

TRAVEL

Feeding our souls on the Anthony Bourdain Food Trail in N.J.

By Diane Blair and Pamela Wright Globe Correspondent, Updated October 19, 2023, 6:09 a.m.



Anthony Bourdain grew up in Leonia, N.J., and spent summers on the Jersey Shore. HANDOUT

"I come here to feed my soul," Anthony Bourdain once said of New Jersey. The late author, celebrity chef, and TV personality grew up in Leonia, N.J., and spent summers on the Jersey Shore. In season 5 of the TV series "Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown," Bourdain returned for a nostalgic trip in his home state, dining at some of his favorite restaurants. We've watched the entire series several times and have created a long list of restaurants to try based on his travels.

The New Jersey folks made it easy for us by creating the official [Anthony Bourdain Food Trail](https://bit.ly/3PUY1Mg), spotlighting 10 of his favorite New Jersey restaurants, as featured on the show. We recently hit the trail, visiting seven of the 10 in a whirlwind, stomach stretching, two-night, three-day trip.

Our plan was to fly into Philadelphia, rent a car, and visit the following places: Frank's Deli, Dock's Oyster House, James Original Saltwater Taffy, Tony's Baltimore Grill, Knife & Fork, Lucille's Country Cooking, and Kubel's. Already we were having regrets as we'd be missing Hiram's Road Stand in Fort Lee, serving deep-fried hot dogs since 1932. Bourdain called it his "happy place." And who doesn't like a great dog? Instead, we beelined it to [Frank's Deli](#) in Asbury Park.



Frank's Deli, an old-school breakfast and lunch joint in Asbury Park, hasn't changed much since it opened in 1960. Frank's has named the #4 sandwich after Anthony Bourdain. PAMELA WRIGHT

We suspect that this old-school breakfast and lunch joint hasn't changed much since it opened in 1960. We found Joe, the owner, behind the counter, working the grill. "The crew was here all day filming," Joe reminisced. "But we were only on TV for about two minutes!" Still, he admits that the show — and now the official food trail — has brought in business.

Frank's has named the #4 sandwich after Bourdain. That's what he ordered, and that's also what we tried. It's a classic Jersey sandwich, piled high with ham, salami, pepperoni, provolone, tomatoes, onions, shredded lettuce, and roasted peppers, drizzled with oil and vinegar, and jammed between slices of soft, fresh-baked bread. "Bourdain added mayo and hot peppers," said Red, who's been a waitress at Frank's for 18 years.

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A walk around town was in order. Asbury Park, a small seaside community known for its iconic music venues (think: The Stone Pony, The Wonder Bar, and Convention Hall), has gone through a massive renaissance, recovering from its down-and-out, gritty past. “It took decades to come back from the racial unrest and riots in the 1970s,” said Sylvia Sylvia (that’s really her name), executive director of the Asbury Park Chamber of Commerce. “It took a perfect storm: the businesses that wouldn’t give up, a great developer who invested wisely, and a fantastic LGBTQ community that moved in, bought houses, and fixed up neighborhoods.” The city was bustling when we were there; the streets and waterfront boardwalk, lined with restaurants and shops, were clogged with people.

We made it to Atlantic City by late afternoon and checked into the impressive and imposing [Ocean Casino Resort](#), a towering glass, 1,399-room hotel set on 20 acres along the waterfront. It’s ultra-contemporary, and home to a casino, nightclubs, performance venues, spa, pools, and several restaurants. Rooms are sleek and bright, with large floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of the ocean or the Atlantic City skyline.



There are 10 stops on the official Anthony Bourdain Food Trail in New Jersey. Tony's Baltimore Grill proudly displays its inclusion. PAMELA WRIGHT



You'll find a wide variety of taffy flavors at James Original Saltwater Taffy in Atlantic City. PAMELA WRIGHT

We walked the boardwalk and popped into [James Original Saltwater Taffy](#). Neither of us is a fan of sticky, teeth-clinging taffy, but James is an institution. Bourdain wasn't a big fan either. “I hate sweets, but I’m a sucker for nostalgia,” he said on the episode.

That evening we dined at [Dock's Oyster House](#), a classic, longstanding dining establishment with lots of wood and old photos and a cast of hurried waiters and waitresses dressed in black pants, white shirts, and neckties. The place was full, with old folks and young couples and every age in between.

