

Marvelous Madison

A capital city with a capital swagger of arts, culture, cuisine—and the Friday Night Fish Fry.

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Last month's Destination was a city once associated with beer and sausage—Milwaukee, Wisc. Good brew and traditional generations-old recipe sausage are still a part of the city's pedigree, but as I discovered in my three-day tutorial of swell food, sights and astonishing locavore-ability, Milwaukee's future is being redefined by celebrating its roots. Modern-day food artisans, chefs and farmers are in concert, delivering a superlative mix of cuisine that whispers of a rich ethnic past.

Today I'm headed to Milwaukee's kissing cousin, Madison. Land of the Wisconsin Badgers, Cornish pasties at Teddywedgers and the Friday Night Fish Fry. It's a vibrant city of 225,000 residents sparked by a rare combination of thriving business, progressive government, culture, exquisite cuisine and advanced education surrounded by pristine nature.

Spoiler alert: This university town surrounded by five lakes stands up well to Milwaukee's homerun scorecard—in my book, it's a tie.



Part II: Madison

Pastoral fields and dairy barns whiz by on the short drive between Milwaukee and Madison, the late summer's humidity casting an intriguing sheen over the landscape. Pulling into the city, the shimmering waters of Lake Monona are dotted with boaters eager to start the weekend, and walkers and cyclists occupy the trail in front of the sandy shoreline. Down the way, I spy a group of swimmers huddled in wet suits—later I learn they're individuals training for one of Wisconsin's many triathlons.

The Milwaukee breakfast at Alterra is a distant memory; I park at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center—a spectacular structure inspired by Wisconsin native Frank Lloyd Wright's vision to link the shore of Lake Monona to Madison's capitol building and home of Michael Feldman's "Whad'Ya Know?" radio show—and go in search of lunch. It's Restaurant Week in Madison, and chefs are anxious to showcase their talents.

Osteria Papavero promises rustic Italian food from the Emilia Romagna and Toscana regions. Patrons are enjoying lunch with a relaxed Friday attitude; a cluster of café-style tables on the sidewalk offers al fresco dining and inside the restaurant are charming butternut squash-hued walls, hand-blown pendant lights, a chalkboard listing daily specials and a happy buzz.

Settling in with the laid-back diners, I choose the Torta di Ceci, a sandwich on a savory Tuscan-style chickpea crepe filled with sundried tomatoes, fresh Wisconsin mozzarella and baby arugula. Delivering the entrée is a fresh-faced server who looks like she just stepped out of a Land's End catalog. Maybe she did, as the apparel giant's headquarters is just 45 miles down the road.

Dessert is a creamy butterscotch *budino*—a divine, tawny Italian-style concoction that redefines pudding. I almost lick the bowl clean, and consider asking for one to go.

But there's a whole afternoon of discovering Madison—popcorn and ice cream and more cheese—lots more cheese—in my future.

Before setting off on a walking tour of downtown Madison's quaint and hip shops, I check into my accommodations at The Madison Concourse Hotel and Governor's Club. Located near the center of everything—the State Capitol, the State Street pedestrian mall, the University of Wisconsin campus and more—the independent property is modern and full of amenities.

My room has a priceless view of Madison's tallest landmark—the capitol building's granite dome is the world's largest, comprised of 43 types of stone from six countries and eight states. The imposing edifice is so close it fills up my 12th-floor window. I snap a picture through the glass—the majestic building's creamy white juxtaposed against a cornflower blue sky is irresistible.



Emerging from The Madison Concourse's cool lobby, I land on sidewalks teeming with tourists, university students, office workers and shoppers on a mission. State Street, steps away from the hotel, is a pedestrian mall filled with restaurants, boutiques, galleries and attractions such as the Betty Brinn Children's Museum and the Overture Center for the Performing Arts that hosts the Madison Symphony Orchestra, Broadway performances, ballet and children's theatre and houses the magnificent Klais organ.

Meandering seems to be the speed of my fellow walkers and gawkers, so I leisurely window shop, poking my head in places that stock everything from Wisconsin souvenirs, designer clothing and shoes to chic home accessories and cheese. The fragrant scent of Clary's Old-Fashioned Gourmet

Popcorn seduces me—think Topsy’s—there are 20 varieties of corn, including Jalapeño Cheese, Packer (banana and lime) and Wisconsin White Cheddar Cheese. I grab a bag of their plain old white corn, knowing it will complement the ice cream that, according to my GPS, isn’t far down the street.

Strolling along the streets of Madison, Lawrence comes to mind and its eclectic mix of eateries, bars, and retail shops and the colorful street people—there are lots of buskers here, too, juggling, strumming guitars, and accepting tips thrown in buckets and instrument cases. This Badger-crazy city has the wonderful academic-university-entrepreneurial vibe that Jayhawk central has; it draws you in.

