

TRAVEL

Restaurant Report: Mini Bar in Lisbon

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Bites

By JAY CHESHES



Bites at Mini Bar, which opened last summer. Paulo Barata

The evening began with a cocktail, of sorts: a margarita vacuum-packed inside an apple slice, topped with the sea salt and chile powder typically destined for the rim of a glass. It set the tone at Mini Bar, a casual spot that opened on a steep slope in Lisbon's Chiado neighborhood last summer. The food is modern, playful and features the sort of trompe l'oeil presentation that, while new to the Portuguese capital, is now commonly found in cities around the world.

The restaurant, inside the São Luiz Municipal Theater, is the latest venture from José Avillez, the creative and prolific young chef who has opened five here in the last three years. Mr. Avillez, 34, has probably done more than anyone to nudge his country's cooking into the 21st century, spurred by the food revolution across the border in Spain.

His new place is an homage, of sorts, to Tickets, a small-plates Barcelona restaurant run by his friend Albert Adrià. (Mr. Avillez once worked for Albert's brother, Ferran, at El Bulli.) "In terms of food, Albert was definitely my biggest inspiration," Mr. Avillez said. "When I opened I sent pictures of

our dishes to the Tickets team.”

While Mini Bar’s retro décor channels the 1930s and 40s, its avant-garde cooking is as up-to-date as it comes. The gently priced menu (dishes average 5 euros or less) is arranged in five “acts,” and features a broad mix of local and imported flavors. Or you can opt for the “Epic” tasting instead, an exceptional deal at 48.50 euros for a dozen generous small plates.

Those dishes might include tempura-fried avocado spears with cilantro and kimchi or cured mackerel slices under a smoke-filled glass dome. Fans of Mr. Avillez’s much pricier flagship, [Belcanto](#), come for pared-down cut-rate spins on that restaurant’s high-end best-sellers: the foie gras “Ferrero Rocher” with hazelnuts and a gold-leaf candy wrapper; the beautiful, bracing frozen citrus sphere.

While the cooking techniques here might sound cerebral, for the chef, the new spot is about easy enjoyment. “In Portugal you have nothing like this place,” he said. “Not about conceptual dining, but about food that’s fun.”

Mini Bar, Rua António Maria Cardoso, 58; 351-21-130-53-93; [minibar.pt](#). An average à la carte meal for two, without drinks or tip, is about 80 euros, or \$99 at \$1.23 to the euro.

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