

# Jersey Diners Serve Up Culture, Family-Style

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Staff Writers

A burger is more of an experience than a meal when it's served with a helping of history in a tin-roofed diner resembling a railroad car.

With a welcoming atmosphere, a staff that treats customers like family and top-quality cooking, the typical Jersey diner is a place for conversation and camaraderie, set to the soundtrack of clanking silverware.

With more than 500 of the establishments, many of which have been around for just under a century, New Jersey has been called the Diner Capital of the World. Because New Jersey's diners are convenient, affordable and plentiful — not to mention reputable — people of all ages and backgrounds frequent them. This has created what has become known as the “Jersey diner culture.”

## The history of diners

The origin of New Jersey diners can be traced back to the success of lunch wagons in New England in the late 19th century.

It all began, according to Richard J.S. Gutman's “American Diner Then and Now,” with Walter Scott, a pressman who set up a horse-drawn lunch cart in front of the Providence Journal newspaper office in Rhode Island.

Designs for the original diners, some of which are still around today, were based off of the shape of railroad dining cars.

The American diner became a symbol of optimism and youth, a representation that still stands.

Today, many Jersey diners — such as the Bendix, Suburban, Sunrise, Stateline, White Manna and Pompton Queen, are being preserved and restored as they maintain their traditions and commitment to service. Each has its own story to tell.

## Bendix becomes landmark

At the Bendix Diner in Hasbrouck Heights, it's all about the location and keeping memories alive. The exterior is a small rectangular steel structure with a hot pink neon sign advertising its name and boasting good coffee. The interior is cozy, furnished with old-fashioned countertops, stools and booths.

Eva Diakakis, who has been a waitress at the Bendix since her late husband Tony bought it 28 years ago, said that people use the diner as a reference point to find other places in the area, because it's been around for 63 years.

The diner has been featured in numerous TV shows, commercials and movies, including “Boys on the Side” and “Jersey Girl,” as well as a recent photo shoot for the “Real Housewives of New Jersey.”

The Bendix, manufactured by Master Diners in 1947, is surrounded by highways — Route 17 North and South and Route 46 — on all sides and is a frequent stop for those who live and work in the area, as well as for truck drivers and tourists. The diner hasn't changed much since it opened, but Diakakis said it's becoming harder to find the right kind of replicas to replace what needs fixing.

“Oh, our customers, they're the best,” Diakakis said, “they're good customers ... Some very intelligent, very educated, or, you know, truck drivers we have, young kids. We have all kinds.”

Eric Johannessen, Bergen County resident



photo by Laura Hahn

Late-night trips to Stateline Diner are common for most students at Ramapo College.

and president of Consolidated Instrument Co. in Teterboro, stops at the Bendix weekly for Diakakis's homemade cheesecake and pumpkin pie.

Johannessen has been a regular customer at the diner since 1968, and he remembers when the Bendix Plant next door was at its peak, with 14,000 employees. “At lunchtime, it took hours to get in,” he said. “You had to stand outside the door to get on line.”

Regular customers Peter Curtis and Judy Feltus have been dining at the Bendix for nearly 50 years. They come for the food, the people and the owners, as well as the “great portions.” “They'll make anything you want,” said Curtis, who said Eva is like his stepmom.

Old pictures cover the menu behind the counter — most customers know what they want long before they arrive. Diakakis fought back tears while admiring a picture of her husband. “I love this place to death,” she said as her 14-hour shift drew to a close. “I don't wanna look back.”

## The Suburban Diner: Where friends meet

If you're at the Suburban Diner, you're either meeting friends or making them — at least that's what any Paramus resident will tell you.

Walk in the door on almost any given night, and you'll be greeted with a handshake or pat on the back from a smiling Teddy Repantis, nighttime manager and chef by trade. He's been working at Suburban for 18 years.

The Suburban Diner Restaurant, located on Route 17 North, opened in 1956 when there was no highway, only a dirt road.

Since then it's changed about six times, existing as it is now for the past 17 years.

Jennifer Geerlof, customer service manager, thinks two things keep people coming back — the staff, who she said “really cares about everybody,” and the burgers.

For Repantis, there's nothing like getting

along with the young crowd and talking town politics and sports with the customers. He said the success of diners is due to “the

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friendly atmosphere, plenty of food, a good clean environment and friendly faces.”

Ramapo College senior Kristen Andreazza has been a part of that young crowd for four years, going to Suburban sometimes as often as three times a week for her usual order — a mushroom omelet with wheat toast (no butter, just jelly).

“As soon as I walk into Suburban, I feel comfortable,” Andreazza said. “Teddy always greets me with a hug and kiss. I see familiar faces, and know that I can stay there as long as I'd like, eating and catching up with friends or family. Some diners in New Jersey have tried to renovate and become more upscale, but to me that's totally taking away the classic diner feel.”

## Stateline Diner: It's all about the people

Most Ramapo College students have been to, or have at least heard of, Stateline Diner on Route 17 North. It's about five miles from the college, and provides a variety of meals at a reasonable cost. Many appetizers and popular menu items are priced between \$4.75 and \$7.50.

General Manager Kathy Riordan, Wayne, said the college students, especially those from Ramapo, are very respectful and are really good tipppers.

Sophomore Ashley Beaton, 19, eats at Stateline about three or four times a month.

“I go to Stateline because it feels like home,” she said. “Everyone's friendly and helpful, no matter the time of the day; the food is great, no one ever tries to rush you

out. It's the epitome of what a Jersey diner is supposed to be, and it's basically a Ramapo institution.”

Despite the popular and busy location, Riordan said there was a study done recently that shows 75 percent of their business comes from repeat customers. “The older customers act like this is their diner,” she said. “It's a personal attachment.”

The one problem that the managers sometimes come across is staffing. They need to make sure there are enough waitresses on duty, so they typically have 10-11 during the week, and 12 on the weekend.

A friend of Riordan's founded the property in 1976. The Nissirios brothers liked the location and bought the property.

The Ford Motor Plant used to generate a crowd when it was still in business, with little else in the up-and-coming area at the time. Additionally, the highway and big transition to the thruway made a great location.

Just as the customers stick around for many years, so do the staff. Some of Stateline's waitresses have been there for 20 years, and the hostess has been there for seven.

Additionally, Riordan has worked at the diner for more than 30 years, enjoying her interaction with the people above all else. “It's an unending story with no completion,” she said. “I enjoy it.”

## Diners live on

Today, Jersey diners continue to attract longtime residents and young people looking for places to congregate and converse, making the Jersey diner culture more prevalent than ever.

For Andreazza, late-night diner trips are as much a part of Jersey life as days spent at the Jersey shore or the State Fair.

“I really have no idea how it started,” she said, “but all I know is that I would never want to live in a place that didn't have good diners!”

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