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New Jersey Diners: Open 24 Hours

TRIP
10



WHY GO What makes a diner? Is it the hours, the neon, the counter, the menu? Is it the jukebox, the clientele? New Jersey and its diners are inextricably linked; to know one is to know the other. On this trip, then, we seek the existential truth of this 3am-coffee-and-cheesecake conundrum.

New Jersey has over 600 diners, more than any other state, so we'll start by restricting ourselves to the boomerang of urbanized northeast Jersey. Locals, save your howls of indignation: we know this leaves out all the great diners elsewhere, but whatta ya gonna do? You really want them all?

Let's begin with a burger. Specifically, a White Mana. Diner scholarship generally acknowledges that the oldest diner in New Jersey is Max's Grill, a 1927 shingle-roofed, maroon O'Mahoney on Harrison Ave (at Manor St) in Harrison. Sadly, Max's Grill is closed, perhaps forever; though the cream-colored lettering announces "Ladies Invited," the grill is quiet.

The Jersey City **1 White Mana** likes to claim it pioneered the fast-food hamburger, which some still call a "slider." First or not, it's a classic of the genre. The tiny chrome-and-white building with the red roof was featured at the 1939 New York World's Fair, and sitting at the circular linoleum counter is a true time warp – as well as a rite of passage for diner aficionados and Jersey City kids.

To get there: from Manhattan's Holland Tunnel, take Hwy 1-9 and follow it north onto frenetic, truck-packed Tonnele Ave. White Mana comes up fast, at Manhattan Ave, but everyone risks the turnoff: from gray-haired matrons to truckers to businesspeople to the quintessential lost souls who frequent Edward Hopper paintings.

TIME

2 – 3 days

DISTANCE

150 miles

BEST TIME TO GO

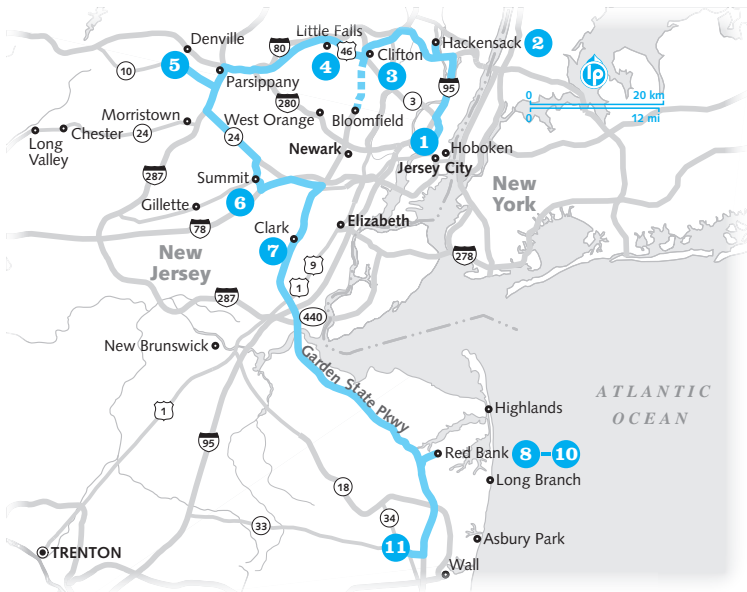
Year-round

START

Jersey City, NJ

END

Wall, NJ



The menu is simplicity itself: burgers, hot dogs, eggs, fries. The equipment? Two small grills, a deep fryer, a toaster oven, and a blender for shakes. The burgers are fresh; no frozen, preformed patties, oh no. The chef grabs a hunk of raw meat with his hand, flattens it with a spatula, tops it with grilled onions and pickle, lays it on a soft bun, and there you go. For \$1.12. Cheese is another 10 cents. A “Big Web” – the equivalent of a quarter pounder – is \$3.36. Atmosphere is on the house.

For purity, for history, for architecture, this chrome wonder is the quintessential truck-stop diner, and they are a vanishing breed. Another prime example, which in fact argues that *it* was first, is the Hackensack **2** **White Manna** (two ns, no explanation, also c 1939); it’s got a glass-brick front, more red trim, and smaller potato buns. Are the burgers better? Some make that case, but it’s the same experience – order three at a time, and skip lettuce and tomato. They just get in the way.

To get from White Mana to White Manna, continue north on Hwy 1-9 to Rte 46 west, and exit onto River St north (Rte 503/Bergen Turnpike). Then, from White Manna, take Rte 503 back south to I-80 west, take the Garden State Parkway south to exit 153, and take Rte 3 to the **3** **Tick Tock Diner**. “The Tick” is a legend, and it epitomizes another aspect of diner-osity: the restaurant-diner with the mile-long menu. How is it that places offering only a handful of things and others offering everything are both equally and essentially diners? Discuss.

