

## Mark Patinkin: Rhode Island by the book

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There is a new series of books coming out on various states, all with similar names. As follows: Maine 101. Vermont 101. Iowa 101.

I expected Rhode Island would be left out — you know, the way we’re often left out of those calendars claiming to feature photos of all New England. The series is by a publisher in Canada, so it would make sense we’d be an afterthought to them, or at best, an island off New York.

But I was gratified to hear months ago that Rhode Island 101 was going to be among the first in the series. The book is by Cranston freelancer Tim Lehnert, who asked me back then to make a contribution under the heading, “Five signs you’ve been in Rhode Island too long.” Among others, I wrote, “You haven’t gone to a restaurant that’s more than 10 minutes away in two years.” Guilty.

The final book was recently published. I sat down to thumb through it, and found a compelling mix of history, humor, and its signature feature: “celebrity” lists, like Michael Corrente’s “Top Five Rhode Island Subjects for Biopics.”

His first was Buddy Cianci, then Vinny Paz, with the fourth being Roger Williams.

I think Corrente nailed it in order of interest and you have to love a state where a rogue mayor and colorful fighter would draw bigger audiences than the more minor achievement of founding one of the first 13 states.

I like books like this that are serious but don’t take themselves too seriously. For example, it covers basic facts — that Delaware, the second smallest state, is still twice our size, and that Rhode Island, the second densest with 1,029 people per square mile, is slightly more crowded than Wyoming, which has 5 per square mile. Oh, and who knew we have 764 bridges?

But on an adjoining page, the book lightens up with a “You know you’re from Rhode Island when” list. For example: “You can’t park in your garage because a boat resting on cinderblocks is in the driveway.”

It also has ripe areas for debate, like the top five Rhode Island symbols. In order, according to Lehnert: (1) An anchor. (2) Rhode Island Red chicken. (3) The Independent Man. (4) Mr. Potato Head. (5) The Big Blue Bug.

The book gives reasons for hope: In 2006 we were ranked by GMAC insurance as the worst drivers in America, but have since soared to only 41st worst. Makes you proud.

The lists from notables keep popping up to give the book a real uniqueness — take Charlie Hall's Top Five Most Lamppoonable Rhode Islanders.

(1) Buddy Cianci: "Doesn't get mad – gets even."

(3) Arlene Violet: "Last pronounced an 'r' in 1968."

There are tips for sounding like a local. Never say "Paw-tucket." It's P'tucket. And PPAC is Pee-Pack.

Given that the book takes the "101" part of its name seriously, there are some almanac-like sections, such as a rundown of each city and town, done straight. This is where you go to learn when East Greenwich was founded, rather than more inside truths, such as that it's the state's facelift capital.

I liked my colleague David Brussat's five best and worst Providence buildings. Among the best: The State House, the Arcade and interestingly, Providence Place. Among the worst: Old Stone Square — the Rubik's Cube — and Broadcast House, now the Johnson & Wales library, which Brussat calls the "East German embassy."

There are some interesting reminders in the book, like the way Rhode Islanders, for unknown reasons, were superstars during the early Survivor TV shows. Richard Hatch won, and both Elizabeth Filarski Hasseback and Helen Glover got far. Aside from his later tax-evasion conviction, I'm still proud that in that first show, Hatch, from Middletown, proved more conniving than the big city contenders.

There also seem to be more major movies made here than you'd expect for our size, like *The Great Gatsby*, *Amistad*, and *Meet Joe Black*.

And here's a great list from Rick McGowan of the Newport Daily News on the top five Rhode Island athletes of the past 40 years:

Basketball players Ernie DiGreorio and Marvin Barnes; NFL running back, Mark van Eeghen; Hendricken and Red Sox baseball player, [Rocco Baldelli](#); and hockey star Brian Lawton.

Johnette Rodriguez, longtime food writer, names the five essential "Rhody Foods" – and the best place to find them:

Johnnycakes at Jigger's Diner in East Greenwich; clear quahog chowder at Commons Lunch in Little Compton; stuffed clams at Amaral's Fish and Chips in Warren, clam cakes at Flo's Clam Shack in Middletown; and fried calamari at Anthony's Seafood in Middletown.

I learned another surprising stat a few pages later: There are 2,663 eating and drinking establishments in the state, including 29 McDonald's outlets and 73 Subways.

I learned it's nice to make \$119,818 as governor of Rhode Island, but nicer still to be Thomas Ryan, CEO of CVS, who recently, with stock options and bonus, made \$18 million. This is more than the average Rhode Island income, as of 2007, of \$39,827 – a bit lower than Connecticut's \$59,174. But give Ryan credit — CVS is the state's biggest private-sector employer, followed by Citizen's Bank, Stop & Shop, Bank of America and Fidelity.

The paperback book is 248 pages, so there's a lot more details, like my colleague Zachary Malinowski's top five mob hits. I love that idea.

In fact I love the idea of Tim Lehnert finding another 50 notables with quirky lists for a sequel.

Like maybe Cianci's top five Rhode Island felons, and Atty. Gen. Patrick Lynch's top five who got away.

Call it Rhode Island 102.

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