

## **CULTURE, CUISINE, CAMARADERIE DRAW PORTUGUESE TO AREA CLUB**

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### **Body**

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Inside a small, nondescript concrete building, behind doors marked Members Only, each night a lively group plays billiards, drinks heartily and snacks on homemade baked goods.

But this is not your typical corner tavern.

This crowd - about two dozen on weekdays and more than 100 on weekends - is likely to sip wine and brandy from Portugal, engage in heated discussions about Portuguese politics and sports, and snack on a popular codfish appetizer called bolinhos de bacalhau well into the early morning.

The Association of the Lady of Fatima of Riverside is where South Jersey's Portuguese immigrants come together.

Their population in the region has mushroomed in the last 15 years, and Portuguese children constitute the largest ethnic group in the Riverside School District.

The influx is due to the economic conditions in Portugal, one of the poorest countries in Europe, said Jose Cepa, who stepped down as the association's president at a dinner party Saturday at the building on Lafayette Street. Jose Rodriguez became the new president.

"It's the symbol of the Portuguese people," Cepa said of the building. "For me, I feel like I am in Portugal."

According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, an average of 1,106 Portuguese immigrants a year entered New Jersey from 1990 to 1997. In Pennsylvania, the average was only 59.

Five years ago, the Riverside-based group - established in 1986 by about 30 Portuguese families from Riverside and nearby communities - bought the 4,000-square-foot building, formerly the home of St. Casimir's Polish-American Club.

Since then, members - who now number more than 400 and come from South Jersey and Pennsylvania - have gathered for dinners and events in the hall, game room and bar, which includes an overhead TV feeding satellite programming from Portugal.

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"It's like a little corner to come back to, a place to be proud of your background," said Alfredo Silva of Delran. "We do this to revive the Portuguese culture here."

On Wednesday night, the scene at the Portuguese Club was typical. Crowding beneath the television, men watched a soccer game, arguing in Portuguese whether Porto, Sporting or Benfica - Portugal's top soccer teams - would come out on top.

In the hall, which is decorated with flags from regions of Portugal, about a dozen children played pool or sat in a circle listening to music.

For many of them, it was in this building that they put on their first ranchos, the colorfully embroidered outfits from the country where their parents and, in some cases, grandparents were born.

In the kitchen, six women baked Portuguese delicacies.

At the bar, Ricardo Lopes, 21, who moved to Riverside from Portugal with his parents when he was 3, kept busy with his weeklong volunteer duty serving drinks.

"I was shocked to see how many people are here," said Lopes, a Temple University junior who joined the club last year. "Now I recognize a lot more people on the streets. I wanted to experience the Portuguese community and also try to motivate youngsters to get to know their culture."

As the club added more members, traditional dinners of feijoada, a pork and bean dish, and sopa de legumes, a green pea soup, have become a monthly event featuring Portuguese musical groups from as far away as Massachusetts.

Two members, Leonor Morais and Maria Almeida, have begun after-school language classes at Riverside High School three days a week.

Association leaders hope to establish a school and day-care center.

Isabel Santos, a longtime member, said the best part of the club was its ability to pass down tradition.

"We talk about work, talk about soccer, talk about our families in Portugal," said Jose Fernandez, who came from Portugal to Philadelphia 10 years ago and moved to Riverside in 1995. "That's what life is all about."

## Graphic

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PHOTO

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