

## The Portuguese Table

Tuesday, 21 June 2011  
Steve Desroches



<http://provincetownmagazine.org/Provincetown/the-portuguese-table>

*Recipes from the Provincetown Portuguese Cookbook by Mary-Jo Avellar*



There is perhaps no more popular cultural expression than cuisine. How and what we eat within a society is as much an artistic expression as fine art or literature. Within each culture's recipes are family traditions, expressions of faith, and a commitment to community. When done correctly, eating is a communal experience. Sharing conversation over a meal builds friendships and community. And a pure example is the decades of food the Provincetown Portuguese community shared with artists, writers, and the multitude of visitors from around the world. It is one of the main reasons why Provincetown's culture is one of tolerance and acceptance. At the invitation of the Portuguese, people sat and ate together, and in the process learned a lot about each other. It's just one of a million stories about the contributions of immigrants to American culture.

The immigrant story of those that came from Portugal and the Azores to Provincetown goes hand in hand with the migrants that came here for the art colony, to paint, to write, to act, to create. Portuguese families rented rooms and opened their homes to the thousands that came to Provincetown to be artists. Perhaps nowhere in the world were starving artists so well fed. As the town celebrates the Portuguese Festival, here are just three of many stories about how Provincetown's diverse community came together over the Portuguese table.

Mary-Jo Avellar's grandmother Angelina Jacinta Soares Avellar came to America when she was just 16 years old from the Azorean island Flores, the western most point in the Portuguese archipelago. She married and had 13 children, raising them in the East End. Gregarious and fun-loving Avellar became close friends with writer Mary Heaton Vorse, journalist, labor activist, and author of the classic Provincetown book *Time and the Town*. Through her friendship with the leftist journalist, Avellar met and socialized with journalist John Reed, author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, and his wife, feminist and writer Louise Bryant (who were popularized in the film *Reds* starring Warren Beatty and Diane Keaton). Those friendships introduced Avellar to the Provincetown Players, a slew of artists from Greenwich Village, and Eugene O'Neill. And in turn, it introduced all of them to Avellar's kale soup.

"She knew them all," says Avellar, who has intermittently served on the Board of Selectmen since the 1970s and penned the quintessential Provincetown Portuguese Cookbook. "O'Neill, all of them. She was very outgoing and she and Mother Vorse were best friends. They ate at her house frequently."

**Tennessee Williams** arrived in Provincetown for the summer of 1940 a struggling writer looking to work, play, and unbeknownst to him, fall in love. Skinny and scrawny, Williams was broke, living on \$100 for the whole summer. Living in the West End, including Captain Jack's Wharf, Williams befriended local fishermen who would in turn give the starving writer some of the daily catch, as well as potatoes.

"What really strikes me about the interactions the Portuguese had with visitors is how accepting they were," says David Kaplan, author of *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown* and curator of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival.

In all, Williams spent four summers in Provincetown during the 1940s renting from the Portuguese and staying in boarding houses. The West End in particular was loaded with artists and writers as the Portuguese property owners had a tradition of renting to sailors and other transient visitors. The open and accepting attitude mixed with the Mediterranean culture of people-watching and congregating in the plaza, or in Provincetown's case in front of Town Hall or strolling along Commercial Street, meant Williams had many occasions to form friendships with the local Portuguese and vice versa.

Williams' connection to the Portuguese comes full circle this September at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. The Carbono Theater Company of Lisbon, Portugal, will present the world premiere of **Alma**, a dance-based performance inspired by the Williams play *Summer and Smoke*. With text and songs in both Portuguese and English, the production will return to Lisbon after the festival for a limited engagement.