



JERSEY, OH JERSEY

These are a few of a raconteur's
favorite Garden State things.
Humor by Jean Shepherd

No doubt choosing a list of favorite New Jersey things will get me into trouble. Why? Because everyone has their own view of what makes New Jersey unique. Some feel any such list should include the Statue of Liberty—it's in New Jersey territorial waters, after all—and the Turnpike (people laugh at it because it works). These are great things, yes, but they're not necessarily everyone's—least of all my—favorite things.

As someone who has lived, traveled, laughed, and written about New Jersey, I've compiled my list in the spirit of my Uncle Carl. Well, I have to tell you, one man's Favorite Thing is another man's honor. For example, Uncle Carl had this favorite sandwich. It consisted of thick slices of kosher salami covered with thick slices of ripe banana and a bit of mayonnaise sandwiched between two slices of rye bread. He loved it. And he wanted all of us to share his joy. Now I dare you, my this sandwich as a scientific test and you'll get vivid proof of how wide the spectrum of taste can be.

Anyway, what follows are my favorite New Jersey things. Please don't write angry letters disagreeing with me. It will do you no good. It never worked when my Aunt Min made loud "ugh, ugh" noises when her husband—my Uncle Carl—chomped his favorite sandwich. He just went right ahead and chomped away. So here goes.

In all my travels I have never enjoyed such a peculiar emotion as the day I stood peering out to sea, squinting through the eye of the legendary **Margate Elephant**. The experience was almost religious, like the time I saw the Great Buddha.

The Margate Elephant was built in the nineteenth century as a posh New Jersey hotel. It was considered very chic to spend your wedding night or honeymoon cuddled in the belly of the hind end of this colossus. People would come from such places as Philadelphia and the nation's capital to live the good life inside this elegant pachyderm.

I love it. Any time the world gets too earnest and sure for me, which is often during a Mondale speech, I think fondly of the elephant and thank that early New Jersey genius who came up with this mad necessity. Just think, today there are New Jersey oddities walking around us totally unaware that they were conceived in the Margate Elephant. What a great way to start life!

hen there is Hotdog Johnny's. What, you've never heard of Hotdog Johnny's, in spite of considering yourself a gourmet, a lover of fine cuisine, a snob, a New Jersey sophisticate? Hotdog Johnny's is tucked away in tiny Buzville, surrounded by lush, verdant hills in the far western reaches of this state. Hotdog Johnny's is a veritable Vatican of the mustard-and-picolilli set. Johnny strains his dogs in beer, slaps them between fresh, stovetop beans, and offers a dazzling choice of onions, pickle relish, horseradish, catsup, and sauerkraut.

But that's only the beginning. Hotdog Johnny, in a truly inspired stroke, features icy mugs of fresh country buttermilk to wash down your dog. Sprinkle a bit of fresh-ground pepper and a wee spritz of salt on your frigid buttermilk—it doesn't get any better. And then, to top himself, Johnny features some of the best draft root beer around, as well as the increasingly rare but magnificent birch beer.

What I like most about Hotdog Johnny's, though, is the curious atmosphere of the place: a combination of bucolic simplicity and the upper deck at Yankee Stadium. Rolls Royces and Jaguars park side by side with pickup trucks and Harley Davidson bags. The mysterious haze of hotdogs and buttermilk is truly democratic. Rich and poor, elegant and indigent, all squam amily together in the shade, knocking back Hotdog Johnny's best.

