

# Are These the 21 Best Diners in America?

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A quality diner is like a minor league utility player: always ready in an emergency, does a few things well, and tends to have long experience spending time in weird, little towns. Our search to find these places took us all over the country, from the oldest diner in Maine to an updated classic in Raleigh and a famous writer's haunt in New Mexico. We ate pie, drank milkshakes, and confusedly stared at birch beer for a while. But we also enjoyed some of the best food and the cheapest prices in the country. Then we ate more pie.

So, check out our 21 favorite diners in the country, and let us know what we missed in the comments, using your polite Internet voice. The free refills are on us:



*Credit: Flickr/Jun Seita*

## **The Blue Benn**

*Bennington, VT*

The Blue Benn — a diner that glows azure from its stools to its trim — was shipped from Jersey to Bennington and assembled on its current spot in 1948 and, since, very little has changed. Besides an entryway that's extremely necessary to cover the throngs of hopeful, waiting diners in the Vermont weather, the diner is that original car — kitchen and all. Normally, I'd say to sit at the diner counter, but, here, fight for a booth with its wall-mounted jukebox (the counters have them, but it's common knowledge that no one likes to *share* their old-school country picks with other eaters): \$.25 gets you two songs, and I feel confident saying that mixed berry pancakes sized larger than your head taste better with Patsy Cline crooning.

**[More: Power-Ranking the Greatest Movie Diners](#)**



*Credit: Flickr/Alan Light*

## **Bluebird Diner**

*Iowa City, IA*

Every year, several Thrillist editors take a road trip to Iowa City. It's a weird tradition that isn't worth explaining, but there is much eating and drinking and feeling old when, at some point, we inevitably stumble into Brothers, Iowa City's main college dive. And in the morning, there is no bigger ally in the fight against nausea than a breakfast at Bluebird. Unlike a lot of diners, they have a manifesto, and it includes the names of the local partners they use to get their food (what's up, Dreesman Buffalo Ranch!), and said food is delicious. Do yourself a favor and get the Huevos Epsteinos, a "cross cultural collision" of homemade chili verde, smoked pork, Parmesan polenta, over-easy eggs, and hash browns. And maybe stay out of Brothers.

**More: [The 33 Best Burgers in the Country](#)**



*Credit: John Carrington*

## **The Breakfast Club**

*Tybee Island, GA*

First things first, The Breakfast Club has been serving omelets on the quirky island outside Savannah since 1976, nine years before Judd Nelson threw his fist in the air while strutting across the football field in THAT MOVIE. Jodee Sadowsky, a CIA graduate, has been at the helm for most of that time with a homemade policy governing everything from the Smackwater Jack omelet's spicy sausage to the toast that's definitely the most boring part of the, uh, "Emotionally Satisfying!" PMS omelet order, a two-egg omelet loaded with spinach, garlic, mushrooms, and Parm, served with grits, bacon, and that house-made bread. The line's notoriously long, but, hey, this is the beach, and there are worse places to spend your morning than waiting in the dunes for a seat at this counter.



*Credit: Adam M. White*

## **Brent's Drugs**

*Jackson, MS*

Brent's may've made its Hollywood debut in *The Help* and undergone a number of renovations since it first opened its doors in 1946, but this Jackson diner maintains its old-school soda-fountain style and well-worn air of a neighborhood institution. Grab a stool and order a French toast sandwich — two slices housing a fried egg and gooey American cheese — or a grilled bacon & pimento cheese sandwich with spicy, gooey cheese oozing out. If the menu's overwhelming, just keep sampling until it's time to drink... Brent's may look like it could host a sock hop, but it's also hiding Jackson's best cocktail spot, speakeasy-style, in the back.



*Credit: Sean Cooley/Thrillist*

## **Diner Grill**

*Chicago, IL*

Built from an old railroad dining car, this 24-hour institution is everything a diner ought to be. No tables. No frills. Just a counter, a big-ass griddle, and guys working it who know how to turn out lifesaving breakfast foods and burgers at a breakneck pace. The signature move here is known as the Slinger, a daunting mountain of hash browns, burger patties, runny eggs, cheese, and grilled onions covered in chili and kicked with toast for mopping up the mess (yes, you get a certificate for finishing). Of course, if that sounds like too much, you could go off-menu for a Dick Burger (topped with a runny egg and hash browns), the late-night brainchild of a regular (Richard) who also happened to be the [Alinea](#) sommelier at the time. When the staff at a 3-Michelin star joint endorses your late-night prowess, you're doing something right.



*Credit: Sue Leiting/1221creative.com*

## **Franks Diner**

*Kenosha, WI*

In 1926, Anthony Franks' \$7,500, Jersey-made dining car arrived by rail in Kenosha, WI, finishing its journey to downtown behind a crew of six probably really unhappy horses. The same family ran the diner all the way until 2001 and, two more owners later, little has changed, besides the addition of another dining room (you'll almost definitely be eating here — few are lucky enough to land a counter stool) and a larger kitchen. Do as everyone else in Kenosha has for the last 89 years and order a Garbage Plate, that's as much a legend as the diner itself: five eggs, hash browns, peppers, onions, and one (or three) meats. It also comes with toast, which you won't be able to eat.



