

Foodways in South Jersey

by Angus K. Gillespie

The cuisine of New Jersey reflects the diversity of its ethnic population. Thus it is futile to suggest any one dish as “typical” of New Jersey, for one can find Cuban food in Union City, Portuguese food in Newark, Jewish food in West Orange, and Hungarian food in New Brunswick. In fact, nearly any ethnic cuisine one can think of is prepared and consumed on a daily basis somewhere in New Jersey. Most people who have attempted to characterize New Jersey’s cuisine have focused on this rich ethnic diversity. There is another way, however, to view the topic – through a regional approach.

New Jersey stretches from the mountains in the northwest through the urban corridor in the center to the Pine Barrens in the south. South Jersey is particularly different, lacking the population density of the rest of the state. In the middle of the Eastern Megalopolis the Pine Barrens – ironically named since they comprise a vast wilderness forest of oak and pine, occupying nearly a quarter of the state. A few of the people who live in this area have been there for many generations, some of them tracing their family history to pre-Revolutionary days. These people have evolved a distinct lifestyle; their way of life is based on a small community in a rural setting which has been relatively isolated for many years. As a result, their culture is very tightly knit and homogeneous.

Outsiders, who had difficulty understanding these people, called them, derisively, “Pineys.” But in recent years the people themselves have embraced the term and now accept it with pride. Part of what makes the Piney distinctive is his commitment to self-sufficiency. The true Piney is fiercely proud of his ability to survive without being dependent on a regular employer. He may accept seasonal employment from time to time, but he remains fundamentally his own boss, free to walk off the job at any time. How does he manage to achieve this enviable freedom? Largely through his self-reliance which comes from an ability to live off the land. In practical terms, the South Jersey Piney relies on three resources – hunting, fishing, and gardening. To achieve success in these three realms depends upon an intimate knowledge of his landscape, and while the typical Piney may not have money in the bank, he usually has food on the table – and remarkably good fare at that.

Over the years, the Piney has developed ways of preparing the food which he wrests from his environment. Fortunately for us, these recipes have been recently compiled by Arlene Martin Ridgway, who put them together in a book with the whimsical title, *Chicken Foot Soup and Other Recipes from the Pine Barrens*.¹ Here are three of them.

The absolute mainstay of the Piney diet is venison. To the extent that the Piney can provide for his family by hunting game, he is independent of the supermarket. To the Piney, the deer hunt is not for sport; it is a ritual of survival.

Deer Stew

2 pounds of deer meat, cut in 2-inch cubes

Pepper

1 cup water

1 large onion, chopped, or 4 or 5 small
whole white onions, peeled

3 medium potatoes, cut in quarters

3 carrots, cut in half lengthwise and in half again

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Sprinkle meat with pepper. Add other ingredients and cook covered until tender on low heat. Thicken with flour and water. Serves 6 (recipe courtesy of Mildred Arnold Winton, Barnegat, New Jersey)

Fortunately for the Piney, he is never far away from a large body of water – either the Barnegat Bay or the Atlantic Ocean. Hence he can nearly always supplement his diet of game with clams, oysters and fish. Clamming and fishing are just part of growing up in the Pines, the skills passed along from father to son and the recipes from mother to daughter.

Baked Bluefish

1 3-pound bluefish
Bacon strips
Stuffing:
2 slices dry bread, broken
1 small onion, finely minced
1 tablespoon butter
Salt
Pepper
Onion salt
Pinch of garlic salt

Preheat oven to 350°. Clean and wash out bluefish well. Gore it to make openings for stuffing. Before stuffing fish, place in pan. Stuff fish and place bacon strips on the outside of the fish. Put 1 or 2 cups water in pan and bake for 1 hour. Serves 6 (recipe courtesy of Myrtle Taylor Ridgway, New Gretna, New Jersey)

Even more reliable than hunting and fishing as a source for meals is the family garden. The land in the Pine Barrens is too sandy for large-scale commercial agriculture (except for cranberries and blueberries), but it does lend itself well to the carefully cultivated small garden plot. This is not the casual weekend recreational activity we associate with the suburban gardener, for many of the gardening techniques are traditional rather than modern. For example, there is no reliance on commercial pesticides; instead, pests are removed individually by hand. A typical garden recipe distinctive of the region is the following:

Turnip and "Tater" Stew

2 medium turnips, peeled and cut in 1-inch chunks
3 medium potatoes, peeled and cut in 1-inch chunks
8 ¼-inch thick slices salt pork
1 medium onion, diced
1 medium carrot, cut in ½-inch slices
½ green pepper, cut in 1-inch pieces
1 stalk celery, cut in 1-inch pieces
1 large clove garlic, minced
Salt
Pepper
Sugar
Seafood seasoning
Dash gravy seasoning
3 teaspoons cornstarch

Boil turnips and taters in water together until tender. While they cook, place salt pork in a cast-iron pan over medium heat. When enough grease has melted out and the salt pork is nicely browned, saute the rest of the vegetables together in the salt pork grease for approximately 10 minutes. When the turnips and taters are done, drain and add them to the rest of the mixture. Add just enough water to cover. Season with salt, pepper, sugar, seafood and gravy seasonings. Simmer approximately 25 minutes. When done, thicken with cornstarch dissolved in half a cup of water. Serves 5 (recipe submitted by Carol Britton, Forked River, New Jersey, and Audrey Singer, Rochester, New York)

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Suggested reading

Forman, Richard T. T., ed. *Pine Barrens: Ecosystem and Landscape*. New York: Academic Press, 1979.

Kobbe, Gustav. *The Jersey Coast and Pines*. Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1970, reprint of original 1889 edition.

McPhee, John. *The Pine Barrens*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1971.

Sinton, John, ed. *Natural and Cultural Resources of the New Jersey Pine Barrens*. Pomona, New Jersey: Stockton State College, 1979.

Suggested films

Joe Albert's Fox Hunt . . . and Other Stories from the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, by Julie Gustafson and John Reilly with Karen Mooney. 59 min. ¾" videotape cassette, color sound. Global Village, 454 Broome Street, New York, NY 10012.

Mother Leed's Thirteenth Child, by Bill Reed. 29 min. color sound. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.

Sand in Our Shoes, by Martin Spinelli. 29 min. color sound. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.