

Cafe Portugal is the quintessential Portuguese restaurant offering delicious standards in a friendly, old-world atmosphere

I can't imagine a life without the presence of Portuguese culture. Having lived in many states and countries, I've learned how uncommon Portuguese enclaves are and how much we can take Portuguese food for granted.

Growing up, I thought everyone in America had linguica, chourico, kale soup, "pops," quezadas, boiled dinner and many of our other favorite Portuguese dishes. Once I started traveling, I discovered how rare it really is. In fact, I've even had someone ask "What do Portuguese people look like? Are they black or white? Do they eat weird food?" There are wide swaths of America that have absolutely no idea where Portugal is on a map, what Portuguese people look like, let alone what they eat.



*You've probably
driven by Cafe
Portugal a
thousand times!
(Fernando Costa)*

These poor deprived souls.

The idea of relocating to another part of the country or world and not having access to Portuguese food, Fado, festas, or hearing last names like Pereira, Gomes, and Fernandes is horrifying to me. So, I relish this community and certainly do not take it for granted. I go to the various feasts, I listen to Fado whenever I can, and partake in one of my favorite aspects of the Portuguese culture: eating at many of the absolutely fantastic Portuguese restaurants. I honestly cannot think of a **bad** Portuguese restaurant.

So, I've done what any good foodie does when he has to make the difficult choice of where to go – I designate each restaurant as the one who makes the best of a particular dish or particular dishes. I go to one place because, in my opinion, they make the best boiled dinner, the best Chourico Bombeiro, or the best Alentejana. That way I get to support them all, as they deserve.

A hidden gem in plain sight

One of my favorite spots is a hidden gem – one less frequented because it doesn't have a massive presence. A quiet little place that is perhaps skipped over because some people may think they aren't Portuguese enough. You know, those Portuguese places where no one is speaking English and when you walk in, it's like you are no longer in America, but in Portugal?

Thing is, that we all know that that means the food will be authentic and we also know that it will be good. The kind of food that is so good that when you eat it, you feel like you are doing something wrong. Well, one such place is Roberto and Grace Calderon's Cafe Portugal at 1280 Acushnet Avenue. It's a place we've all driven by countless times because of its location.

I made the above mistake for years, but I kept hearing how darn delicious the food is and how I simply had to try it. I'd hear it again. Then again. I knew I had to smarten up and get

there.

Walking into Cafe Portugal reminded me of those many tiny back alleys in a rural European town – could be Portugal, France, Belgium, or Spain – that I had passed through. The archaic looking old world sconces on the wall were mnemonic triggers. The front dining room and bar have a very rustic, warm, and homey feel to it. Like you just walked into avó's living room. The aromas coming out of the kitchen are the same – a signal that you are about to feed your soul.



*The Chicken Mozambique
is as good as it
looks.*

Warm welcome, first impressions

Roberto and Grace both happened to be there and greeted Mike and me straight away. They didn't know who we are, but their warm welcome, made us feel like we were regulars. A nice start to things.

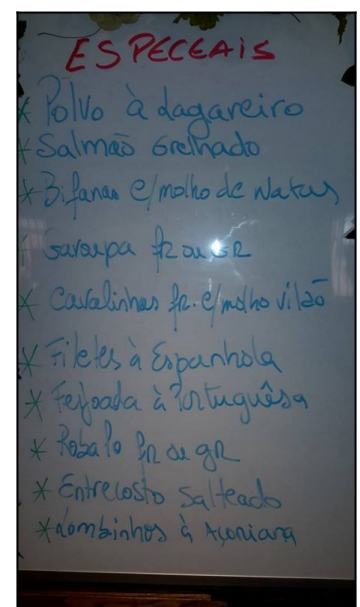
They worked in tandem taking our drink order, bringing a bread a butter basket and setting up for some major event that night. From where we sat, there was a massive dining area that looked like it could seat 150 people or more. Roberto noticed my interest and explained that there was going to be a celebration that night featuring a band from Brazil. He mentioned something about a "Dos Anjos" celebration, but my Portuguese isn't fantastic so I don't understand the "angels" reference.

The menu was very straightforward and modest. If you're looking for a menu that has 50-100 dishes, this isn't the place. That's certainly not a bad thing. The menu suggested "We offer only what we specialize in." They know what they know and serve exactly that. However, they had a marker-board of daily specials (most were \$6,95) to keep happy those who want to change it up now and again.

Mike and I discussed a concept we feel strongly about. When it comes to restaurants, there is always a dish or two that are signature to that culture – something that is the benchmark for everything else on that menu. The dish that is quintessential to that ethnicity – if they do that right, you know that everything that follows is going to be good.

