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## Rhode Island's 10 best brunches

After a month-long tasting trip across the Ocean State, food editor Gail Ciampa reveals her picks for the 10 best places to treat yourself.

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Nicks on Broadway, in Providence, might be the busiest brunch spot around. (+)

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Journal Food Editor

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People are passionate about brunch. From those who go early for eggs and a hot cup of coffee, to the late crowd dining on more elaborate dishes with a mimosa or Bloody Mary, it seems everyone has their favorite place.

Do they wonder what they might be missing at another restaurant? Is a new favorite right around the corner?

I went on a month-long brunch adventure across Rhode Island and learned a few things.

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All coffee is not created equal.

You can judge a brunch by its French toast.

The early bird gets the table.

Here are my picks for the top 10 brunch spots, from best buffet to all-day breakfast and more.

#### BEST FARM TO TABLE

**Nicks on Broadway**, 500 Broadway, Providence (401) 421-0286, [nicksonebroadway.com](http://nicksonebroadway.com). Brunch menu served Wednesday to Sunday 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Owner/chef Derek Wagner is the face of cooking local in Providence. Don't know why that is important? Well you can taste it in his Baked Polenta. He starts with a coarse grind of Hopi blue heirloom cornmeal from North Smithfield's Dan Geer. He makes polenta and then puts it in terrine molds overnight. He cuts it into squares and bakes it with two eggs from Baffoni's Poultry Farm in Johnston, his homage to grits and eggs. He tops the eggs with nutty pea greens, usually from Westport's Allen Farms and Debbie Barrett.

He makes a pesto sauce from toasted pumpkin seeds that he saves each fall from local pumpkins. He adds Vermont Cheddar and some Parmesan cheese to create a dish that sings with texture and is vegetarian, gluten-free and nut-free, to boot. He had me with the polenta that tasted like corn.

#### BEST FRENCH TOAST/HOMEMADE PRESERVES

**Simone's**, 275 Child St., Warren, (401) 247-1200, [simonesri.com](http://simonesri.com). Brunch served Saturday and Sunday 8 a.m.-1 p.m., breakfast Wednesday-Friday 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

French toast became part of my brunch test, and there was a lot of competition, with some versions lighter than air and others topped with citrus for a great sweetened taste. But none was better than chef Joe Simone's version, which he developed out of necessity. When he ran his Sunnyside by the water in Warren, he had a small griddle and not enough room to make French toast the conventional way. So he came up with the idea to bake it, but not until he soaks torn pieces of Portuguese sweet bread in a custardy mixture of eggs, milk, half and half, nutmeg and cardamom overnight. Then he bakes each order topped with a little butter and fresh berries or fruit of the season. You'll find rhubarb right now.

The dish arrives bubbling hot and perfect with each bite.

Simone's serves an amuse bouche. I had cornbread with dates and two of chef Simone's homemade preserves, which were as exceptional as the fresh seasonal berries must have been.

#### MOST CREATIVE BRUNCH

**Tallulah on Thames**, 464 Thames St., Newport, (401) 849-2433, [tallulahonthames.com](http://tallulahonthames.com). For the summer season, brunch served on the second Sunday of each month: May-October 10 am-2 pm: June 14, July 12, Aug. 9, Sept. 13, Oct. 11.

If you eat with your eyes, you can't miss what co-owner/chef Jake Rojas is doing at Tallulah on Thames. Everything is beautifully made and plated. The bonus here: it all tastes as lovely as it looks.

Brunch started with an amuse bouche, a treat from the kitchen, which was Rojas'

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Nothing could compare to his chicken and waffles. The two pieces of fried chicken were served in a bright, spicy jalapeño jam, and the waffles were dotted with foie gras maple butter that was sweet and savory. Well, maybe the Cured Salmon Toast could rival that dish. The salmon was the texture of butter, served elegantly with crème fraîche, pickled onion, a quail egg, crispy capers and herb salad.

