

DELICIOUS SALVADOR

Worldly Delights

Tim Johnson



Salvador is full of restaurants

CONSUMING HISTORY AND CULTURE IN BRAZIL'S OLDEST CITY.

It's Saturday night, and I'm watching a fight. And eating. And tapping my foot to an irrepressible beat. As drums pound in the background, two sweaty, shirtless men circle, eyeing one another up. Then, suddenly—as I dig into shrimp Bobo, bean stew and pigweed—the men attack, swinging roundhouse kicks at each other's heads, narrowly missing, and doing so in time with the beat. The kicks continue, none landing, and as the men uncouple, one makes his exit with theatrical flourish, cartwheeling and flipping away from the scene. I drop my fork just long enough to give them both a hearty round of applause.

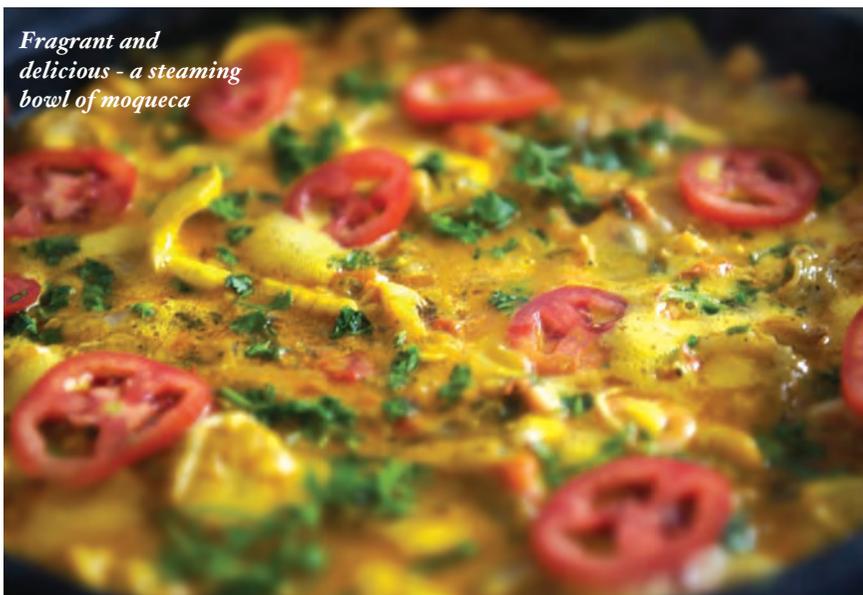
I was in Salvador, one of the oldest cities in the Americas and the first colonial capital of Brazil, and I found myself watching some first-rate *capoeira*. Salvador is the capital of the state of Bahia and the undisputed centre of Afro-Brazilian culture, and *capoeira*—a curious mix of martial arts and dance—is perhaps its most vibrant expression. A coastal city in the northeastern part of the country, Salvador has also long been one of Brazil's primary ports, bringing in a unique mix of food and culture from all over

the world. While Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo often get the majority of the attention, I would learn over my several days in Salvador that this city has some amazing—and very delicious—things to offer.

For the *capoeira* show, I went to a restaurant called O Coliseu, a sort of dinner theatre on the fringes of Salvador's Pelourinho (historic district) that offers nightly performances. Before the *capoeira* began, performers in elaborate costumes—exotic-looking *baianas* in giant hoop skirts, fearsome warriors in frightening masks—acted out scenes from traditional African folklore, which had morphed and evolved over the centuries through the experiences of Afro-Brazilian slaves. *Capoeira* itself developed as a product of the slave experience. Slaves brought in by the Portuguese would practice this form of self-defense in the fields, but would disguise it as a dance, lest anyone know they were learning to fight. This combination of sport and art was standardized and popularized by two Salvadorian masters, and thus the city is seen as the birthplace of modern *capoeira*.

And as I watched these elements of Afro-Brazilian history, I ate some of the culture, too. Shrimp Bobo, for example, is a cornerstone dish, descended from West African cuisine, where it was made with beans. Mixing in local, Bahian ingredients, it now combines fresh shrimp (harvested just off the coast) with manioc, palm oil and plenty of coconut milk—it was a hot, soupy treat. I downed it along with other traditional dishes—rabada (a sort of oxtail soup), drover beans, rice, and something called acarajé, a deep-fried Bahian street food made from black-eyed peas, shrimp, garlic and okra, a dish that originated long ago in Nigeria.

