

Ed Siegle eats out in Tiradentes, Brazil

CAIPIRINHAS & CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

ON A SATURDAY IN AUGUST

last year there was, for certain lovers of fine cuisine, a difficult choice to be made between gourmet dinners prepared by two culinary stars. Angela Hartnett was offering a starter of swordfish carpaccio with avocado crisps, before a main of roasted fillet of veal, followed by a cleansing basil pannacotta, rounded off by a chocolate mousse with Damask sorbet. Not far away, Rougui Dia was serving a gazpacho of petit pois with orange jelly and coriander, followed by a lamb chop with persillade and a mushroom risotto. But the remarkable thing about this showdown was that it did not take place in London or Paris, where these two top chefs ply their trade, but in a small colonial town called Tiradentes, 300 km inland from Rio de Janeiro.

The Tiradentes Gastronomic and Cultural Festival takes place over 10 days at the end of August. On the Friday and Saturday nights of the weekends which bookend the festivities, top Brazilian and international chefs prepare a meal at two exquisite venues: the



Pousada Villa Paolucci and the Pousada Pequena Tiradentes.

Beyond the famous chefs there are a wealth of opportunities to sample the everyday but by no means ordinary delights of Brazilian cuisine – something for which this region, Minas Gerais, is widely renowned.

From fine restaurants to street food, from *leitão a pururuca* (crackling crisp suckling pig) to simple *pão de queijo* (cheese-bread), there is something new to savour and enjoy for every mood, taste and wallet. And let's not forget the liquid side of affairs. Brazil is well known for its *caipirinha* cocktail – of which plenty are on offer, including variations with strawberries or passion fruit. But few outside Brazil are aware of the diversity of the *cachaça* from which *caipirinhas* are made. There are

“

ARGUABLY THE GREATEST DELICACY OF ALL IS THE TOWN ITSELF

Above: Angela Hartnett plates up at the festival. (Picture courtesy of the Tiradentes Gastronomic and Cultural Festival).

Below: the Matriz de San Antonio church in Tiradentes.

over 500 varieties of the good stuff on sale at shops such as the Confidências Mineiras Ateliê da Cachaça. Sample a couple and you are sure to stagger out with a few chinking bottles.

Fine dining may not be the first thing people think of when considering a trip to Brazil, but the festival and its setting present the perfect opportunity to experience a different side of a country characterised by great variety and vivid contrasts. The town itself has a rich history which is also highly accessible – with many former mansions, a legacy of the region's gold mining past, now converted into stylish *pousadas* (think boutique hotel meets country inn).

More than anything, the festival is a success because, despite being all about the food, it's not all about the food – there is just so much else about Tiradentes to enjoy. When you've had your fill, you can always catch an impromptu samba band playing in the street, visit the gallery of local artist Oscar Araripe, nose around in one of the numerous antique furniture shops, or ride a pony and trap around the cobbled streets.

And beautiful streets they are, because arguably the greatest delicacy of all is the town itself. Tiradentes was named after an eighteenth-century revolutionary who rose up against the Portuguese colonial government, and the town has changed little since those days. Nestling under the imposing ridge of the São José mountain range, perched on the side of a hill, it presents a perfect postcard scene, with the twin towers of the Matriz de San Antonio church rising regally above white villas and ochre rooftops. The church itself, a Baroque gem, is famous for its gilding and worth a visit, as is the contrasting Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos – a simpler chapel built by slaves for their own use.

And to round it off, there are the people. There may more to Brazil than the beach-samba-football cliché, but one reputation is well deserved: Brazilians know how to have a good time. **t**



Invisibles by Ed Siegle is published by Myriad Editions, price £7.99.