The original Tick was a 1949 Silk City, but the current building was made by Kullman in 1994: the original clock and the neon motto “Eat Heavy” were kept. Though it applies to much, the Tick’s motto certainly covers the ever-popular “Disco Fries,” which arrive smothered in cheese and gravy. The Tick has the retro chrome and neon, the wry waitstaff, the overwhelming dessert case, the 24-hour breakfasts. It’s a home-away-from-home for high schoolers and families and a cure-all for postclub, predawn hangovers. All it lacks are tabletop jukeboxes.

In the same vein is the **4 Park West Diner**; to get here, go west on Rte 3, which becomes Rte 46. The Park West has an even classier retro vibe, with a fun planet-and-stars Googie carpet, two-tone booths, a dramatic two-story glass-brick entry, and the scalloped ceiling and inset lights of a Pullman railcar. It’s a spruced-up vision of the doo-wop, streamline moderne, art deco ’40s and ’50s. But the Park West really shines with its food, highlighting, of all things, salads: they arrive like crafted events, towering with mango, strawberries, perfectly grilled tuna, blackened shrimp, and feta. Each meal starts with fresh bread and a tasty chickpea salad, and the waitstaff are *nice*.


DETOUR

It’s not a diner, but it’s destination dining, Jersey-style: **Holsten’s** (www.holstens.com) was the setting for the final scene in the final episode of *The Sopranos*, but it’s long been a gourmand’s delight. Cheap, fresh hamburgers, homemade ice cream (the shakes are out of this world), and a glass-front confectionery. You’ll find Holsten’s at 1063 Broad St in Bloomfield; from Rte 3, take exit 153/Broad St.

Yet, with its cutesy mural of Elvis and a pink Cadillac, the Park West tips dangerously close to pandering nostalgia. Which begs the question: at what point does refurbishing and re-creating an authentic building and time period fall into irredeemable kitsch, becoming yet another *American Graffiti*-style Mel’s Diner rip-off? The Park West is not, making the case that authenticity is less about the right look than fresh food, which creates regulars like the actor who played Furio in *The Sopranos*, a native of Paterson, who would no doubt club our kneecaps if we broke bad about the Park West. Which we wouldn’t, ever. Sir.

Furthering this particular looks-don’t-matter argument is the **5 Alexis Diner** in Denville (take Rte 46 west to I-80 and then west to I-287 south to Rte 10 west). There are lots of ugly New Jersey diners; many are flagstone-sided monstrosities with mediocre food served by indifferent staff. As your stomach will tell you, that Jersey boasts 600 diners is not always a good thing.

From the outside, the nondescript Alexis could be mistaken for one of these, though, inside, its pink neon and plum-and-gray decor have a tacky appeal. The Alexis isn’t even 24 hours. But it doesn’t matter. What matters – the reason the Alexis is voted Morris County’s best diner year after year – is the food. Like



at the Park West, dishes are fresh and display evidence of thought. The Italian BLT just might be the best sandwich ever made: fresh mozzarella, smoky bacon, green-leaf lettuce and deep-fried tomato on a seasoned focaccia.

GARDENS OF THE GARDEN STATE

New Jersey is called the Garden State, not the Diner State, for a reason: it's packed with farms. Imagine that? And Jersey corn, tomatoes, peaches, apples, and blueberries inspire their own pilgrimages. Here are four farms convenient to north Jersey. All are open daily year-round, but pick-your-own fun only happens in fall. Ya' know, harvest season.

- Alstede Farm, Chester (www.alstedefarms.com)
- Hillview Farms, Gillette (www.hillviewfarm.snj.com)
- Ort Farms, Long Valley (www.ortsfarm.com)
- Wightman's Farm, Morristown (www.wightmansfarms.com)

Jersey has had at least nine manufacturers: such as Silk City, Jerry O'Mahoney, DeRaffele, Kullman and Paramount. Only the last two remain in business.

But are any of them places you'd actually want to eat in?

From the Alexis, take Rte 10 east to I-287 south to Rte 24 east; at exit 8, follow Summit Ave to downtown Summit and the **6 Summit Diner**, a 1938 chrome-sided O'Mahoney facing the train station. It's a little worn, inside and out; waitresses display a level of impatience some might call surly. The menu is long, but limited to the grill and the fryer; no shakes. When a despairing customer asked, "How about spinach? You got any green vegetables?" the waitress casually shrugged him off, "Nah, we got green peppers. That's it." The cook uses so much butter, cheese and bacon, the doorway should be posted with instructions: sit, eat, wait for irregular heart rhythm.

"so much butter, the doorway should be posted with instructions: sit, eat, wait for irregular heart rhythm."

And yet, this is the real deal: the Summit is often packed with contractors, pensioners and high school kids. It's an inexpensive working-class place in a town (and a state) that is less working class by the day. It's not *too* worn, and jokes aside, the food is good. So, here we are: diners are not just about the menu and pert greens. They are clientele, history, some attitude.

The Alexis is the ideal place to go Greek: its gyros and Greek salads are delicious and its "taverna specials" are hearty meals that exemplify the best of this particular strain of restaurant-style Jersey diner cuisine. Like '50s nostalgia, what you get at many diners is bland fakery, but not here.

