

The Reinvention of Madeira

The subtropical Atlantic isle is brimming with newfound energy, led by a burst of recent openings and homegrown culinary concepts. *by Ann Abel*



Looking out into the Atlantic from the lush grounds of Reid's Palace

MADEIRA HAS COME a long way from the time that Scotsman William Reid put it on the international map as a rather posh sanitarium for respiratory patients with the opening of his namesake hotel in 1891. In recent years, the subtropical Portuguese island off the coast of Morocco has continued to flaunt its natural beauty – and it's become downright cool.



Scaling dramatic oceanfront cliffs via cable car

“There is a reason why Madeira is consistently voted one of the world’s top island destinations,” says Ciriaco Campus, the current general manager of Reid’s Palace. “A diverse range of plants bring year-round exuberance. Scenic waterfalls, spectacular skylines of mountains penetrating white clouds, dolphins and whales breaking the ocean waves, and deliciously surprising – Madeira has something to offer any kind of visitor.”

Paula Andrade, the public relations, sustainability and reputation manager of Savoy Signature, another group of hotels, goes further. “Madeira is an extremely interesting place to visit now, as it has firmly shaken off its image as a place just for retirees and has emerged as ‘the Style Isle,’” she says. “There is a hive of creative high-end activity afoot, with innovative new companies catering for chic travellers opening across the island.”

That creativity – and the way it’s mixed with tradition – is clearly on display in its new eateries. Chef Júlio Pereira is a longtime Madeira resident who has opened three new restaurants in the past three years and has dedicated himself to researching the island’s gastronomic traditions and recipes.

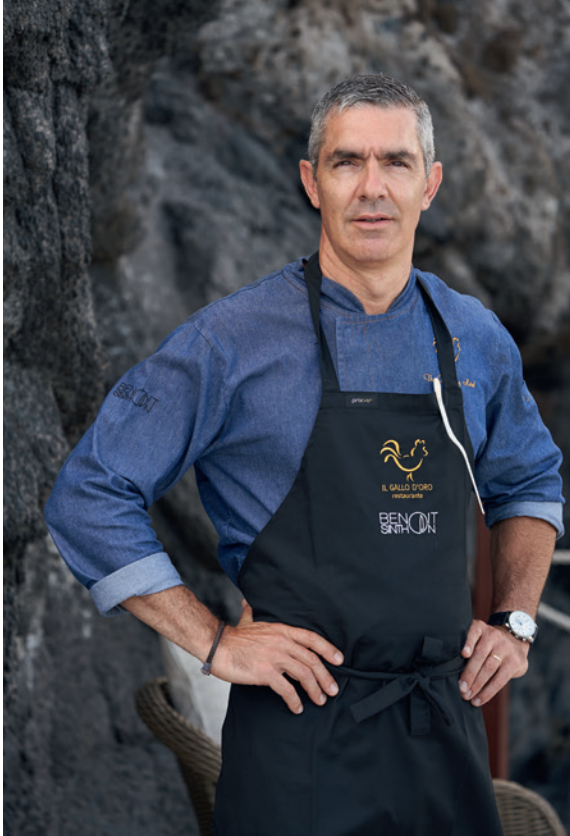
“Our gastronomy is varied, as it has more than 500 years of history,” he says. “People from diverse parts of Portugal and the rest of the world came here and brought their gastronomic cultures with them.” And perhaps the most tempting reason to visit now: “Madeira has the best of two worlds: the customs and organisation of Europe, and the lifestyle of Latin America – open and happy, living life on the street with the conviviality of local people.”

Bedding Down

More than a century on, **Reid’s Palace, A Belmond Hotel** (www.belmond.com), remains the island’s standard bearer. After a refresh several years ago, the 158 rooms and suites



