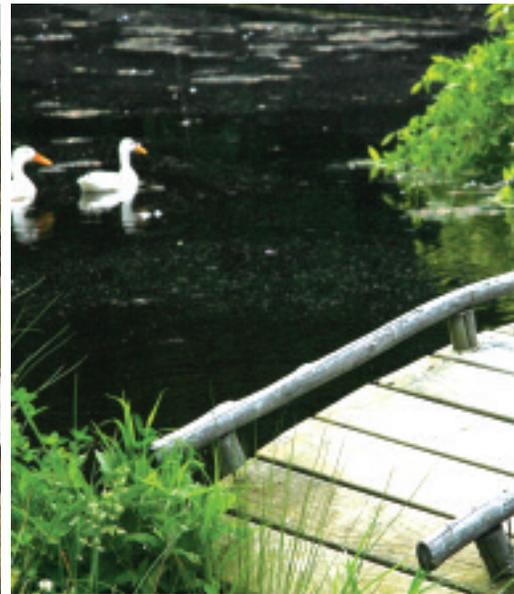


RHODE TRIP

BY JOHNETTE RODRIGUEZ
PHOTOS BY LISA GENDRON

CHARIHO AND THE SURROUNDS

An Edible Itinerary



Rhode Island's rural roads are beautiful any time of year—shady in summer, brilliant leafy in fall, outlined-in-snow in the winter and bristling with green promise in the spring. Visitors to our tiny state and even longtime residents are often surprised to find so much surviving woodland in densely populated Rhode Island.

We planned an excursion to Solitude Springs, the Miner family farm in Hopkinton—with a loop through Chariho (Charlestown, Richmond and Hopkinton) and stops in Exeter and easternmost Westerly—in springtime, when you can still see into the middle of thick woods and catch a glimpse of pea-green shoots coming up, when the rivers are in spate and the waterfalls are singing, when newborn piglets are nuzzling their mothers and baby ducks swim in a row behind their parents. The sights, sounds and smells of spring tend to stir a sense of hope and renewal in the most harried of hearts.

MORNING—THEY'VE GOT COUNTRY AND WESTERN

To stoke up for our expedition to the farm, we stopped for breakfast at the Middle of Nowhere Diner, on Route 3, just south of I-95's Exit 5. We knew we'd hit rural Rhode Island when we stepped through the door: Everyone turned to see if they knew us, the radio station was tuned to country music and the staff couldn't have been friendlier. The diner's four-egg omelets are legendary, so we indulged in one with fresh mushrooms and cheese and one with thick ham cubes and cheese (both delish!). Their chocolate chip pancakes and French toast are a hit with kids of any age.

Breakfast is served all day (except Fridays) at Middle of Nowhere, and "Neil's Favorite Omelet" is stuffed with 13 items, including every

breakfast meat in the kitchen. Owner/cook Neil White also turns out a great burger, a raisin bread pudding that's often gone by noon and dinner entrees that are as generous as his omelets.

Fortified by carbs and caffeine, we headed south on Route 3 with a stop in Hope Valley to pick up picnic supplies for our agrarian sojourn. Spring Street Market and West's Bakery sit conveniently on opposite corners of the intersection where Route 138 takes a turn to the west.

Spring Street Market owner Mike Eisa offers a wide range of grinders, from homemade chicken salad to the very popular Italian (lots of cold cuts and cheeses), as well as pizzas (even one with sliced "soupy" sausage) and calzones. The broccoli/cheese calzone is a winner and big enough for two. Drinks, salads, chips or cookies could also stock the picnic hamper.

Far more decadent, however, are West Bakery's Bismarks for dessert. These long, skinny, light-as-air donuts are spread with raspberry jam and then piped with sweetened whipped cream. They almost melt in your mouth.

MIDDAY REPAST—PICNICKING

Fully provisioned, we continued south on Route 3 into Hopkinton City, with its cluster of 18th and 19th century buildings, which we admired as we turned onto Woodville Road, where two or three more historic houses lined the roadway. After crossing over I-95, the road quickly narrows and passes a bustling sawmill on the left before Tomaquag Road pops up on the right. We took that turn and began to look for the Miner Farm address.

A long dirt driveway ("Miner Farm Parkway") ends in a circle near the Miners' house, and patriarch Bob Miner, a vigorous and youthful



septuagenarian, came out to greet us. He'd been running a small bulldozer near one of the animal pens. This farm, approximately 60 acres worth, has been in Miner's family since 1923 when his grandfather bought the property. His father bought it from him and Miner from his father, in the early 1960s.

