

# Food for Thought: Beyond Macau's Egg Tart --- As It Exits Colony, Portugal Will Leave A Legacy to Savor

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Asia's first Western colony is now its last. On Dec. 31, Macau returns to Chinese sovereignty after being ruled by Portugal since 1557. The run-up to the handover has been smooth, and the Portuguese are evidently thinking about what they'll leave behind. Unlike the British in nearby Hong Kong, they never had much of a reputation for the rule of law. Street signs may all be in Portuguese but only a handful of Macau residents speak the language. So what will Lisbon's legacy be? Most probably vinho verde and caldo verde, chourico and bacalhau, cha gordo and pasteis de nata -- all components of a cuisine that found its way to the south China coast over the past 450 years.

Macau has excellent Portuguese food and some of the best Cantonese food in the world, but it also has its own unique cuisine. Like the Macanese themselves -- predominantly Portuguese and Chinese with Indian, Malayan, Goan and other roots -- Macanese food is more than East meets West. The Portuguese stopped en route to Asia and picked up a range of influences from Africa, Goa and Malacca. The intermarriage that produced Macanese culture employed products that could make the voyage from Portugal -- sausages like chourico, the staple salted cod called bacalhau, olive oil and wine. From other colonies, it added spices such as cinnamon, saffron and pepper, and from the New World they tossed in a range of foodstuffs from chilis to potatoes. Into the mix went ginger, coconut milk, turmeric and most distinctly balichao, a shrimp paste that contains chilis, pepper, lemon and wine.

## FULL TEXT

Asia's first Western colony is now its last. On Dec. 31, Macau returns to Chinese sovereignty after being ruled by Portugal since 1557. The run-up to the handover has been smooth, and the Portuguese are evidently thinking about what they'll leave behind. Unlike the British in nearby Hong Kong, they never had much of a reputation for the rule of law. Street signs may all be in Portuguese but only a handful of Macau residents speak the language. So what will Lisbon's legacy be? Most probably vinho verde and caldo verde, chourico and bacalhau, cha gordo and pasteis de nata -- all components of a cuisine that found its way to the south China coast over the past 450 years.

Food was what brought the Portuguese spice traders to Asia, so it is fitting to leave it behind. As cultural bequests go, it's more benign than the misery and strife Lisbon left in colonies such as Angola, Mozambique and East Timor. Sensing that Macau might redeem their record, the Portuguese have been putting up monuments to themselves, even building a wine museum filled with the lore and legend of Portugal's vineyards. It is a strange idea, akin to the British deciding that what Hong Kong really needed was a museum dedicated to ale and morris dancing. But the cleverly designed installations and video displays work well, giving visitors an enjoyable amuse bouche of information and a chance to sample vinho verdes and ports before they head off to eat, which for non-gamblers is the main reason to go to Macau.

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It all produced a strongly flavored, unpretentious cuisine that until recently was practically unavailable outside Macanese homes, many of which had staff to prepare the complex dishes. For several decades now Macanese culture has been under threat -- there are only about 60,000 Macanese and many live in Portugal, Brazil, Canada and Australia. Only about 10,000 remain in Macau.

Like Straits Chinese and Anglo-Indians, Macanese existed apart from the colonists and the local Chinese, and the tensions of those relationships produced a slightly inward-looking society with a strong focus on domestic life. Elaborate meals used to be the norm, particularly the cha gordo, a high tea prepared for weddings and other celebrations that includes a multitude of dishes from curried crab to pastries. At the Museum of Macau in the Monte Fort that stands over the city, they have recreated a mouthwatering (although sadly inedible) cha gordo. In creating the display, Macanese women were asked to make dishes which were shipped to Japan in the diplomatic pouch and recreated in plastic for the display.

For the real thing, try the restaurant Balichao. Located on Coloane Island in a strange park populated by white peacocks and black swans, it is a breezy, relaxed place that is perfect for long weekend lunches. It has one of the most extensive Macanese menus in the colony with all the signature dishes of the cuisine, from minchi, a dish of stir-fried minced beef or pork that has roots also in Chinese and English food, to lacassa, a prawn noodle soup similar to the Malay laksa but flavored simply with balichao. Crab and prawn curry is a bright turmeric yellow emulsion of seafood, oil and spices, hinting of India and China in its intense flavors. The pasteis de bacalhau -- crispy balls of dried cod and herbs -- are excellent, as are the rissois, a type of soft prawn cake. Pork is cooked with tamarind and fish sauce to produce a dense stew. Not only is the food superb but the service is warm and open. It is the perfect respite from the bustle and stress of Hong Kong.

In the face of the declining population and changing domestic habits that preclude such time-consuming cooking at home, restaurants such as Balichao are keeping Macanese food alive. The cuisine is destined, when the Portuguese finally leave, to become something mostly eaten by visitors to Macau.

Something from Portugal has, however, insinuated itself into the lives of many Chinese from Macau and Hong Kong in just the past few years. It has taken such a grip on the population that there have been murmurs that it's Portugal's revenge on China, a new opium that leaves consumers caught in an agonizing spiral of desperate cravings. It is pasteis de nata -- small custard tarts with light flaky pastry and a rich, smooth filling of eggs and cream. On the jet-foil to Hong Kong, half the passengers were clutching boxes of the tarts from Lord Stow's, a now-famous bakery run by an Englishman. My neighbor was busy inhaling his third tartlet before the crew had even cast off. I asked if they were good; in return, I got a grunt and face full of pastry crumbs. He pulled away and his arm curled defensively around the box. No one was sharing his stash.

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Macau in Four Courses
Any culinary exploration of Macau should begin in a bookstore. "Macau
on a Plate," by Annabel Jackson, is one of the best books published in
recent years on Asian food. Witty, insightful, packed full of history
and culture and superbly written, it is by far the best guide to
eating in Macau. Chapters cover everything from Macanese food to
Cantonese cooking. There is a guide to Portuguese wine and a
comprehensive list of restaurants. The book is published under the
name Annabel Doling by Roundhouse Publications Asia Limited and can be
found in many bookstores in Hong Kong.
The Macau Wine Museum is on Rua Luis Gonzaga Gomes, about a 10-minute
walk from the ferry terminal. It is in a new tourism complex that
includes the Macau Grand Prix motor racing museum. Entrance is about
\$2 (15 Patacas or HK\$15) including a glass of wine. The Macau Museum,
which has a strong focus on the history of food in the colony, has
been built in the middle of the Monte Forte that dates back to 1617.
Admission is also about \$2.
Balichao (tel. (853) 870098 or 870099) is at Seac Pai Van Park on
Coloane Island, about a 15-minute taxi ride from the ferry terminal.
Buses from the city center pass by the park. Prices start at \$4 to \$5
for appetizers; main dishes start at \$8 to \$10 and run to about \$20
for crab curry.

If you can find the space for a post-prandial espresso and pasteis de nata, try Bolo de Arroz at 11 Travessa de Sao Domingo, just off the Leal Senado Square in the center of Macau.

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