation of ingredients is rare.

Stock up on egg tarts, almond biscuits, delicate almond-paste rolls, meats (Portuguese sausages, or



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAVINA RAWAL

chouriço, are a must for anyone with carnivorous cravings), and seafood snacks. A variation of the chewy 'chikki' back at home, their peanut candy—coated with sesame seeds or powdered coconut—got both my attention and my vote instantly. Bags of the sesame-peanut candy to be paid for, I had to wait first for a swarm of Japanese tourists ahead of me whose enthusiasm and determination seemed violently torn between stuffing their bags with boxes of these local treats and taking group pictures (the only reason they even travel, in my opinion). You could earn yourself a discount if you have the patience to haggle, pataka by painful pataka, on a calculator with the salesperson, but mostly they have a printed price that is non-negotiable, as far as I understood the system.

Back in the heart of Macau, I often walked around in search of some bargain shopping. On a good day, a

kind woman appeared to understand what I was asking and led me to 'Red Market', a spot on the map that we both nodded enthusiastically to when she first pointed it out. On a road startlingly similar to most back in Mumbai, was a large red building that reeked of an assortment of unpleasant smells.

I thanked her though clenched teeth and tight smile, unhappily realising that this was a messy, loud food market, whose selling points (odd sea creatures, no labels) stared at me unforgivingly as I glared back at them, silently hoping they wouldn't suddenly leap out and get my jugular.

I took a taxi back to Senado Square, where I remember seeing shops that I was sure I wanted to buy things from. But more a rule of common experience than of thumb, when in southeast Asia, unless you're petite or generous about presents for

Macau's beloved balcalhau (cod fish)
RIGHT Dried meats on Taipa food street include fillet of piglet, beef and wild boar

those who are, don't bother shopping for clothes or footwear of local brands—both come in bonsai sizes. Being neither, I got enthusiastic about collecting an honourable number of unusable photographs instead—churches, garish chandeliers, template houses, casinos, and even one of (rich, rich casino owner) Stanley Ho's many cars. And before I'd checked my watch, I knew it was time for dinner again.

On my last night in Macau, I walked around, taking in the last of it. Women shimmered in fresh make-up, men sauntered casually into strip clubs, pawn shops rattled open behind closed shutters, and clammy hands gripped cash-filled briefcases as they entered casinos. And, somewhere in the distance, a Macanese Elvis Presley—whose costume and accent were both imported 'all the way' from Thailand—serenaded those who were feeling left out. The air was dense with an excitement now familiar to me—Macau was awake again. For spirit's sake, I gambled the last of my money at the hotel's casino. I lost eight dollars, then won back two. Content, I returned to my room, blared what I hoped would be the last of any Chinese MTV I'd have to hear in a long time, and dissolved into my carefully prepared tub bath. ●

WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO EAT

- *O Porto Interior:* 'Tide of O Porto' soup, garlic king prawn.
- *Restaurante Litoral:* Charcoal-grilled king prawn, Portuguese chicken.
- *Tromba Rija:* Clams, charcoal-grilled sea bass with sauce.
- *Espaco Lisboa:* Portuguese sausages, cod fish with cream, and Chef Antonio Coelho who puts on a great show slicing open champagne bottles with a sword.
- *Fisherman's Wharf:* A variety of little multicuisine restaurants, cafés and dessert stalls, this place spoils you for choice.

