

Conserveira de Lisboa

Lisbon

Preface

It would take a very special shop to impress Lisbon's pescatarian public, but Conserveira de Lisboa – now into its 77th year – and its jawdropping array of Portuguese tinned fish has fed Lisboans, Michelin judges and tourists alike. A peckish *Monocle* joins the shoal.

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Pushing oversized carts down brightly lit aisles in one of the city's many hypermarkets, Lisbon residents often feel a tug of nostalgia for more traditional times. It usually strikes just as they reach for a box of frozen fish fingers. Fortunately, there's a sure-fire remedy close at hand in the form of speciality food purveyor Conserveira de Lisboa. Tucked away in the Baixa district, this shop focuses on a staple of the Portuguese diet: canned fish. Besides offering the obligatory tins of sardines and tuna, shoppers can find cod, eel, octopus, squid and mackerel.

Skinless, boneless, in vegetable or olive oil, plain or with tomato sauce, the variety is staggering. "At any one time, we have about 125 different types in stock," says Regina Ferreira, 58, who runs the store with her husband Armando. For diehard foodies – the Michelin Guide has reserved a place for the store in its book – there's sardine-egg caviar as well as tender chunks of tuna belly (what the Japanese call *toro*) for sale. "It's a real delicacy. We supply it to the local sushi restaurants."

Provenance is important to the Ferreras and is one of the reasons that keeps clients coming back. "All our fish are caught in Portuguese waters. The tuna is from the Azores; the sardines are from Matosinhos." Seafood is sterilised in a state-of-the-art autoclave and the



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- 01 Conserveira employee Dona Manuela
- 02 Conserveira's vintage tins are highly sought after by gourmands
- 03 Dona Manuela wraps 600 tins a day
- 04 Customer purchases are gift-wrapped
- 05 The shop's cash register
- 06 Employees Heleno, Dona Manuela and Jefferson

couple's exacting standards mean that certain fish are not always in stock. "It's easy to fall into the trap of offering quantity over quality but I prefer not to do business that way. We could have our fishermen catch sardines in August but they wouldn't taste as good. It's better in the autumn since they are fatter then."

Part of the shop's enduring charm is the fact that everything inside – the wooden shelving, cash register and countertops, has remained untouched since it first opened for business in 1930.

"It's all original. The only thing we've added are new doors out front to keep away the thieves," says Ferreira. In the beginning, Armando's father had the dream of managing a neighbourhood grocery store, but it wasn't long before he and his business partner decided to specialise in fish preserves – the shop, incidentally, sits in the "Street of the Cod Boats".

During the Second World War, with the increased demand for tinned food, their business took off. Added to that was a family stake in the cannery business,



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which survived until 1980 before a crisis hit and they were forced to close down.

Seafood at the Conserveira is sold under three labels: Tricana, Prata do Mar and Minor. Most first-time buyers go with Tricana, as it contains the very finest cuts of first-choice fish. Instantly recognisable with its vintage wrapping, the image of the smiling Tricana girl has remained largely unaltered since first appearing on tins in 1942.

Considered a design classic by many, Ferreira is in the process of updating the labels so as to conform to European Union regulations. "It won't affect the cover but on the back of all of them we have to put on barcodes and nutritional information." She's also switched over to Kraft paper, a coarse, dark brown material, as it's more ecological.

Another annoying bureaucratic detail which she's not too pleased about is Brussels' ruling on expiration dates. "The EU has a five-year limit for canned fish but it's absurd. These tins were designed for surviving during times of war. They keep for decades."

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of their business is the odd request that comes in from gourmands and collectors, who for the most part are French. "They wanted nine tins of canned fish from the early 1990s. We made them a bespoke wooden container with a glass cover. They paid €60 for it. Sixty euros for nine tins of fish! Can you believe it?" — (M)

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