Having been introduced to Afro-Brazilian culture, I decided to explore more of Salvador's history, rambling around its stunning Pelourinho. The first part of the city to be settled after its founding in 1549, this central zone was the heart of Salvador during the period of Portuguese colonization. It achieved UNESCO World Heritage status back in 1985, and the city poured resources into a major restoration project in the



Fragrant and delicious - a steaming bowl of moqueca

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The town gets dressed up for a local festival.

1990s, leaving it in beautiful shape. I walked its cobblestone streets, passing *baianas* on seemingly every corner—these women in traditional dress play a major role in the city’s Carnival, one of the largest in the world, which takes place each February.

I grabbed a cup of *suco de limao com coco* from one of several street vendors—this drink, a distinctive mix of coconut water, lemon juice and sugar is a neighbourhood favourite—and set about exploring. Roaming up and down the area’s hills, I snapped photos of its pastel pink, red, blue, yellow and green buildings, some of them dating as far back as the 17th century. Along the way, I popped into shops and stopped every so often to take in another street performance. I eventually finished my walk at the building that serves as the training centre, offices and store for Olodum: perhaps the most famous Afro-Brazilian cultural group in the world.

Founded in 1979, Olodum is best known for performing alongside Michael Jackson in his video for the song “They Don’t Care about Us,” but the group has also recorded

and appeared on stage with Paul Simon and other notable artists. They originated from Pelourinho during a time when the area was scruffy and crime-ridden—the group was even founded with the goal of combatting racism and raising the profile of Afro-Brazilians (who were, at the time, often marginalized)—and it wasn’t long before the group’s original members opened a school to help get at-risk kids off the street.

Originally excluded from the city’s Carnival, Olodum now play a major role in it every year, pounding out their distinctive form of reggae samba on their drums while simultaneously dancing to the beat. I chatted with a few of the current students, who said they not only learn music and dance, but also business and marketing skills, and take special courses in Afro-Brazilian history. The latter was especially empowering, said Manuela Macedo, a slightly sheepish 18-year-old student. “They don’t teach it in our public schools,” she explained, just before the sound of drums upstairs set her off in that direction. “Knowing it, I feel a lot more confidence, a lot more self esteem.”

I finished my day around the corner at Maria Mata Moto, a restaurant named for a character written by the renowned Brazilian novelist and playwright Hilda Hilst. I stopped on the way to dinner to take in the colours of the sunset as they reflected off the cross and twin towers of the Church of Sao Francisco on Anchieta Plaza; one of the most stunning spots in all of Pelourinho. Maria Mata Moto is home to one of the best patios in Salvador. Housed in a 17th century former home, the al fresco area out back—which has a Secret Garden feel, complete with a little gurgling fountain—is hemmed in by brick walls built in the same style as Salvador’s 16th century fortifications, and hung with tapestry of green vines. I dined on a delicious moqueca, another traditional Bahian dish, a stew that brings together a variety of seafood, plus onions, garlic, cilantro, tomatoes and palm oil, all in one black pan.

Inspired by my dinner, on my last day in Salvador, I headed to the coast—where it all began for this historic city. Taking in the view of the water from atop a high promontory, I rode the city’s huge, public Lacerda Elevator; built in 1873 to connect the two parts of the city, it still transports hundreds of people every day. Arriving at the bottom, I made my way towards the rocky beaches that form much of the city’s waterfront; later climbing to the top of the iconic Barra Lighthouse, which is housed in a 16th century Portuguese fort and has long guided oceangoing vessels into All Saints Bay, home of Salvador’s busy port.

Fittingly, I finished the tour at Amado. Set right on All Saints Bay, I sat at a table just inches from the water, dining on the fruits of the Atlantic - often matched with actual Brazilian fruits and vegetables, like mandioquinha, perhaps Brazil’s longest-cultivated root vegetable, or, a banana puree. As I happily polished off my meal, I looked out and considered the fact that its core elements—fish and other seafood—were perhaps brought in by the boats that sat anchored nearby. My belly full and my head filled with the sounds of Olodum, I smiled to myself and looked out on their lights, twinkling against the black sea and sky on a perfect Salvadorian night.