Appetizers – a teasing of what's to come

So, ordering the **Shrimp Mozambique** to start with seemed an obvious choice. For an entree, I decided on the Azorean Steak – I only order steak about twice a year and it had been a while, so I opted for it. Besides Mike was nudging me towards it. He is a "Mozambique guy" – he orders something Mozambique pretty much every time we go to a Portuguese restaurant. In fact, he chose the **Chicken Mozambique** for his entree.



*standard menu is
complimented with
daily specials*

However, he is also a steak guy. I think he was torn, so by suggesting that I order the steak, and knowing I would share, he could have the best of both worlds. So I guess I “had” to order the steak. Cruel, right? Is there an organization that fights for the human rights of brothers in a first world?

The Shrimp Mozambique came out in a flash and with its aroma leading the way. My, my.

Approximately ten plump, tender, **fresh** shrimp taking a bath in that famous, tangy, garlicky, signature sauce garnished in parsley, Portuguese black olives and lemon slices. I have never made the dish myself, so I am not familiar with every ingredient, but there always seems to be a hint of beer or perhaps wine – it’s always the one thing that puts the sauce over the top and separates it from a simple, crude hot sauce. It is this complexity that has made the dish so popular and made this particular one so fantastically divine.

The one thing I want to be sure to mention is that these shrimp were not processed, but fresh. I find it insulting to the food and the customer when seafood is processed. Charging people a premium price when you are cutting corners is insulting to the customer, and removing the flavor is insulting to the food itself.

Just unadulterated, sweet and succulent, fresh shrimp that could have stood alone without any sauce whatsoever. Just amazing. A great start. After we pummeled these in a matter of a minute, we stared at the serving plate of sauce. I know what Mike was thinking and surely he knew what I was thinking. “Would it be considered rude to pick up that plate and drink that sauce like it was bottled water?” Or more importantly, could we do it without anyone noticing? When I finally thought

the social penalty an even trade and was about to sip – even slurp – the waiter came to take the tray away to make room for the coming entrees. A moment passed is a moment lost. I just stared longingly at the plate as it was whisked away.

The main event, entrees

Sadness turned to joy when the entrees arrived. Again the powerful aroma was the vanguard of deliciousness. Mike and I were both pleasantly surprised at the ample portions. You definitely get your money's worth.

The steak came smothered in a translucent-brown, broth style sauce – sort of a Portuguese Au Jus – half and whole roasted cloves of garlic, julienned Portuguese red and yellow peppers, topped with an egg over-easy and garnished with fresh parsley. A modest pile of golden-brown, crispy fries and yellow rice garnished with more parsley accompanied the steak.

I ordered the steak medium-rare and it was cooked exactly as ordered, yet they still managed to get char on the outside. That demonstrates care and skill when it comes to cooking steaks. This steak was simply one of the best steaks I have ever had. This was the quintessential steak: savory, juicy, and tender. The sauce didn't compete for attention, but was the perfect compliment. Together they were a match made in steak heaven.



Cafe Portugal's mouth-watering Azorean Steak

The rice was perfectly cooked and the an excellent way to

sponge up any excess steak juice. The fries were crispy on the outside, piping hot and creamy on the inside. Yep. I was in my happy place.

The centerpiece of Mike's entree was a square bowl of large, plump chunks of all white meat chicken in the same amazing, tangy Mozambique sauce that the shrimp were served in and garnished with a lemon slice and fresh parsley. It was also accompanied with rice and french fries.

Again, this was the quintessential Mozambique dish – when you think of Chicken Mozambique, this is the standard. One of the best versions I've had on the South Coast – which might as well be the world when it comes to Portuguese cuisine outside of Portugal.

Summary

The portions were large enough that we had to pass when we were offered dessert. The service was friendly, fast, and attentive. The ambience was old world and the prices were right on the money – pardon the pun. I can't believe that I waited this long to try Cafe Portugal. I now have a new place to mention when people say "Let's eat Portuguese!"

I not only plan on coming back again and again for lunch or dinner, but I'd like to come during one of the musical events that Roberto says he has frequently. A restaurant that not only serves phenomenal Portuguese food – some of the best in the city – but also serves Portuguese culture on a regular basis?

I'm all for it.

Cafe Portugal

1280 Acushnet Avenue

New Bedford, MA 02746

Phone: (508) 992-8216

EMail: cafeportugal@comcast.net

Facebook: facebook.com/Cafe-Portugal-348438405359249/

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder