

The New Bedford Portuguese Feast Survival Guide



By Shonna
McGrail

This is our 2011 New Bedford Portuguese Feast article. Check out of 8 Things to Know About the 2012 Portuguese Feast article for information on the 2012 Feast.

The New Bedford Feast of the Blessed Sacrament, a.k.a. the Portuguese Feast, a.k.a. Madeira Feast is the largest event the city has every year. More than that, it is the largest Portuguese feast in the world and the largest ethnic festival in New England. The feast was founded in 1915 by four Madeiran immigrants who wanted to recreate the festivities of their home island.

Between my own experience with the feast, some careful research and some very helpful guidance from Ed Camara, the Director of Media and Public Relations for Clube Madeirense S.S. Sacramento, I have come up with an overview of the feast which has become a major attraction for visitors from all over who come to celebrate the Portuguese culture through food, drink and entertainment.

For this year's 2011 feast, over 100,000 attendees are anticipated. If you are considering being one of them, here are eight things you should know about the feast:

1. Time and Location

If you have never been to the feast it naturally makes sense to let you know where to go and when to be there. The feast is a a four day event, officially kicking off at 6:00 PM on Thursday, August 4th. The grounds close at 11:45 each night.



On Friday the grounds re-open from 6 PM to 11:45 PM. The weekend hours start a bit earlier with Saturday festivities begin at 10 AM for the 5K road race followed by Kid's Day afternoon. The last day of the feast is Sunday which starts off with a parade at 2:00 PM. For more information on when and where events will be taking place, go to the Portuguese Feast Entertainment Schedule.

Most of the events take place at Madeira Field (a permanent location in New Bedford's north end) that comes to life one weekend a year for the Portuguese Feast festivities. The address of Madeira Field is 50 Madeira Avenue, New Bedford, MA. Parking can be a bit tricky, you may have to plan to search a bit to find a spot and walk a few blocks, or pay to park in a nearby lot.

2. Costs

The festival allows free admission and entertainment thanks to the hard work of the 52 committee members who comprise the 2011 Feast of the Blessed Sacrament Committee. While admission is free there are also many vendors at the grounds selling everything from handmade Madeiran souvenirs to cigars.

Tickets may also be purchased to buy authentic Portuguese cuisine or, if you're over 21, an impressive selection of alcoholic beverages. Tickets cost a dollar each and can be purchased at ten machines located throughout the grounds by

placing a five, ten or twenty dollar bill inside. Tickets are non-refundable. There are also stands with employees who sell the tickets.

Prices of food are kept reasonable, and I was informed by the Mr. Camara (who has been a part of the feast's organization since 1982) that prices on some items are actually lower than past feasts and no prices have been increased in the past two years. To give you a general idea of the prices of items at the feast, a full meal is 12 tickets (which equates to 12 dollars), most sandwiches are around four tickets, and a soda or a water goes for one ticket.

3. Food



carne de espeto!

One of the greatest features of the feast is the delicious Portuguese fare. There are many food stands located throughout Madeira Field that serve your favorites from the simple delights of linguica and cacoila sandwiches to full on Portuguese cuisine plates of chicken, beef, goat or tuna with potatoes, rice and vegetables.

Another major culinary draw is the Carne de Espeto, a massive, 40 foot barbecue pit where beef sirloin cubes can be cooked over an open flame on massive skewers. This is hard to miss since the aroma is absolutely mouth watering. Visitors are able to buy the meat for eight tickets a pound and a delicious aromatic salt is provided to cook with. Visitors are then

able to roast their own dinner over the gas-fired lava rock grill. Mr. Camara advised me that if someone tells you to pour Madeira wine on the meat it is not advisable (it does not help the flavor and causes the meat to burn faster!)

In case you are not accustomed to the flavorful cooking style of Portuguese cuisine, go to the Food & Drink page of the Portuguese Feast website for definitions of some of the food you might expect to see.

4. Drink

One of the great draws of the feast is the consumption of Madeira wine, which is a central part of the festivities as it is part of a long tradition. Madeira wine is a sweet, fortified red wine. Genuine Madeira wine is made on the island of Madeira, and exportation of actual barrels are restricted due to regulations. However, thanks to a special agreement made between feast officials and the President of Madeira, casks are able to be delivered to New Bedford and served for the weekend, making this a very rare treat for those who attend.

For those who want an alternative to Madeira wine, there are a great variety of additional options including a full liquor bar for mix drinks. Alcohol stands also serve sangria and white wine and Budweiser beer is on tap.

