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Insiders Guide to the 45th annual Greek Festival: Where to park, what to eat & how to avoid the crowds

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The 45th annual [Greek Festival](#) — dubbed "The Original Greek Festival" to differentiate it from newcomers — traditionally kicks off the fall festival season in Houston. Temperatures are finally cooler, the weather is usually picture perfect and Houstonians are ready to celebrate. (Last year, so many people came to the festival, located around the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Montrose, that organizers pretty much ran out of everything by the last day.)

The four-day event, from Thursday night through Sunday, is a mixed blessing for residents like myself, who live only a few blocks away. The atmosphere is festive but the event has clearly outgrown the surroundings and parking can be a nightmare, with cars blocking driveways and sidewalk entrances throughout the neighborhood.

However, festival chairman Demetri Dale says organizers have come up with some new options to make this year's festival more enjoyable for everyone. Here are some tips:

Where to park

In a car-centric city like Houston, finding a place to park at an inner-city festival can be a problem. You can roam up and down adjoining streets praying that a space will open up, which is unlikely since one side of most nearby streets has been turned into a "No Parking" zone so emergency vehicles can pass by.

A better solution: Drive directly to one of several lots and parking garages that festival officials have secured for the event and walk or take a shuttle.

- [Parking garages](#) on Montrose Boulevard (at Colquitt and West Main streets) and [surface lots](#) on Richmond Avenue, between Montrose and Yoakum streets, are open during festival hours. They are located about six blocks south of the festival grounds. While that might seem like a long walk for Houstonians, pretend like you're in New York, where such a jaunt is considered short. (There is a nominal charge to park.)
- A parking garage on the [University of St. Thomas](#) campus, at the corner of Graustark and West Alabama, about three blocks from the festival, is open, for a small fee.
- Free parking is available at [Lamar High School](#), 3325 Westheimer, or in a [commercial garage](#) at 3351 W. Alabama, between Kirby and Buffalo Speedway, with shuttle bus service to the festival every 15 minutes from both locations.

When to go

We usually meet friends on the first night of the festival when it is a little less crowded. In recent years, Thursday night has become more popular and the crowds have grown larger, but it's still not quite as jammed as on the weekends. Dinner is served from 5- 10 p.m.

Dale recommends Friday lunch as a good time to attend because admission is free and it's not as crowded. Lunch is served from 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. At other times, admission is \$5 for adults, children 12 and under are admitted free.

The festival reopens at 5 p.m. for dinner on Friday and remains open until 10 p.m.

On Saturday and Sunday, generally, the earlier in the day you go, the easier it is to navigate. Food service is from 11 a.m. - 10 p.m. Saturday and Noon- 6 p.m. on Sunday (or until the food runs out).



Photo by Fulton Davenport: PWL Studio

Traditional Greek dancing takes place throughout the weekend.



Photo by Fulton Davenport: PWL Studio

Oh, the food!



Photo by Fulton Davenport: PWL Studio

[Youth groups perform Greek dances](#) at 11:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m., 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on Saturday and at 12:30 p.m., 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on Sunday in the Annunciation Greek Cathedral gymnasium. So if you are bringing along the kids, factor in these times as they'll get a kick out of watching their peers perform.

[Adult Greek dancers](#) perform Thursday-Saturday nights and Sunday at 4 p.m.

What to eat

Each year officials reassess discuss whether to add new food items and the consensus is to stick with what works. "Patrons know what they're getting when they come to us. If we pulled something off the menu, we'd get a huge backlash," Dale said.

Among the items for sale: 22,000 pieces of [baklava](#) (for sale at \$2 each) and 20,000 sticks of [souvlaki](#) (beef tenderloin with Greek spices, \$7 each).

We usually go for the [dinner plate](#) (\$12), which includes generous samplings of pastitsio (baked macaroni with beef filling and Romano cheese topped with bechamel sauce), tiropita (triangular-shaped cheese-filled puff pastry), spanakopita (spinach and Feta cheese rolled in filo), keftedes (Greek meat balls with fresh mint) and salata (traditional Greek salad with seasonings, vinegar, olive oil, and Feta cheese, garnished with olives, tomatoes, and a salad pepper).

[Other menu items](#) for sale include gyros (\$7), Greek pizza (topped with gyro meat, spinach and Feta cheese, \$4, \$6 or \$7 each), and dolmades (stuffed grape leaves, \$6 for four).

Save room for [dessert](#). Our favorite: Loukoumades (Greek deep-fried donuts, \$5 for 10). With a Greek coffee (\$2) or a Frappé (\$3), they're divine.

Other options

[The Agora](#), offering a selection of Greek-themed gifts, ranging from jewelry to olive trees, returns to the church's S. P. Martel Auditorium. And [regular tours](#) of the cathedral are conducted throughout the festival.

New features

This year officials have extended the festival grounds onto Kipling street, between Mount Vernon and Yoakum, to provide more tables and chairs for dining.

Dinner plates and bottles of Boutari Greek wine (\$20, \$25 or \$30) can be purchased by credit card at specially marked registers with high-speed service.

[Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Greek Festival](#)

[Demetri Dale](#)

The church gymnasium is turned into The Agora, with jewelry and other Greek items for sale.



Photo by Fulton Davenport: PWL Studio
Practice makes perfect.