For a decade or more, through the mid-'80s, Bob raised exotic waterfowl and shipped them to zoos around the country. But most of his life, he's had to work a job outside the farm to make ends meet. Nowadays, he sticks close to home, selling honey, firewood and garlic; sometimes boarding horses for neighbors; and charging visitors for tours of the farm, be they picnicking families or the occasional curious couple, like us.

The first thing that struck me was the pastoral panorama in front of the house. My eye traveled down a gentle slope and through a gate, along a track that Bob described as a one-time colonial road and before that a Native American trail, into a meadow where four horses grazed quietly. I took in the woods on the far side of the pasture, and then my head swept slowly along the length of a large pond, with a small island in the middle and a fishing "shack" along one side. Solitude Springs is a marvelous balance of land and water, of carefully tended gardens and wild, rock-and-briar areas.

One side of the Miner property borders the Hopkinton Land Trust, a "borrowed blessing," Bob noted. A couple of years ago, to help preserve the farm, he received the first Grasslands Reserve Conservation Easement in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States, and in 2005, he was awarded the "conservation farm and farmer of the year" by the Southern Rhode Island Conservation District.

AFTERNOON—SECRET GARDENS

As we walked around the gardens and ponds, it struck me that what sets Bob Miner apart from many hard-working lifetime farmers is his unjaded curiosity about the natural world around him and his unwavering imagination. His particular gift is to look at things through the eyes of a child, with a sense of delight and playfulness.

Thus, the small herb gardens filled with shells and stones become, in turn, a miniature Alpine scene or a beachfront landscape. A tucked-away glen holds giant wooden and stone mushrooms he and his son have carved. The spring-fed creek that forms a horseshoe around a group of shade gardens—filled with hostas, rhododendron and azaleas—has small man-made waterfalls that have to be cleaned periodically of their "mole and shrew waterfront condominiums," as Bob calls them.

He loves finding heart-shaped rocks and has small collections here and there, in addition to the large paving-stone-sized ones he has used for a "secret garden" that is surrounded by ornamental grasses and a wisteria arbor. He handed me a heart-shaped rock with dark red veins running through it, never ceasing to be amazed by its appropriate coloring.

Bob Miner also gets a kick out of the animals, both wild and domesticated, that populate the farm. He called "pig, pig, pig" to two Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs named Snoopy and Scooter—"though he's too fat to scoot anymore"—and Snoopy came trotting toward us. In a separate pen was a pregnant sow, and he pointed out how she lifted her nose to smell us, since her sight is so feeble. Nearby were two tall emu, a Sicilian donkey, two female swans, three white Indian runner ducks and in another pen, two reddish miniature horses.

Frogs and fish inhabit the ponds, though otters like to keep the finned population in check. Hummingbirds come by the dozens to

feeders near the herb gardens; butterflies sip water in the bottoms of overturned wine bottles. Deer and coyote have been caught on a camera that Bob sometimes sets up at night.

Surrounded by the colors in the flower gardens, the smell of the wisteria, the soothing shush of the tiny waterfalls, the excitement of hearing so many songbirds and the amusement of talking to the animals, we found it hard to pull ourselves away from Solitude Springs. But we had one last goal for this outing: Shelter Harbor Inn.

EVENING—HISTORICAL NOTES

The ride down Tomaquag Road was a twisty, turny one, passing Tomaquag Dairy Farm, part of the Rhody Fresh collective, and ending at Route 216, which we took (twisting and turning again) to Route 1 to reach the inn, itself housed in a former 19th century farmhouse. We arrived a bit early for dinner, so we opted for a pre-prandial game of croquet on the raised lawn next to the inn.

Though the menu changes seasonally, to accommodate local seafood and produce, Chef Ed Gencarelli and his staff always prepare some traditional recipes that customers have loved for decades, such as lobster bisque, finnan haddie, hazelnut-crust chicken and Indian pudding. Sated and satisfied by our day at the farm and our evening at Shelter Harbor, we headed home, with visions of heart-shaped rocks, snaking roads and striped croquet balls dancing in our heads. eR

Jhnette Rodriguez is a food, travel and arts writer, published in *Yankee*, *Saveur*, *New England Travel and Life*, *The Boston Phoenix* and *The Providence Phoenix*.

DATA POINTS

The Middle of Nowhere Diner

222 Nooseneck Hill Rd., Exeter
401-397-8855
middleofnowherediner.com

Solitude Springs, Miner's Farm

Bob Miner
271 Tomaquag Rd., Ashaway
401-377-4059

Spring Street Market

1 Spring St., Hopkinton
401-539-0111

West's Bakery

995 Main St., Hope Valley
401-539-2451

Shelter Harbor Inn

10 Wagner Rd., Westerly
401-322-8883
800-468-8883
shelterharborinn.com

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