5. Entertainment

There is a great deal of quality free entertainment at the feast each year from Portuguese and American cultures. There are three stages throughout Madeira field, and each host a variety of performance types throughout the weekend. In addition, the



Museum of Madeiran Heritage will be featuring musical

performances each night of the feast. These performances will be featuring fado music, a Portuguese genre of music that can be traced back to the 1820s but is believed to be even older than that. For a schedule of who will be performing go [here](#).

One of the cultural acts that you may see take the stage at Madeira field is Grupo Folclórico Clube Madeirense S.S. Sacramento. This group of dancers present traditional dancing performances to authentic Madeiran music and in traditional clothing. These performances are always very spirited and interesting to see.

There will be many bands on the smaller stages during the feast, but the largest stage is reserved for a special performance at 10:00 each night. Thursday night the band Soul Asylum will take the stage. Soul Asylum had two platinum albums, and are perhaps best known for the song "Runaway Train."

Friday night will feature Johnny Hoy and the Bluefish, a band from Martha's Vineyard that specializes in "bluesy dance music" according to their website. On Saturday a Green Day tribute band called Dookie will be the main stage highlight to cap off the evening, and Backseat Lover will be playing Pearl Jam tribute music for the final night of the feast.

6. Families

Since Madeira feast involves alcohol consumption, some readers may be wondering if it is a family appropriate event. You will be glad to know that family values are integral to the foundation of the feast. While it is probably not advisable to bring young children later in the night due to large crowds and loud music, it should be mentioned that there are many features of the feast that children will love. Also, the feast takes great measures to prohibit underage drinking.



All who wish to consume alcoholic beverages are required to undergo a license verification process in order to receive a specially printed wrist band.

An interesting part of the feast is that it features carnival rides and games all weekend. Saturday is probably the best day for families with young kids thanks to Kids Day Afternoon which follows the 12th annual 5K road race. Kids day kicks off at 12:15 PM and involves a children's theatre, Toe Jam puppet show and much more family friendly entertainment.

For senior citizens in the community, special transport is being offered from the parking lot of Lincoln Elementary on Saturday so that seniors can attend the event without having to worry about parking. They are also being offered the special deal of half price meals from noon to four o'clock that day, and special entertainment will be featured as well.

7. History

The Feast of the Blessed Sacrament gains its roots from the island of Madeira which is located 390 miles off the coast of Morocco. Traditionally, each Roman Catholic parish in Madeira would observe a festival to celebrate their patron saint. A committee of four men called festeiros would be responsible for preparing the village for the celebration by decorating

the streets, contracting entertainment (often in the form of a brass band and fireworks) and holding a ceremonial meal after mass on Sunday.

There are many versions of the tale of why the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament was first begun in New Bedford 97 years ago.

What is certain however is that the feast was initiated as a means of preserving basic values of the Madeiran culture. Of course, since it was first begun the feast has changed in many ways to accommodate thousands of eager participants and modern elements of celebration.

While there have been many changes in the feast, many aspects still remain central to the celebration. The tradition of Madeira wine is a very old one, dating back to the 15th Century when the Malvasia vine was planted on the island of Madeira to see it would yield an alternative supply of wine for England. When growth was successful Madeira wine quickly took to the market, but did not become a major export until many years later. It wasn't until the 16th Century that the flavor we know of today was created when they discovered that the flavor of the wine was actually improved by being repeatedly heated up. [Follow the link for more information on the history of Madeira wine.](#)

The religious aspect of the feast also remains a part of proceedings. As it did in 1915, the feast still takes place near Our Lady of Immaculate Conception which is located on the corner of Earle and Madeira Street in New Bedford. The Portuguese feast pays homage to its religious traditions by beginning the weekend festivities with a procession to the church where Father Daniel O. Reis gives a Benediction to the Blessed Sacrament. Throughout the weekend the church also hosts the music of organist Edward Viveiros and vocalist Derek Capobianco each evening from 6:00 to 9:00 PM.

8. Madeira Field



Santana House at the New Bedford Portuguese Feast.

The grounds on which the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament takes place are quite expansive and easy to lose people in. Be sure you have a plan for finding lost party members whether it be by cell phone or a designated area to meet up at.

When entering the feast you will need to get in line for a wrist band if you wish to purchase alcoholic beverages. One of the most prominent features you will notice upon entering the festival grounds is the Santana House. The house is designed after the colorful architectural styles of the homes in the village Santana, Madeira and is where the Madeira wine is served from.

Across from the Santana House is Stage One, which is massive and where the main attractions will be hosted throughout the weekend. There are also two other smaller stages, one that is inside the gates and the other which is outside and amongst the souvenir vendors. You will also see many food and drink stands throughout the grounds, and towards the back you will find the barbecue pits for Carne de Espeto (or just follow your nose).

Enjoy the feast! If you enjoyed this article please share it. All photos courtesy of the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament 2011.