



SLOW BOAT TO SUCCESS

When chef Antonio Coelho arrived in Macau – by boat from his native Portugal on December 12, 1970, to be precise – he found a sleepy, quiet little backwater.

That first visit extended into a three-year stay and Coelho says in the years that followed he could never get the city out of his mind. So when the chance came to rekindle his love for Macau in 1997, Coelho jumped at the chance. And the local restaurant scene – and its diners – have benefited since.

Stints at the likes of Espaco Lisboa and Clube Militar de Macau led to the opening of Antonio's in the old town section of Taipa and the chef has been able to witness his adopted city's growth first hand, and hear from his customers just how locals and visitors view the changes.

"Since 1999, we have become a cosmopolitan city. The city now has so many layers. There are people living and working here from everywhere and the city is completely different. Some people were scared that Macau would lose its history but it hasn't, it has just become a very modern city."

Coelho says an increase in demand has seen the cost of living rise but believes the wealth is being spread around town.

"It has meant a very different life for people - it has become better. People are making more money, the standard, quality and style of life has improved," Coelho says. "For sure things have become more expensive. Before you could [rent] a nice house for HK\$4,000, now that would cost you HK\$8,000. But the quality of life has become better and better."

The chef now travels around as part of the Macau Government Tourism Office's promotional roadshows, so he is used to painting a positive picture of the city. But he says the developments since the handover have really made a difference to the way businesses are able to operate.

"I am Portuguese and I love my country," he says. "But Macau has given me everything that I have. It has recognised me as a professional, it has given me friends and I am very happy in Macau. It is not a big city, there is not the kind of stress in other big cities in Asia.

"In Singapore, other places, things take so much time. Here, if someone rings me in the morning and asks for a dish I know I can get the ingredients, I can get them right away. And that is even more the case since 1999 because the demand for service has become so much better."

What pleases Coelho most, though, is that in some ways the city he fell for back in the 1970s has retained the same vibe.

"We have not lost the casual way of life that attracts people here. If mistakes are made, so be it. No one is perfect in this life. And we know that no matter what, people get things right eventually." Mathew Scott