*Credit: Galley Diner*

## **The Galley Diner**

*South Boston, MA*

Southie is in the midst of an inarguable transformation, as the siren song of gentrification now plays loudly and on repeat. Yet Galley remains the same as it did many years ago, when I lived in an ugly apartment building at N and Sixth known as the Ramada. When you are hurting, and you need something quick to eat in shame back at your apartment, their sausage, egg, and cheese on an English muffin is the move. But if you're actually willing to show your face, get the Southie omelet — full of hash and cheese, it's a signature dish, and will assist your inarguable transformation back to being a normal functioning person.





*Credit: Sara Norris/Thrillist*

## **Harry's Coffee Shop**

*La Jolla, CA*

In theory, a New York-style diner in San Diego should not work at all. The San Diego attitude's all, "Whatever, brah" and the New York attitude will punch that guy in the face. But luckily for La Jolla, the NY attitude is nowhere to be found, while 12 omelet varieties and bacon pancakes made the trip West. That explains the tons of regulars who show up day after day. Since 1960, the Rudolph family (including the three brothers who currently man the ship) have been treating the faithful to all-day breakfast, along with creative coffee offerings, like a mocha with Mexican chocolate and espresso.



*Credit: Shanley Cox/eatitkansascity.com*

## **Hayes Hamburgers and Chili**

*Kansas City, MO*

Hayes does things the same way they did about 60 years ago when they opened — fresh hamburger meat is still ground and delivered every day and the homemade chili is made using a recipe from 1906. And the tiny Kansas City institution is still selling plenty of sliders in the present day, including an estimated “35-40% in the morning.” Nothing like a chili cheeseburger before noon. There’s also biscuits and gravy if you like breakfast food in the morning. Hayes’ regulars also add character to the place — people just finishing their shift at the Ford plant nearby and white-collar folk sit elbow-to-elbow at the counter. They don’t have much of a choice, either, since the whole place is only 600sqft.



*Credit: Howley's Diner*

## **Howley's Restaurant**

*West Palm Beach, FL*

Despite the restaurant tag, Howley's is an all-classic '50s diner, from its red leather counter stools to its neon glow that lights up Dixie Highway. You could say a 2004 renovation updated Patrick Howley's eponymous spot, but really it just returned the diner to its original 1950 glory. The menu, though, lines upgraded dishes, like crab cakes and fresh juice smoothies (Remember: you're in Florida.), alongside banana cream pie, berry pie, apple pie, Key lime pie, and all the other pies you've dreamed of eating alongside Special Agent Dale Cooper.



*Credit: Natalie St. John*

## **Loose Kaboose Diner**

*Seaview, WA*

A funky little train-themed trailer on the already-funky tourist destination that is the Long Beach Peninsula — home of [Jake the Alligator Man!](#) — the Loose Kaboose is a place where breakfast is a multi-pound affair, where the waitress calls you “hon” while busting your chops, and where the main soundtrack is the cook/owner clanging spatulas and muttering. It’s a tiny spot with only a few seats, but it’s worth the inevitable wait to get a huge burger or halibut fish & chips. Where else can you score eggs Benedict with crab cakes fresh from the ocean (it’s across the street) while a tiny toy train makes the rounds above your head, and then tack an autographed dollar bill to the ceiling when you finish?



*Credit: Flickr/John Dalton*

## **Palace Diner**

*Biddeford, ME*

Painted on Palace Diner's facade in yellow letters are the words "Ladies Invited," which should help illustrate the fact that, as Maine's oldest diner — founded in 1927 — it was around during a time where that might be the answer to a plausible question. With 15 stools, the space is small, and features an equally diminutive menu: five breakfast items, four sandwiches, and some side dishes. But once you taste the bacon, egg, and cheese deluxe with jalapeños, or the brown butter banana bread, and wash it down with a red birch beer, you won't need anything else. Satisfied sighs are also invited.



*Credit: Flickr/Dave Malkoff*

## **The Pantry Restaurant**

*Santa Fe, NM*

Many months ago, I found myself in Santa Fe for several days working on a freelance project and scaring myself by looking up pictures of jackalopes. Before I went down, I bugged my friends who lived there to give me a short list of spots I had to try, and the Pantry was on every single person's list. Around since 1948, it's 1) damn iconic, 2) a place where you have a decent shot at running into Cormac McCarthy, and 3) serves impeccable New Mexican breakfasts, like the Buenos Dias (pantry fries topped with green chile, cheese, and two eggs), and a dinner carne adovada plate using a red chile marinade that makes me weep with nostalgia just thinking of it. Also, in less exciting news, it turns out jackalopes aren't actually a real thing.



*Credit: Angie Mosier*

### **Poole's Downtown Diner**

*Raleigh, NC*

When selecting places for this list that've been "updated," we had to be very picky, as too many places rely on the nostalgia and historical gravitas and then just add something with kale and call it updated. But James Beard Award-winning chef Ashley Christensen (Beasley's Chicken + Honey, [Fox Liquor Bar](#), etc.) is not one of those people. Her crew meticulously restored and preserved the old Poole's Luncheonette, with its double horseshoe bar and red banquettes, and offers up a seasonal menu on their chalkboard based on what's available right now. Do yourself a favor, though, and order both chalkboard mainstays (the mac & cheese and the Royale burger) before even deciding on anything else.