It may be too much food for one seating, but do not miss the light-as-air homemade doughnuts from pastry chef Cassandra Borshoff.

#### BEST TASTE OF PLACE

**The Restaurant, The Weekapaug Inn**, 25 Spray Rock Rd., Westerly, (401) 322-0301, [weekapauginnevents.com](http://weekapauginnevents.com). Sunday brunch 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

With food as stunning as the setting there on Quonochontaug Pond in Westerly, the Weekapaug Inn's Sunday Brunch is as graceful as it gets. Sitting in The Restaurant, where brunch is served, offers a peaceful retreat, reinforced by the scenic view. There is nature to enjoy, including the purple martins fluttering back and forth to their birdhouse and bunny rabbits scampering across the lawn. You can't quite see what the clammer is pulling in, but you can imagine.

The table is set with beautiful white basketweave-patterned china, and a silver coffee pot (filled with Dave's Coffee) remains on the table during the meal. Fresh flowers and jams complete the picture-perfect image. The service, too, is impeccable.

Then comes the food: a rich lobster cake served with local greens and a waffle topped with crème fraîche. Chef Jennifer Bachman delivers elegant food befitting the perfect setting.

#### BEST NEW BRUNCH/BEST OATMEAL

**Eli's Kitchen**, 40 Market St., Warren, (401) 245-1809, [eliskitchenwarren.com](http://eliskitchenwarren.com), serves Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Before opening his quaint Eli's Kitchen last year, Eli Dunn cooked breakfast at Warren's now-gone Three Rivers Cafe and the Beehive, in Bristol. The place is welcoming and offers a farm-to-table menu from a welcoming open kitchen.

His most excellent oatmeal is all about excellent oats and lots of toasting. He buys Maine Grains organic oats through Farm Fresh R.I.'s Market Mobile. Then he toasts them to bring out flavor and mixes the milk (cow or almond) right into the pan. Then he adds toasted coconut and toasted almonds and some delicious dates for even more depth of flavor and texture.

His French Toast is topped with slices of grapefruit which adds a most pleasant citrus note to each bite.

#### BEST LUNCH DISHES

**CAV Restaurant**, 14 Imperial Place, Providence, (401) 751-9164, [cavrestaurant.com](http://cavrestaurant.com), brunch served Saturday beginning at 9:30 a.m. and Sunday beginning at 10 a.m.

If you enjoy things such as easy parking in the city, a gracious host and excellent service, CAV is easy to love for brunch. Its spot high on a hill in Providence's Jewelry District makes parking easy on the weekend.

What I loved here best were the dishes that are more lunch-y than breakfast-y. CAV's rich decor make me want to enjoy substantial entrées such as Pistachio-Encrusted Maryland Blue Crab Cake with poached egg and grilled sweet bread served with a zesty sriracha aioli. The crab cake was all crabmeat and seasoned beautifully. I liked the pairing of the poached egg with the crab.

But I loved the pairing of pasta and salad. An ever-so delicate crepe made of fresh-cut pasta was stuffed with spinach and ricotta mousse and adorned with a delicate shallot cream. It was stellar, but so too was the side salad with the acidic vinaigrette that cleansed my palate after every bite of cheesy pasta.

#### BEST COFFEE/BEST VEGETARIAN

**The Grange**, 166 Broadway, Providence, (401) 831-0600, [providencegrange.com](http://providencegrange.com). Weekend brunch 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.



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There is a wonderful civility to The Grange. The servers are friendly and efficient and there is a feeling of zen peacefulness there on Broadway. Perhaps it's the vegetarian menu or maybe it's simply the experience of chef Jon Dille and owners Rob and Uschi Yaffe. But it's just nice to be here.

Stumptown Coffee Roasters makes the best and most consistent cup of coffee, whether you like it as a creamy, delicious latte or steaming hot and black.