They must be doing something right. As Bourdain said, Dock's, established in 1897, has "survived Prohibition, the Great Depression, two world wars, numerous declines and rebirths..." Bourdain ate crab cakes, lobster stuffed with crab Imperial, and pommes souffle. We tried the crab cakes, which were filled with lots of crabmeat and topped with a nicely seasoned roasted pepper sauce. We couldn't bring ourselves to order the lobster; we're from New England and one of us had just hosted a lobster bake for family and friends back home. But, oh, the pommes souffle we will crave forever, a pile of double-fried shaved potatoes that defies description. If you make it to Dock's, get the pommes souffle.



Tony's Baltimore Grill is an old-school joint serving traditional, unfussy Italian comfort food. PAMELA WRIGHT

We ate leftover, cold pommes souffle for breakfast the next morning and walked off a few calories before lunch at [Tony's Baltimore Grill](#). Talk about old-school; this joint has it in spades. Previous owners tried to clean it up, taking out the old sconces and tile floor, updating the menu. "That's when it really started to go downhill," says manager Joey Palumbo. The new owners put back the flooring, the jukeboxes, the old coat racks, and replicas of the original sconces — and they brought back the original recipes. We ate what Bourdain ate, now called the TBG Experience. "It's a taste of what's kept TBG going since 1927," Palumbo said. It's the house salad with cheese, salami, tomatoes, carrots, and onions, spaghetti and meatballs, fried shrimp, and a 12-inch pizza. It's pure comfort food; it's Sunday dinner at Grandma's (if Grandma happens to be Italian.)



Anthony Bourdain ordered spaghetti and meatballs at Tony's Baltimore Grill. PAMELA WRIGHT

Could we possibly have an appetite for dinner that evening? You betcha. We'd been looking forward to dining at the renowned [Fork & Knife Inn](#), known for its historical ambience and its traditional dishes. The 1912 landmark was once an exclusive men's club, with a special — ahem — "ladies lounge" upstairs. It was a speakeasy during Prohibition (Prohibition warning buzzers are still in place), and a longtime magnet for tycoons, gangsters, and celebrities.



The dish Bourdain was most interested in at the Fork & Knife restaurant in Atlantic City was the lobster Thermidor, a lobster stuffed with lobster, topped with gooey cheese and wine sauce. PAMELA WRIGHT

"The dish Bourdain was most interested in was the lobster Thermidor," said Tim Buckley, our waiter, who has been at the Fork & Knife for 17 years. "It's a 100-year-old recipe."

We went for it, a very retro, over-the-top lobster stuffed with lobster, topped with gooey cheese and wine sauce. We went to bed truly stuffed, thinking we would not eat another meal in days. But we already had plans for breakfast the next day.



"Our Mom was a huge Anthony Bourdain fan," said Karen Flynn, co-owner of [Lucille's Country Cooking](#), an out-of-the-way, diner-style restaurant in Warren Grove. "She dreamed of traveling but she couldn't. She was always working here. So, she traveled through him."

A signed copy of Bourdain's book sat on a table beneath a framed photo of Mom (Lucille Bates-Wickward) and Bourdain. It's a local hangout near the Pine Barrens, with a handful of tables and a lunch counter, and seating outside, weather permitting. We ordered the Anthony Bourdain breakfast, including two eggs, scrabble, home fries with sauteed onions on the side, and toast, and listened as locals greeted one another and shared their stories. A few customers grabbed slices of homemade pie on their way out.



Anthony Bourdain and his brother went for seafood at Kubel's in Barnegat Light on Long Beach Island. PAMELA WRIGHT

Our last stop was [Kubel's](#) in Barnegat Light on Long Beach Island. "We knew he [Bourdain] was coming, but he showed up early," said Kenny Egan, owner of Kubel's. "When he knocked on the door, one of the waitstaff told him we weren't open yet." Bourdain, his brother Chris, and the film crew made it in. "He ordered a Barnegat Lager right away," Egan said. "They were totally cool, very friendly."

Kubel's has changed hands many times, but remains a Barnegat mainstay, a large, lively tavern, known for its fresh seafood, including just-caught local scallops and steamed clams. We sat at a table with water views, enjoyed a bowl of garlicky steamed clams (some of the best we've had) and clinked our lagers in a toast to Bourdain and his New Jersey home state.

For more information, visit www.visitnj.org/anthony-bourdain.



Garlicky steamed clams are a specialty at Kubel's in Barnegat Light on Long Beach Island. PAMELA WRIGHT