

madeira, m'dear?

The Portuguese island should be as famous for its cuisine as for its eponymous drink.

Some months ago, I was sitting at the bar at St John in Clerkenwell, thinking it was a little early for a glass of wine, but a tad late for coffee. Up popped chef/co-proprietor Fergus Henderson and suggested that a slice of seed cake and a glass of madeira was just the ticket for elevenses, that most Poooh-ish of snacks.

I passed on the cake - caraway is my one culinary aversion - but I gratefully accepted the madeira. Jolly fine it was, too: a medium-dry Verdelho, I think. It was surprisingly uplifting, with a zing that belied its slightly fusty, old-fashioned image.

The same could be said of the island on which it is made. Take Reid's Palace, the *grande dama* of Madeiran hotels, where George Bernard Shaw learnt the tango and the seagulls float on bubbles of champagne. One can still take tea on the veranda, but also (as I did) sit on the moonlit terrace of its Villa Cipriani restaurant and enjoy very fine Italian food - beef carpaccio; superb salt cod, fragrant with sweet onions; and sumptuously sludgy chocolate cake - with a glass of the nectar to which the island lent its name. Service is exceptional. If there are hotels in heaven, they will be managed by staff from Reid's.

A little further along the coast from Reid's, The Cliff Bay Hotel is home to Il Gallo d'Oro, the swankiest restaurant on the island. Chef Benoît Sinthon's cooking contains perhaps more hints of the Med than the Atlantic, but it is done with a flourish. Puddings are particularly spectacular.

Chef Sinthon is also the only holder of a Michelin star on the island, but not, I suspect, for long. The young upstart is



Above: **Ristorante Villa Cipriani serves Italian food under the stars.**

The Vine, a sexy, wine-themed boutique hotel in Funchal. It would be perfectly at home in, say, Barcelona. Uva, its rooftop restaurant, also has a French chef - Antoine Westermann - at the helm, but Madeiran Thomas Faudry mans the stoves.

He does so brilliantly. Tomatoes of a particularly sunny disposition arrived as sorbet, gazpacho and stuffed with vegetables: clever, but not clever-clever. Barbary duck was served with sautéed Surinam cherries and a little duck leg shepherd's pie. A lovely fig tart was offset with a piquant sorbet of *queijão* (a kind of ricotta), and the all-Portuguese wine list was a revelation. Uva is the best place to view Funchal's New Year's Eve fireworks; otherwise, it's great for a sundowner.

Out in the country, meanwhile, Quinta do Furão's restaurant nestles among vines and flowers, with fabulous views along the coast. The former's fruit is destined for some of Blandy's finest madeiras. And so, after a splendid meal of local limpets and *espetas* (chunks of beef, barbecued on a skewer of bay), I raised a glass of Blandy's superb 1920 Bual madeira to both Mr Henderson and the vines on the hillside. The madeira had travelled well: so, for that matter, had I. **BILL KNOTT**