Now we come to another major category of diner: the gleaming, silver roadside railcar, the diner of fantasy – the one photorealist painter John Baeder has made a living capturing and the kind architectural buffs drool over. Like the White Mana, these are prefabricated buildings (though the first were real train cars), and New

From Summit, take I-78 east to the Garden State Parkway south; take exit 135 to Central Ave and stop at the **7 Clark White Diamond**. This is another, teeny-tiny chrome haven for top-quality burgers, though here the burgers are bigger and the bun has substance (and poppy seeds).

Keep going south on the Parkway to exit 109 and Red Bank. Here, the **8 Broadway Diner** is another classic railcar that glows in bubblegum pink, from the tables to the booths to the ceiling. It's got the rotating dessert case, fluffy pancakes, and, at last, tabletop jukeboxes. Yet they don't work. They almost never do. Clearly, the once-essential connection between diners and popular music is gone, so let's mourn and move on: diners are no longer about music.

9 Red Bank is a great town to explore (and window-shop those burgers off), but if you just can't continue, roll yourself into the **10 Molly Pitcher Inn** for a well-earned rest.

Finally, there's one more stop, perhaps the most famous of all: the **11 Roadside Diner**. The Roadside is a movie star: it was in 1983's *Baby It's You*, it made a Bon Jovi album cover (*Cross Road*), and in 2008, the Boss himself featured it in the music video "Girls in Their Summer Clothes." Tour buses stop at the Roadside, a burden it somehow overcomes.

This 1950 Silk City railcar has a cool sliding-door entry, 18 counter stools and six booths. It's clean and neat, with original red-and-white tile and woodwork, and exudes a low-key nostalgia (tin advertising signs, a photo of Babe Ruth, golden oldies music). Like Park West, it evokes its era without overdoing it. Best of all, the standard, everything-under-the-sun menu is made to order. Burgers are great, and of the chef's egg and tuna salads, a customer nodded reassuringly: "He mixes everything fresh. It doesn't sit."

The Roadside pulls it all together at a nowhere location near the intersection of Rtes 33 and 34. It doesn't epitomize *all* a diner can be – nothing could. In the end, the best diner is always the one where we feel comfortable, the one we call home, the one where we're known and where we'll forgive the occasional bad meal because, like our home, that diner is us.

Jeff Campbell

TRIP INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

From New York City, take the Holland Tunnel to Hwy 1-9 north/Tonnele Ave to White Mana.

EAT

Alexis Diner

The friendly Alexis gives you fresh baked cookies; if the Italian BLT isn't on the menu, ask for it. ☎ 973-361-8000; <http://alexisdiner.nj.com>; 3130 Rte 10 W, Denville; mains \$5-20; 🕒 7am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat; 🍷

Broadway Diner

Gotta love the undersea mural and the bad pop music: get down, boogie oogie oogie! ☎ 732-224-1234; 45 Monmouth St, Red Bank; mains \$6-18; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

Clark White Diamond

The burger is bigger than the paper plate; the staff are very friendly and they have an Elvis gold record! Cash only. ☎ 732-574-8053; 1207 Raritan Rd at Central Ave, Clark; mains \$2-5; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

Park West Diner

Park West gets props for challah bread French toast and buffalo burgers. ☎ 973-256-2767; www.parkwestdiner.com; 1400 US Hwy 46, Little Falls; mains \$7-23; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

Roadside Diner

Big, fresh burgers, and don't overlook the dinner specials here. Cash only. ☎ 732-919-1199; 5016 State Rte 33, Wall; mains \$4-13; 🕒 5:30am-8pm Tue-Sat, 5:30am-4pm Sun & Mon; 🍷

Summit Diner

Great for breakfast and cheesesteaks, but the grilled cheese is a killer. Cash only.

☎ 908-277-3256; 1 Union Pl at Summit Ave, Summit; mains \$4-11; 🕒 5:30am-8:30pm Mon-Sat, 6:30am-1pm Sun; 🍷

Tick Tock Diner

If it's not on the menu, it hasn't been invented yet. Ask for sweet-potato fries instead of regular. ☎ 973-777-0511; www.tictockdiner.com; 281 Allwood Rd, Clifton; mains \$7-19; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

White Mana

Celebrity clients here include Mike Tyson and Sty Stallone. Cash only. ☎ 201-963-1441; 470 Tonnele Ave, Jersey City; mains \$1-4; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

White Manna

You could get milk in a Styrofoam cup and a hot dog, but why? Just decide: cheese or no cheese. Cash only. ☎ 201-342-0914; 358 River St, Hackensack; mains \$1-3; 🕒 24hr; 🍷

SLEEP

Molly Pitcher Inn

It's fancy for this trip, but you'll appreciate going upmarket to sleep. Plus, you know where to go for breakfast. ☎ 800-221-1372; www.mollypitcher-oysterpoint.com/mollypitcher; 88 Riverside Ave, Red Bank; r \$160-200; 🍷

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