

Nuts over Nata

First made by nuns nearly two centuries ago, the pastéis de nata still taste like heaven on earth. RATHINA SANKARI seeks out guardian of the custard, Penélope Clarinha

IT IS A warm day and I cool off in the Lisbon heat with a pitcher of yellow-hued sangria in one of the al fresco restaurants at Belém. From the other side of the road I watch a long queue of locals and tourists — young, old, tots, all eagerly waiting for their share of the sweet that defines the very identity of Portugal, the pastéis de nata.

While there is an abundance of Portuguese sweets, this custard tart is perhaps the most prominent in the global culinary scene having crossed numerous international borders. My own first experience of tasting it was in Macau, once a Portuguese colony. But I was not content savouring its clones and had long desired to relish it in its very birthplace. So that afternoon I walk through the crowded entrance of the renowned Pastéis de Belém (or Antiga Confeitaria de Belem) just down the road from the stunning Jerónimos Monastery with its Manueline architecture.

The confectionary with its blue and white interiors is teeming with staff catering to numerous patrons. I manage to find an empty space in a corner and wait for Penélope Clarinha, who hails from the family that owns the business. She soon arrives spotting thick oversized glasses (which reminds me of Professor Sybill Trelawney of Harry Potter fame), and together with her 10-year-old daughter, we set off on a tour of the factory. But first, she hands me a coat and a hairnet that I diligently wear and follow her to the kitchen. We walk past the staff pushing huge trolleys with multiple trays of the hot golden delights

fresh from the oven. I notice a door marked Oficina Do Segredo or Secret Workshop. Though I managed to get an entry to this temple of Portuguese conventual treats, I am denied entrance to the *sanctum sanctorum* of the cafe. I am disappointed, but when I get to know that only six people in this world are allowed entry, it somewhat soothes my aching soul. Penélope, her cousin Miguel Clarinha, uncle Pedro Clarinha and three pastry chefs are the current secret masters of its recipe. The pastry chefs have signed an agreement of confidentiality

which if broken would lead to heavy penalties.

The mystery vis-à-vis its recipe has always been a cloak-and-dagger affair. The nuns at Jerónimos Monastery would starch their habits with egg white. They found an innovative way of using the discarded egg yolks, which went into the making of some decadent sweets. By 1834 because of the Liberal Revolution, convents and monasteries in the country were shut down. In a desperate measure of survival, it is told, a monastery resident approached a nearby general store to sell these

pastries. These timeless tarts soon became the craze of the region. The secret was passed on to the owners of the general store and their descendants have continued to bake these delights in utmost secrecy behind closed doors since 1837.

Shortly after, a tub of the custard which is filled into the tart is sent out of the secret room. In another room I find a woman stretching the dough, rolling it into long sausages and cutting into small pieces. These are then spread by hand into the tart tins by a group of women (with hairnets) hunched together. Once the custard is poured into these tarts they are good to go into the oven. In less than 20 minutes the baked yellow-and-brown goodies are pulled out and served hot to its customers.

"On an average, we make 22,000 pastéis de nata in a day," says Clarinha. The numbers speak for itself the demand for these atypical pastries.

As the establishment grew, more rooms were added — today it has around 500 tables and a staff size of 170 to serve its patrons. Those who are pressed for time opt for takeaway while others prefer enjoying them warm at the cafe with their cuppa. It is judgement time when a plate of these artisanal pleasures is placed in front of me. "Sprinkle some cinnamon and icing sugar on them," Clarinha suggests.

I conform shortly and dig into the flaky pastry with the right dose of thick, creamy sweet custard.

An absurd thought crosses my mind. Did the nuns want to experience heaven by relishing these confections? But did these pastries deserve all the adulation though? "Two boxes of pastéis de nata, takeaway," I find myself calling out to the lady at the counter. ■



ONLY SIX PEOPLE ARE PRIVY TO PASTÉIS DE BELÉM'S SECRET RECIPE, WHICH WAS FIRST WHIPPED UP BY THE NUNS OF JERÓNIMOS MONASTERY