No list of favorite New Jersey things, at least in my catalog, is complete without a salute to the benign gods who gifted this state with its glorious **tomato**. I am a true tomato freak, and all of my brothers and sisters in this cult live the year around those blessed days in late summer when our sun-ripened tomato is here for an all-too-brief visit. I have eaten tomatoes in the tomato states of Indiana, Pennsylvania, and California, but the New Jersey heavy beats them all. It bears the same relationship to the supermarket obscenity as Jackie O's yacht bears to a rubber raft. You eat a New Jersey tomato slightly chilled—although field-warm is great, too—with a touch of salt, and let the succulent juices fly where they may.

hich leads me, naturally, to the subject of the matchless New Jersey pizza. It's the best in the world—maybe because there are so many guys in New Jersey named Mario or Vinnie. Here's how to know you've tasted the real thing: Take a slice of pizza in your eating hand, crease it slightly, and shove it toward your trap with your eyes half-closed in anticipation of ecstasy. As you bite into that glorious combination of Italian sausage, mozzarella, olive oil, onions, green peppers, mushrooms, and anchovies, as well as the crisp, thin dough, the juice runs down your arm and drip off your elbow. Vinnie's pizza rarely fails this supreme test. I have been in a small Colorado town where the only neon sign lit after 9 PM read proudly: "REAL NEW JERSEY PIZZA." Inside the steamy cabaret there was a transplanted Mario from Lodl, turning it out to a multitude of pizza fans.

Then there are, of course, the more subtle delights of New Jersey folkways, the unique ritual rituals of what we social savants call **Homo Slobbus Jerseyanus**. Where else in the world but on the New Jersey Shore (pronounced "Shaww") will you find such a numberless horde of squawking natives, nattering in stifling heat or clammy rain, who have mysteriously convinced themselves that they have reached Eden and are enjoy-

ing it immensely. A town of countless plywood shacks (800 per week rental), each surrounded by a minimum of twelve enormous cats, is what passes for the New Jersey Riviera. Hordes of mean-eyed kids consuming trillions of Budweiser stickups and listening to Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." on the radio in bumper-bumper traffic, and you have **Homo Slobbus Jerseyanus** adieu of heaven. Any observer of the human condition must recognize this tribe as special. Too bad the late Margate Mead never got around to an in-depth study. It would have made her Polynesian work seem like kid stuff. I love it.

Another New Jersey mystery, an intriguing favorite of mine, is the ghost-like **tailgater**. He appears out of nowhere on every road in the state. In the day and night, at all speeds and weather conditions, this apparition materializes to cling menacingly to the rear of one's car. Most often the tailgater appears to be zooming along in a pickup truck, psychedelic van, Cadillac, or other GM product, pumping your car like a hoard of Hell. This curious phenomenon takes many forms: occasionally it's a grim lipped, blue-haired octogenarian female driving a gigantic Eldorado, often it's a horn-blowing trucker hauling chemicals or gas on his way, no doubt, to start a fire, sometimes it's a plump adolescent girl, jaws slack, in a ten-year-old Toyota from which emanates the latest Michael Jackson hit. Who are these aliens? What do they want? What important missions are they on? And why are they after us? No one knows. But I offer a word of advice: Don't challenge a tailgater or you may be punished by an even more hideous New Jersey phenomenon—the dreaded auto insurance company.

Speaking of ghostly figures, are you aware that in the far reaches of the legendary Pine Barrens the wreck of a World War II Navy Ming lies slumbering, its aluminum ribs baking in the sun, its rusting Wright Cyclone engines forever silent? These are nights, I'm told, when the **Jersey Devil**, his headlight-like eyes beaming, takes the helm of this ancient warbird blimp to wreak havoc on the state. We hear, though, from Governor Keen, that the devil's been in Cleveland lately. Why Cleveland? Seems the New Jersey Devil is getting to like his hockey team.

Of course, there is another side of New Jersey: the dreaming Princeton spires, the Delaware Water Gap, the lovely deer along Route 57, lurking in the cornfields like creatures from a Walt Disney film, the crushing thunderstorms over the Watchung hills, the squadrons of mallard and Canadian geese on the Delaware; the Revolutionary stone houses that feel the restless rear of the ghosts of Washington's officers; and, yes, the sleeping shades of the ill-fated Hessians near Trenton. All Jersey, pure New Jersey. It's quite a state.

I love it!