But there is much more to love here, including the excellent Pretzel Bread French Toast served with maple butter and powdered sugar (a rarity that is appreciated). Vegetarians and those who like to try new things will enjoy the kimchi, tofu, tempeh and falafel that appear on the extensive menu. But you can enjoy the occasional vegan cinnamon bun, too, and toast and eggs and omelets.

Go for the food and leave with some peace in your soul.

#### **BEST ALL-DAY BREAKFAST**

**The Corner Cafe**, 110 Broadway, Newport, (401) 846-0606, [cornercafenewport.com](http://cornercafenewport.com), breakfast served daily starting at 7 a.m.

What a sweet little spot along Broadway, my favorite street on which to dine in Newport. It's not very large but there is the option of a counter seat, table or outside on the sidewalk.

They serve the breakfast classics here, eggs any which way, pancakes (including ones with mouse ears for kids), French toast and breakfast sandwiches. Breakfast burritos are on the menu, too. There are ethnic dishes of Irish (bangers) and Portuguese descent. Consider the Portuguese Sweetbread Scrambler, French toast topped with scrambled eggs, chourico, onion, feta and roasted red peppers.

Many will be pleased to see the Healthy Zone options, which include egg-white-only dishes and the appealing Rancheros Light: whole-wheat burrito filled with egg whites, tomato, cucumber, baby spinach, red onion and Swiss topped with salsa with a cup of muesli and yogurt.

There is something for everyone here in this cozy place that packs them in on the weekend. I had to go during the week to get a seat. Reading the menu for dinner pizzas at this BYOB cafe, makes me want to go back at night.

#### **BEST BUFFET/BEST BACON**

**Chapel Grille**, 3000 Chapel View Blvd., Cranston, (401) 944-4900, [chapelgrilleri.com](http://chapelgrilleri.com), Sunday brunch 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Buffet \$24.99 (adults) and \$9.99 (children 12 and younger); mimosa, Bloody Mary and sangria bar \$9.99.

There are a few buffet brunches still around, and I gave Chapel Grille the nod over the others based on the space. I just love sitting in what remains of an old chapel, originally built in 1891. The Cathedral Bar has stained glass windows, a wooden chandelier, inspired by William Blake's watercolor "Ancient of Days," and a long bar that changes colors. There are also tables at which to sit, or you can opt for the dining room, which can accommodate large parties.

The buffet offers prime rib, an omelet station and a pasta station. There's salmon and bagels and fresh fruit, too. I thought the bacon was the best I'd had along my brunch adventure. It was cooked crispy and had nice smoked flavor. The dessert choices, including an excellent chocolate mousse parfait, were many. You could also return to the buffet as many times as you wished. But really, once was enough.

Chapel Grille also offers unlimited Bloody Marys, sangria or mimosas for an additional price. It was the only place I had a brunch cocktail, and I enjoyed the spicy Bloody Mary.

#### **BEST GAGOOTTS**

**The Music Man Cafe**, 1565 Plainfield Pike, Johnston, (401) 270-5336, [on Facebook only](https://www.facebook.com/musicmancafe). Serves breakfast all day, seven days a week, starting at 6 a.m. Monday-Saturday and 7 a.m. Sunday. Closes 2 p.m. Sunday and Monday; late after dinner every other day.

This is where you find something you thought only your grandmother made — gagoots. Actually, the dish is called Gagoots and Eggs Scramble. Gagoots, Italian for zucchini, is a Rhode Island classic dish. By combining thin slices of squash and zucchini with scrambled eggs, caramelized onions and American cheese, you have

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a dish that is filling any time of day.

The Music Man Cafe in Johnston has gagoots as a daily special, served with excellent home fries. What makes good home fries? I think they need to be seasoned and in bite-size pieces that are crunchy from sitting on that grill. I have to say I didn't find them that way in many places. Mostly I found big chunks of potato with little flavor. But at the Music Man, where they make breakfast all day, including waffles, pancakes and gagoots, you can find them made just right.

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