

# Road trip

## Some Garden State dining suggestions from Princeton to Morristown

Okay, it's time for a culinary road trip. It will be the best of both worlds. Traveling over Garden State roadways - some obscure - and arriving at some fantastic, savory eateries. You'll have gorgeous views in some; great atmosphere and service in all, and your palette will be satisfied.

From my Bloomfield home, all of the following are a worthwhile trip.

If George Washington kept his headquarters here, Morristown is worth the drive - for more reasons than just historical significance. Brick Oven of Morristown ([www.brickovennj.com](http://www.brickovennj.com)), right next door to the Community Theatre at Mayo Center for the Performing Arts on South Street has, yes, great pizza, but try the entrees. A great comfortable atmosphere pervades, as well as in-season, outdoor dining featuring entertainment. Start your meal with an insalat di caesar, and follow up with your favorite dish like ravioli toscano or bracciale di maiale. Also, you're welcome to bring your own wine.

In nearby Somerset County are two stellar restaurants. The Bernards Inn ([www.bernardsinn.com](http://www.bernardsinn.com)) on Route 202 South is grand, luxurious, and home to the sparkling cuisine of Executive Chef Corey Heyer, award-winning wine collection from wine

director Tom Baldwin, and top notch, excellent service. The host encourages you to "Enjoy your evening" when he seats you, and you do. This is gracious dining at its finest. Griggstown Farm chicken is a standard favorite, but don't ignore the other specialties. A bowl of the lobster bisque is highly recommended.

The Bamboo Grille ([www.bamboo-grille.com](http://www.bamboo-grille.com)), owned by the Growth Restaurant group, is located at the Basking Ridge Country Club, and features fantastic indoor and outdoor patio dining, all with a lovely view of the golf course. Open Tuesday through Sunday, a tropical-flair menu reigns. Open with dancing jumbo shrimp and follow up with a special salad or something from the seafood bar or grille. Weekly dinners special are available.

Bistro 1051 Italian Seafood Grille and Sushi Bar ([www.bistro1051.com](http://www.bistro1051.com)) is popular for its catering and offsite family and corporate function barbecues. Family run and owned by Michael Savaris, this lovely BYO spot a minute off of the Garden State Parkway in Clark is helmed in the kitchen by chefs Francesco and Mario, two Italy-trained culinarians five years removed from their homeland. Sea scallops with vegetable risotto and stuffed shrimp and linguini are excellent, but so is the healthy

menu, featuring whole wheat fettuccini, lo mein and more.

Two college towns are next on our tour. Stage Left ([www.stageleft.com](http://www.stageleft.com)) in New Brunswick is one of a multitude of eateries in a restaurant-heavy town, but owners Lou Rivetti, Mark Pascal, and Francis Schott see that it stands head and shoulders above the rest in the Rutgers area. While there isn't a week spot on the menu, Stage Left is well known for The Best Cheeseburger in the World. Wood-grilled angus beef, two year aged Vermont cheddar cheese, tomato and red onion on rye, available in the bar area, is great as you watch the action outside on Livingston Avenue and George Street.

Sit at one of the tables at Yankee Doodle Tap Room, located inside Princeton's historic Nassau Inn (<http://www.nassauinn.com/dining/menus.html>) in Palmer Square, and you just might see Albert Einstein's initials, and those of legions of others, carved into one of the dining room tables. Also, enjoy the black and white photo gallery of famous Princeton University graduates from the past century, and the 1937 original 13 foot wide Norman Rockwell mural of Yankee Doodle, which gave the restaurant its name. The bar and lounge area is cozy and spacious, and breakfast, lunch and dinner is served daily. 12 world beers are on tap, and an extensive wine list is offered as well and terrific seasonal items. The Nassau Inn wings, beef & ale, and buffalo burger are just a few Executive Chef Paul Taylor specialties.

The Happy Apple Inn ([www.happyappleinn.com](http://www.happyappleinn.com)) is off of Route 43 in the tiny village of Imlaystown. Built as a stage-coach stop between Trenton and the Jersey shore in the mid-1800s, the current structure was built in 1902 following a fire, and sits steps from Imlaystown Lake. Owned since 1972 by the Westendorf family, this building and atmosphere make any time a good time for dining. Wednesdays feature the establishment's very own happy apple prime rib, and Thursday's choice surf & turf. After dinner, stroll up the road to the small dam and enjoy the

view.

What hasn't been said about Nicholas Harry and Restaurant Nicholas ([www.restaurantnicholas.com](http://www.restaurantnicholas.com))? What the Bernards Inn is to Somerset County, Restaurant Nicholas is to Morristown. Situated on Route 35 in Middletown, a variety of course and tasting menus are available, as are the very popular Black Truffle Tasting menus (see the website for details). Owned since 2000 by Nicholas and his wife Melissa, Restaurant Nicholas is a true "experience."

Hooked Up Burger anyone? Off The Hook ([www.offthehookrestaurant.com](http://www.offthehookrestaurant.com)) on Route 36 in the Highlands is just steps from the Sandy Hook Bridge and, if you dine on their deck and don't have a Hooked Up Burger and a beer while viewing the Navesink River, you're missing out. Tuna bites and buffalo shrimp are excellent appetizers, and other great menu items abound, but the before-mentioned burger is enough to make you forego the diet for just one night. And, heck, after you're done, you can walk it off on a nature trail or the sand at Sandy Hook.

Matisse Catering on the beach in Belmar ([www.matisse-catering.com](http://www.matisse-catering.com)) is exactly that, on the beach. Reach down, touch the sand, walk to the waves but, before or after you do, BYOB and enjoy Chef Tony Wall's selection of three Appetizers, normally a seafood trio tinned that is both a sight to see and satisfaction to the palate. Another highlight, in addition to an oceanfront window seat, is the (among others) rosemary crusted rack of lamb with sour cream and dill mashed, burgundy jus.

Along country and ocean front roads, in college towns and bog and small cities alike, there are favorite restaurants, just for you. Hop in your car and find them.

(Steve Sears is a frequent contributor to our publications.)

