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This year New Jersey has become reality-TV central, with producers shooting a number of shows right here in the Garden State. TV executives view Jersey residents as "loud and proud," ideal cast members to create outrageous programs such as "Jersey Shore."

That controversial MTV reality show, about a group of Italian American youths spending a summer in Seaside Heights, sparked a firestorm for its alleged stereotyping and celebration of "guidos" and "guidettes." Those are terms that some Midwesterners probably had never heard before — and that some Italian Americans would have preferred stayed within the Tri-State area's borders.

But despite its critics "Jersey Shore" has become a pop-culture phenomenon, with its "cast" appearing on programs ranging from Jay Leno to Wendy Williams.

"Jersey Shore," however, is just one of a series of Jersey-related programs. In December MTV2 debuted "School of Surf," which is about high school teams from Malibu, Calif., and Ocean City competing in Red Bull's Riders Cup.

Earlier this year Bravo's "The Real Housewives of New Jersey," which centered around Franklin Lakes, was a huge hit.

TLC's reality show "Cake Boss" is filmed in a Hoboken bakery, and the network's "Table for 12" is about a Marlboro family that has two sets of twins and sextuplets. "Table" was recently rescheduled and put in to replace "Jon & Kate Plus 8."

And the latest Garden State reality-series addition is Style Network's "Jerseylicious." Shooting wrapped up in December at the Green Brook beauty salon in Central New Jersey where "Jerseylicious" follows six stylists. The show is scheduled to debut next spring.

It's no accident that reality-TV producers are venturing from their glitzy Manhattan and Hollywood offices to shoot the much-maligned bridge-and-tunnel crowd in Jersey. Some TV producers seem to think that many New Jersey residents are as mouthy as the mob crew of HBO's fictional "The Sopranos," which was shot in the Garden State.

"People from Jersey are always touting that they're from New Jersey," said Robert Galinsky, founder and principle of the New York Reality TV School in Manhattan. "The nature of being from New Jersey is to always be loud and proud about it. And when you're loud and proud, those are qualities that casting directors like. Loud and proud is good for reality television."

But there are a bushel full of reasons why TV producers are flocking to New Jersey, according to TV experts and executives.

First, pragmatically speaking, New Jersey is convenient and easy for New York City film crews to get to, even if they have to get there via those dreaded bridges and tunnels.

"Crews don't have to go to Canton, Ohio," Galinsky said.

Secondly, there are hundreds of TV networks today, niche channels, and they need programming. They can fill in their schedules with reality shows, which are cheap to produce.

Explaining the bumper crop of Jersey-based shows, Robert Thompson, founding director of Syracuse University's Bleier Center For TV and Popular Culture, said that when there were only three broadcast networks in the so-called "Golden Age" of television, you would not be seeing fare such as "Jersey Shore" on TV.

"There simply wasn't room to go this deep into the bench of ideas, which is why back then we got pretty much cops, and doctors and lawyers, detectives," Thompson said.

The Garden State is also a change-of-pace setting for a series, a world apart from Los Angeles or Manhattan.



"It's just completely fresh," said Misty Tish, the executive in charge of the set on "Jerseylicious." "When have you seen it, besides 'The Sopranos'? You've seen California, the OC...and then comes this whole fresh East Coast vibe that's not hard-core New York City. But it's still all the style and fashion and beauty."

Next, producers can hook in viewers by playing to their stereotypes about Jersey folks: Namely, that they are an odd Eastern tribe with big hair, big mouths, their own dialect and a chip on their shoulders.

There is truth to that "stereotype," argue several executives who have been involved in the reality-TV genre. New Jersey residents tend to be outspoken, passionate and have big personalities — the exact kind of people that producers want for reality-TV shows, these executives claim.

New Jersey has long been the target of jokes, with Newark Mayor Cory Booker getting into a public dust-up earlier this year with Conan O'Brien over the "Tonight Show" host's ridicule of the state's biggest city, said Tim Brooks, a TV historian and co-author of "The Complete Guide to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows."

Asserting that "'The Sopranos' didn't do anything good for the reputation of New Jersey," Brooks said, "New Jersey has been the butt of a lot of humor. It can't seem to escape that. And most of the programs that have been set in New Jersey or touch on New Jersey, if anything, amplify that. Even 'Real Housewives of New Jersey.'"

New Jersey residents are depicted as "loud, profane and — depending on the show — maybe even violent, crass," Brooks said. "What is it, 'guidos' and 'guidettes' that they talk about on 'Jersey Shore.'?"

Brooks added that while it's socially unacceptable to attack a minority group, there are no such qualms about Garden State inhabitants.

"New Jersey and New Jersey residents are not a protected group," he said. "There are certain things you can't do about African Americans or gays... But you can make fun of New Jersey people."

Thompson said that as more and more Jersey-based shows come on the air, it becomes a "self-fulfilling" prophecy that stereotypes about Garden State natives get reinforced.



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