The bakery off Grand

A tiny Portuguese place I walked past for two years, and a man named Manny who now saves me a pastry.

JUL 20 – 26, 2026

5 MIN READ

I found a new favorite place this week. Which, if you've read this for a while, you know is kind of my favorite thing to do. Walk around until I find somewhere I didn't know existed. But this one got me in a different way.

It's a bakery off Grand Street. Tiny. Like, really tiny. I've lived in the neighborhood for two years and I walked past it probably a hundred times without seeing it. That's how small it is.

. . .

I found it Tuesday morning, around six. I'd been up all night writing and when the sky started going grey I gave up and went for a walk. Down Bedford, over toward Grand, then just kind of drifting.

There was this little side street, and the only thing open on it was a doorway with a light on. No sign really. Just a faded blue awning with some letters peeling off and a hand-written piece of cardboard in the window that said PASTÉIS DE NATA, FRESH. The smell coming out the door was butter and sugar and something burnt, in the good way. I just walked in. I didn't even decide to. My feet did it.

. . .

Inside it's like the size of my bathroom. One glass case, three little stools against the wall, a coffee machine that looks older than me. Blue and white tiles behind the counter, the kind with little painted patterns, and a couple of them are cracked. On the wall there's a calendar from a fish market in Newark, a photo of a soccer team, and a picture of Lisbon at sunset, kind of yellow from the sun.

Behind the counter was this older man. Maybe seventy-five. White hair, white apron, big glasses, big forearms. He was pulling a tray out of the oven when I came in and he didn't look up. He just said "one minute." So I waited.

When he finally turned around he looked at me over his glasses for a second, the way old men do, like he was deciding something. Then he said "you want nata?" I said yes. He said "how many?" I said one. He said "no, two." So I got two.

. . .

I'd had pastel de nata before. Like the kind they have at coffee places, a little sad, kind of cold. This was not that. It was still warm. The crust was flaky and crackly, like a hundred thin layers that shatter all over your shirt, and the custard was soft and a little wobbly in the middle, with these dark burnt spots on top. He gave me a little shaker of cinnamon and said "put." So I put.

I ate the first one standing at the counter and made a noise. Like, out loud. He laughed. Then he made me a coffee without me asking, a galão, which he explained is like a latte but in a glass. It was strong and milky and perfect. I sat on one of the little stools and ate the second nata slower and watched him work.

. . .

His name is Manny. Short for Manuel. He told me the next day, because yes, I came back the next day. And the day after. I'm not proud of it. Actually, I'm a little proud of it.

He's from a town near Porto. Came here in 1979, when he was twenty-eight. He worked at a bakery in Newark for twenty years, where there's a big Portuguese neighborhood, and then he opened this place in 2001. Just him and his wife, Rosa. She made the coffee, he baked. She died four years ago. He said it plainly, just a fact, while wiping down the counter. There's a photo of her by the register. She's laughing in it, holding a cake. He didn't say anything else about it and I didn't ask.

He opens at 5:30 every morning. Seven days a week. I asked him once if he ever takes a day off. He looked at me like I'd asked if he ever takes his skin off. He said "and do what?"

· · ·

By Thursday he knew my order. By Friday he'd started saving one for me. I came in at like 6:40 and he reached under the counter and pulled out a little white paper bag with one nata in it, still warm, and set it in front of me. He said "I saw you coming." I said thanks. He said "you are late today." I wasn't late. There's no time. But I said sorry anyway.

It turns out a lot of the people in there are regulars. There's an old man in a flat cap who reads a Portuguese newspaper and only says "bom dia" to anyone. A construction worker who buys a whole box of a dozen every Friday for his crew. A woman who works at the hospital and comes in in scrubs, half asleep, and Manny just hands her a coffee without her saying anything. I like that I'm sort of becoming one of them. The guy who comes in at dawn with bags under his eyes. He calls me "the night boy." I don't think he means anything bad by it. I think he just knows.

. . .

Saturday he showed me how he makes them. Kind of. He let me come behind the counter and watch him roll out the dough, this huge sheet that he rolls into a log, then cuts into little coins and presses into the tins with his thumb. He does it so fast. Like his thumb has done it a million times, which I guess it has. I tried one. Mine looked like a sad little hat. He laughed for a long time. Then he baked it anyway, and gave it to me, and it actually tasted fine. He said "next year, maybe, you are good."

I asked if anyone was going to take over the place one day. He shrugged and said his son lives in New Jersey and works in an office. "He likes the office," he said, like it was a strange thing to like. Then he went back to the oven.

. . .

I don't really know why this one got me so much. It's just a bakery. But there's something about a place that's been doing the exact same thing every single morning for twenty-five years, before anyone's awake, just because. In a city where everything changes every six months.

It's my thing now. If you find it, don't tell anyone. And if you go in, get two.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.