*Credit: Andy Kryza/Thrillist*

## **Skyline Restaurant**

*Portland, OR*

Straddling the crest of the moss-covered West Hills — which serve as the divider between Portland and the Westside suburbs, as well as fodder for Everclear songs — the Skyline seems to exist in a time warp. From the faded paintings of roller-skating waitresses in the parking lot to the retro stools that weren't retro when they were installed, it's the real deal. The place has a great breakfast, but its claim to fame is the hulking, no-nonsense steak burgers, which pair perfectly with pie shakes. Yes, those are shakes that have slices of pie blended in. In a city known for artisan everything and ultra-hipness, Skyline's squareness sets it apart. And we all know what Huey Lewis said about squareness.





*Credit: Flickr/Thomas Hawk*

## **St. Francis Fountain**

*San Francisco, CA*

Way back in the days when Woodrow Wilson was giving the State of the Union address wearing sweet wire-rimmed glasses, a Greek immigrant named James Christakes opened the fountain as an ice cream parlor and lunch counter. This lasted three generations until Y2K, when the family sold the place and the new owners re-focused by putting in a full service kitchen and updating the dining room. And usually, when the original owners sell, a piece of the place dies with them, but — if anything — St. Francis has prospered in the last 15 years, mainly thanks to a now-formidable menu with winners like the “Nebulous Potato Thing,” (potatoes, cheese, salsa, green onion, other stuff), fresh strawberry sourdough French toast, and a weirdly impressive array of vegan options.



*Credit: Karin McKenna*

## **Steve's Lunch**

*Cleveland, OH*

This legendary, 24-hour diner in the Detroit-Shoreway 'hood is a 60-year institution that has seldom closed its doors since it opened them. With less than a dozen seats in the place (and tabletop jukeboxes for nostalgia), the joint does a fine breakfast, but the specialty is amazing skinless beef franks piled with dry chili (kind of like the Flint coney-style), or its take on Cleveland's own Polish Boy (piled with fries, coleslaw, and hot sauce). The 24-hour status also allows for some incredible people-watching, which ranges from beleaguered barflies to Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees looking for a late-night snack from a legendary hole in the wall.



*Credit: Strawn's Eat Shop*

### **Strawn's Eat Shop**

*Shreveport, LA*

Diner dreams are made of crisp, griddled hash browns and American cheese-covered thin-pattied burgers dripping American cheese, but the crown jewel of these institutions is diner pie. And Strawn's has some of the best pie in the entire South, from a diner, restaurant, bakery... whatever. The ice box pies — there are five standbys: strawberry, coconut, butterscotch, banana, and chocolate, plus the seasonal peach — are indulgent, decadently sweet, and come buried under a few inches of rich, homemade whipped cream. Strawn's also has that burger and those hash browns, but go easy: at least two slices of pie are far more important.



*Credit: Michelle Petrash*

## **Tel-Wink Grill**

*Houston, TX*

When you walk into Tel-Wink, someone will inevitably shout to you “Welcome Home!” which is strange because HOW DID THEY KNOW I WAS BORN IN HOUSTON?!?!? But despite the fact that, UNLIKE ME, Dmitri and Peggy Bokos weren’t born in Houston, they brought their restaurant industry knowledge with them from Chicago, and Tel-Wink is now a legendary fixture on Telephone Road. Dance with the Tex-Mex jalapeño-sausage and egg breakfast sandwich or the chicken-fried steak, and soon you’ll wish Tel-Wink was home, because you’ll need to lie down immediately.



*Credit: Flickr/Alan Levine*

## **Tops Diner**

*East Newark, NJ*

Fresh off an appearance as the most iconic restaurant in New Jersey, Tops differentiates itself from a run-of-the-mill diner by being a place where you'd actually want to order seafood (it's fresh and is available frequently as a special), as well as the ever-popular meatloaf and beef ribs. Any of their oversized 20+ booths will make it tough for onlookers to watch you sloppily devour their enormous portions, and remember to save room for dessert made by one of their two full-time bakers — the brownie sundae with homemade hot fudge is a favorite.



*Credit: Josh Johnson*

## **Wagner's Pharmacy**

*Louisville, KY*

If eavesdropping for the inside scoop on where your Derby bets should go is your kind of breakfast activity (it's everyone's... right??), slide into one of Wagner's well-worn booths. Opened next to Churchill Downs in 1922, the pharmacy/diner is plastered with equine paraphernalia and plays host to the track's jockeys and trainers, as well as the rest of Louisville's locals. The star of the simple menu is the predictably named Derby Sandwich, a hot, delicious mess of glazed ham, gooey Swiss, and mayo. Get it, be content, and know that you can go get a bottle of antacid **RIGHT IN THE PHARMACY**, making this the most convenient diner in which you'll ever eat.