

Our guide to the top 5 picnic parks in Queens

A moveable feast
from Astoria
to Middle Village
and beyond

BY JEFFREY KUNTZ

FOREST PARK: BARBEQUE, BANDSHELL, BEAUTIFUL WOODLANDS

A tree-lined path leads to a silent pine grove. But don't worry, the bandshell and barbeque grills aren't far away. Created in the late 1800s, the winding trails and footpaths that traverse Queens' third largest park pay homage to its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect behind Central and Prospect parks.

Bordered by Richmond Hill, Kew Gardens, Forest Hills, Woodhaven, and Glendale, the east side of Forest Park has plenty of shade as well as open lawns, a playground with a sprinkler, a baseball diamond, and trails for hiking, jogging, and cycling. On the park's west side you'll find barbeque grills, the Queens Greenhouse, dense forest, sports fields, and some of the most refreshing air in the borough.

Bring charcoal, fire up a grill, then take a walk through Queens' pristine woodlands and rock out at a free summer concert or theater event at the Seuffert Bandshell. Sports facilities include basketball, golf, tennis, volleyball, and more. Maps and event listings available online.

Address: Myrtle Ave, Union Turnpike, Park Lane South

Get there: Q37 bus from Kew Gardens – Union Turnpike (F or E train)

Free events & Info: www.nycgovparks.org/parks/forestpark

Phone: (718) 235-0815



GANTRY PLAZA STATE PARK: HAMMOCKS, PRIVATE COVES, BREATH-TAKING VIEWS

With 12 acres of green space, piers, boardwalks, and unrivaled views of the Manhattan skyline, Gantry Park may be the best kept secret in Long Island City. Set on the East River south of the Queensboro Bridge, the park's towering steel gantries hoisted freight off barges in the 1920s. Over the last 12 years, the city has transformed the area into one of Queens' most accessible and well-equipped picnic spots.

Pitch your blanket on the lawn across the river from the United Nations and take turns in large public hammocks. Then relax under shade trees and lounge in adirondack chairs in private coves along the boardwalk. Restrooms and waste bins are located on site. Free weekly concerts and theater events are listed online.

John Ruffino, 41, grew up in Hunters Point and won the 2009 Brooklyn Derby with a fish he caught off Gantry pier. "The park is the best. It has the best views and the best people," he said. "I caught a 42-inch snapper there last year."

Address: 4-09 47th Street, Long Island City, NY 11101

Get there: Vernon – Jackson (7)

Free events & Info: nysparks.state.ny.us | Phone: (718) 786-6385



2D Alert!
See Page 57

JUNIPER VALLEY PARK: THE FRIENDLIEST PARK IN QUEENS?

For the residents of Middle Village, this is the spot. Relax in a shade-drenched grove of trees, run through the sprinkler and swing from the monkey bars, or play any of a dozen sports – Juniper Valley Park has something for everyone. Even history buffs. The property was once owned by gambling mobster Arnold Rothstein, whose notorious deeds inspired characters in *The Great Gatsby*, *The Hustler*, and *Guys and Dolls*. Among other crimes, Rothstein owed \$225,000 in back taxes and was accused of fixing the 1919 World Series. After he was killed in 1928, the city seized Rothstein's land and created Juniper Valley Park.

Today, the park's east side provides a perfect sanctuary for quiet picnics. Cross 80th Street to the west and you're in sport-lovers heaven. Middle Village natives Harold Laslo, 57, and Brian "The Balloon Man" Gregory, 53, love their neighborhood park.

"There's everything in this park," Laslo said. "Baseball, softball, handball, horseshoes, shuffle-board. They even play cricket here. Two years ago [celebrity chef] Lidia Bastianich judged the bocce ball tournament."

"I have seen people here doing birthday parties. I did balloons for them," added Gregory. "And there are a million kinds of food stores on Metropolitan Avenue. There are little Italian delis and more two blocks away on Dry Harbor Road."

Address: 80 Street, Juniper Boulevard North & South, and Lutheran Avenue

Get there: Q45 bus from Jackson Heights – Roosevelt Ave (E, F, M, R, 7); Q29 from Woodhaven Blvd (M, R)

Info: www.nycgovparks.org/parks/junipervalleypark

Free events: www.junipercivic.com



FLUSHING MEADOWS CORONA PARK: WHERE IRON MAN GOES FOR A PICNIC

Once a dumpsite for ash in the 1930s, if any Queens park could be called a phoenix, it's Flushing Meadows. Today, the park covers 1,255 acres – equivalent to approximately 950 football fields – where millions of people have flocked to attend two World's Fairs and explore the museums, lakes, and gardens.

With Citi Field to the north, Queens Botanical Gardens to the east, Meadow and Willow lakes to the south, and the Queens Wildlife Center and the New York Hall of Science to the west – not to mention the futuristic Unisphere and Fountain of the Planets in the center of the park – you may find yourself land – locked by your own curiosity.

Our advice: barbeque on the east side of Meadow Lake, stroll around the Jurassic Playground, head to the Queens Wildlife Center, and weave your way across the grounds where Iron Man battled his Russian nemesis earlier this year. Basketball, tennis, handball, and soccer facilities are also on site.

Address: Grand Central Parkway, Van Wyck Expressway

Get there: Mets – Willets Pt (7)

Free events & info: www.nycgovparks.org/parks/fmcp

Phone: (718) 760-6565



ASTORIA PARK: GET ME TO THE GREEK!

The park's name says it all. Sidewalk cafes and vibrant nightlife bring throngs of people to Astoria, but a grassy wonderland awaits on the other side of the elevated tracks. With an Olympic-sized swimming pool, expansive lawns under the Triborough and Hell Gate bridges, and gourmet Greek and Italian cuisine within walking distance, Astoria Park is a picnic tour-de-force.

Like many parks in Queens, the park offers generous sports facilities, but on a hot day nothing beats a dip in the free public pool. Costas Mondinos, 39, was born in Cypress but has lived in Astoria for over 20 years. He said the park is always good for picnics, especially in the evening. "It's the best," he said. "Usually after 8 p.m., it's cooler. You get a breeze off the water."

Mondinos also suggested where to stock up on picnic supplies. The haloumi cheese, he said, was exceptionally good. "If you want cheese you should go to the Greek places," he said. "Haloumi cheese is from Cypress. You can put on charcoal and it doesn't melt. Or you can eat it raw. It has a sharp flavor and has a bit of mint with it."

For cold cuts, Mondinos suggested K & T2 Quality Meats (3314 Ditmars Blvd) between 33rd and 35th streets.

Address: Astoria Park South, 21 Street, Hoyt Avenue, Ditmars Boulevard, East River

Get there: Astoria Blvd (N, Q)

Free events & Info: www.nycgovparks.org/parks/AstoriaPark