A seaside terrace at Reid’s Palace is an idyllic setting for afternoon tea



Chef Benoît Sinthon of Il Gallo d'Oro and Avista at the Porto Bay Hotel

retain much of their old charm, and the pink palace has always benefited from its clifftop location at the edge of the capital of Funchal, and its lush gardens. There's a new gastrobar, and the Michelin-star restaurant, William, offers two tasting menus, one of them vegetarian. The other big-deal hotel on the island is the two-year-old reimaging of the **Savoy Palace** (savoysignature.com), a sinuous, 352-room behemoth that dominates the cityscape and is notable for its whimsical, nature-inspired and pleasingly over-the-top interiors by noted Madeirense designer Nini Andrade Silva, one of the top designers working in Portugal today. For those looking for a more low-key hotel experience, **Casa Velha do Palheiro** (palbeironatureestate.com) is a Relais & Châteaux country-house hotel in an 18th-century hunting lodge in the foothills of Funchal. And the most interesting new development is **Socalco Nature Calheta** (socalconature.com), a passion project from local chef Octávio Freitas, on the island's southwest coast in Calheta, which combines

the best features of agro-tourism: simple but comfortable farmhouse accommodations, farming, cooking classes and gastronomic experiences.

Top Tables

Pereira's restaurants offer a good introduction to contemporary cuisine in Madeira. At **Kampo** (kampo.pt), he focuses on aged meats and vegetables cooked over coals; at **Akua** (akuafunchal.pt), he takes a more global view of fish and seafood, weaving together influences from Portugal, Latin America and Africa; and at **Kôdea** (+351 936 433 633), he uses a natural fermentation for his bread and will add pizzas later this year. At the new **Goût** (instagram.com/gout.pt) in the famed Mercado dos Lavradores, "serious food made by not so serious people" means a modern approach to local products, such as tartare of tuna from the market with beetroot, mendinha (a cut of beef rib typical in Madeira) sandwiches and squid carbonara. **Avista** is the new, casual restaurant from chef Benoît Sinthon, who holds two Michelin stars at his **Il Gallo d'Oro**, both in the Cliff Bay Hotel (portobay.com). And **Andrade Silva's Design Centre** (niniandradesilva.com) remains a must-visit for its artful cuisine as well as its exhibitions and stunning views over Funchal and the harbour.

Pure Indulgence

Friic (friic.pt) is a new project from Joana Gonçalves, where she makes artisanal gelato from Madeira's outstanding tropical fruits, such as super-sweet little bananas, pitanga (a type of sour cherry) and many kinds of passion fruit. There's a similar idea behind **UAUCACAU** (uaucau.com), where chocolatier Tony Fernandes fills bonbons with the island's fruits or local spirits like Madeira wine and

From left: suckling-pig croquettes with black garlic and mustard at Avista; a well-aged offering at Blandy's Wine Lodge





The Savoy Palace's panoramic Galáxia Skybar

the cherry brandy called ginja. If you'd rather skip the chocolate and get straight to the spirits, **Blandy's Wine Lodge** (blandyswinelodge.com), in an historic cellar, remains a good starting point for sampling fortified Madeira wines. For a deeper dive, **Madeira Vintners** (cafmadeira.pt) is the newest producer on the island (reserve in advance to tour the winery), and its oenologist, Regina Pereira Santos, is the first female producer of Madeira wine. Or, if it's the island's firewater-fruit punch – called poncha – that you're after, the no-frills **A Mercadora** (+351 291 221 708) in Funchal and the mountainside **Taberna da Poncha da Serra da Agua** (+351 291 952 312) are good places to try it.

Outdoorsy Pursuits

There's only so much eating and drinking you can do. Madeira's other selling point is outstanding nature, both its forests (the island's name is the Portuguese word for "wood", after all) and its volcanic mountain peaks. At nearly 2,000 metres above sea level, Pico do Arieiro is one of the island's highest points, with plenty of trails and views in every direction – it's especially popular at sunrise. Less strenuous but no less beautiful are the levada walks beside the water channels in the laurisilva (laurel) forests. And to appreciate the island's colourful, tropical side, take the cable car up from Funchal to the **Botanical Gardens** (telefericojardimbotanico.com), where 2,500 exotic plants from every corner of the world form an exuberant mosaic – a floral representation of this island's dazzling appeal.



The Pleasures of Porto Santo

While Madeira has been on the map for decades, it is, in fact, part of a larger archipelago, one that the marketers have started calling the Madeira Islands. The other significant island in the group is Porto Santo, a few hours away by boat or less than an hour by plane. This makes it an appealing day trip, especially considering it has the main thing that Madeira is lacking: beaches. Porto Santo has turquoise waters and nine kilometres of fine golden sand. There may not be a whole lot of culture, but it's a fine place to spend a day or two relaxing in the sun.