

# MEALS WITH A MISSION

Show your support of Autism Awareness Week by dining at restaurants that employ the developmentally disabled

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In support of Autism Awareness Week, take a moment to appreciate developmentally challenged Staten Islanders who work in the food service industry.

These both privately- and state-funded restaurants rely on paid staff who are supervised by professional chefs and managers. As a patron, one can approach the dining experience as a training session! Workers test-drive their life skills on guests and aim for competency in the hospitality business, one guest at a time.

Exactly how does this work? For example, take Harvest Café, which serves meals with linen napkins on attractive china plates, making it a step up from a casual café. The pleasant dining area includes hardwood floors and a porch for outdoor sipping, a section that overlooks Miller Field. Breakfast and lunch are served six days a week. Dinner is offered on two nights.

Diane Buglioli, deputy executive director of A Very Special Place, the non-profit which operates the New Dorp café, says trainees are paid for about 20 hours or less with benefits.

"When we feel that we have given them sufficient support and experience to enter another setting and they are interested in a job at another location," Buglioli says, "we would seek the right setting for them in a comparable setting and would then help them to transition into that employment setting."

On Your Mark Café is operated by the non-profit of the same name in West Brighton. Here trainees (called "consumers") are taught to take orders, greet guests, prepare food, restock shelves and serve customers. The dining experience here can be likened to an open classroom in the setting of a live coffee shop replete with couches and café tables.

"Those customers who really get our mission, also benefit from being a part of someone's else growth," says Buglioli, adding that it's a win-win and situation for both patron and server: "a wonderful thing to experience from either side."

**ON YOUR MARK**  
639 Forest Ave., West Brighton;  
718-981-8100; [OnYourMark.org](http://OnYourMark.org)

This casual, pleasant coffee and sandwich shop serves breakfast and lunch Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Coffee is self-serve and table service is available by "consumers" who also help prep and cook meals. Off premise catering is available. Food is relatively inexpensive and meals cost less than \$10.

Good morning picks include the Florentine Omelet with mozzarella, fresh spinach, mushrooms and onions, Whole Wheat pancakes and the Daily Breakfast Special, an egg with cheese on an English muffin served with coffee for \$2.50.

For lunch, try the Tortilla Shell Salad, one of the wraps like Chicken Pesto with Sun-dried Tomatoes and Grilled Chicken VIP with broccoli, mushrooms, peppers and onions.

**ON YOUR MARK CAFE AT THE STATEN ISLAND CHILDREN'S MUSEUM**  
Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden, 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston;  
718-273-2060; [Snug-Harbor.org](http://Snug-Harbor.org)

Note this venue is open only to museum patrons. Snack Zone is open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. And, as the name suggests, snacks like chips, fruit and salads are offered. There is also a modest selection of sandwiches and wraps along with bottled beverages. The restaurant is staffed by "consumers," individuals who are training for work in professional food service.

## HARVEST CAFE

694 New Dorp Lane; 347-857-6888; [AvspNY.org](http://AvspNY.org)

Operated by A Very Special Place, breakfast and lunch are served Monday through Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Dinner is served Thursday and Friday from 4:30 to 9 p.m. The restaurant is in the hands of executive chef Rob Burmeister, an affable personality who was one of the first Island chefs to make a splash on Food Network.

"Trainees" along with a professional serving staff/manager, serve and greet customers. Food, also consumer-made with supervision, is served on striking white china plates. Plum and gold are the color themes, as can be seen in linen napkins and décor touches. The restaurant allows BYOB.

Great morning bets are Thick French toast with bacon and The Harvest Benedict with poached eggs over signature crab cakes and hollandaise served with spuds.

For lunch, try Harvest Mini Combó with any sandwich served slider style — mini-burger, pretzel club, grille chicken, tuna or turkey with apple and brie — paired with a salad or soup du jour and the Grilled Matinated Skirt Steak (\$18) with caramelized onions, mushrooms and a baked potato and veg.

## COMMONS CAFE

2 Teleport Dr., Bloomfield;  
347-466-4207;  
[CommonsCafeSI.com](http://CommonsCafeSI.com)

This unique concept comes courtesy of The Lois and Richard Nicotra Foundation. All profits from the breakfast-burger-salad-sandwich operation go to Staten Island charities such as A Very Special Place, Special Olympics, Camp Good Grief and about 90 others. Just recently, Commons added "Community Days" which partner with groups who plan and promote an event through the café. Non-profits who order off-premise catering for 20 guests or more (orders must be picked up) see all profits from the food donated back to their group.



Apple slices with peanut butter, walnuts and cranberries, a snack at On Your Mark Café

AWP PHOTO / ANTHONY DePRIMO



Shanta Harrell at Harvest Café preps tomatoes for a special menu offering.

AWP PHOTO / BILL LYONS



Shannon Molokie, a staff member of Harvest Café who helps teach trainees, serves guests Ralph and Elyse Castaldo their meals.

AWP PHOTO / BILL LYONS



Harvest Café in New Dorp

AWP PHOTO / BILL LYONS



The restaurant's motto adorns Commons Café at the Teleport.

AWP PHOTO / MARK STEIN



Christina Carozza, left, works alongside staffer Robert Kranpost in the kitchen at On Your Mark.

AWP PHOTO / ANTHONY DePRIMO



The Harvest Benedict is made with crabcakes and eggs on a toasted biscuit.

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