Since food is my destination on this trip, I decide it’s time for another nosh. The Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream’s motto is good enough for me: “You want nutrition, eat carrots.” With that kind of permission, I order a triple-scoop dish of Fat Elvis—sweet banana ice cream with a salty peanut butter ripple and rich chocolate chips. This family-run operation opened its doors in 1962 and is a Madison institution. Happily I alternate spoonfuls of my icy treat with Clary’s popcorn.

Life is good in Madison, I decide.

Sometimes the anticipation is better than the actual event—haven’t we all learned that at one time or another in life? So I’m hoping the notion of my inaugural Wisconsin Friday Night Fish Fry matches other first-time culinary adventures that left an indelible impression: Iowa State Fair funnel cake, biscuits with garlic-pepper jelly at the Garlic Festival in Gliroy, Calif., Indian fry bread at the Taos Pueblo in Taos, NM.

My travel companions and I pile into our rental car and head to Avenue Bar, a Madison institution that served the original Fish Boil in the city in the 1970s and is a neighborhood stalwart. A



platter of Wisconsin cheese curds tides us over until our plates of fried cod and authentic Fish Boil with steamed potatoes, carrots and onions arrive. It’s addictive, satisfying and worthy of a memorable first. The fry and boil are washed down with pints of New Glarus Spotted Cow (a craft brew that’s made right outside Madison) and we call it a night.

Turndown at The Madison Concourse includes chocolates and a ringside seat to the moony, illuminated capitol building. I leave the curtains of my room open, since they’ve left the light on for me.

Madison boasts Dane’s County Farmers’ Market—a 200-vendor-ring circus that occupies the perimeter of the manicured capitol grounds. It’s the largest in the country, and on this brilliant Saturday morning the throngs of shoppers move in an orderly clockwise direction, browsing the wares of artisans, farmers’ produce, pesto, and fresh-baked Amish pies, breads, rolls and scones. There’s locally raised beef, lamb and chicken and custom-arranged fresh flowers.

A pint of Door County cherries is breakfast; I’m content to join the locals in exploring the bounty, stopping to interview a family enjoying a picnic on the capitol grounds, taking in a dance routine by

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a women's group (it's National Dance Day) and taking a self-guided tour of the capitol. Outside scattered amongst the stalls of corn and bushels of fruit are demonstrators—peaceful and polite—“Would you like this information on impeaching the governor?”—somehow managing to add to the cheerful festival atmosphere.

Fromagination is a sexy little cheese shop located on Capitol Square—a jewel box store that sells Wisconsin's mother lode—cheese, and lots of it. Master of ceremonies is Ken Monteleone, a former Land's End corporate executive who designed the ultimate urban cheese experience. Walking through the wedge-shaped rustic space that's filled with cheese, crackers, jams, jellies and accouterments for enjoying cheese I'm filled with a sense of the good earth—and Monteleone and his dairy evangelists are there to help sample, educate and pamper the believers. Fromagination is packed with eager cheese heads, but time is suspended as I examine every nook and cranny that Monteleone has filled with tids and bits.

Lunch is at the Daisy Café, a bright and funky restaurant in the Atwood neighborhood that sells cupcakes and food reminiscent of

mom's kitchen: from-scratch stratas, meatloaf and stews—and their own version of the Friday Night Fish Fry: cod with seasoned panko crumbs, pan-fried. A Wakey-Bakey cupcake is my dessert—a winning combination of chocolate cake, maple frosting and bits of real bacon scattered on top and in the batter.

Delightful and sinful, all at once. Just how I like my food.

It's impossible to visit a college town and not hear live music—this afternoon I'm threading my way through a crowd listening to home-grown bands, on my way to Gail Ambrosius Chocolates, a confection that Food Network host Alton Brown calls the “Holy Grail of Chocolate.” Ambrosius—who is as likeable as her name—explains her passion and philosophy and how she sources her single-origin chocolates. The Sweet Curry with Saffron and the Caramel Sprinkled with Grey Sea Salt are two of my favorite picks; I buy a box for nibbling.

Tonight's dinner is a quintessential Wisconsin farm-to-table experience. Graze, a slick urban restaurant that takes its cue from the New York gastropub scene, is a mecca for

locally raised meats and produce. A floor-to-ceiling chalkboard tells the story of the farmer of the month; the place is bustling with couples, large tables of friends sharing dishes and even a family or two. Dinner is fried Sassy Cow cheese curds, bulgur cakes and a warm beet salad. Dessert is a chewy chocolate chip cookie with a frothy glass of Sassy Cow milk from the local creamery.

The last day is spent exploring Green County, Madison's next-door neighbor that churns out world-class cheese and millions of gallons of craft beer. Back in Madison, dinner is at Sardine, a cutting-edge restaurant run by young-gun chefs who trained in Chicago and San Francisco.

My last meal in Madison, perfect in execution and redolent of bold, fresh flavors, is added to the tote board of the Dairy State adventure, helping me understand exactly where I am: standing at the pearly gates of a culinary revolution, by a lake, in the middle of the country, in a place called Wisconsin. ❖

For more information on planning your trip to Madison, visit www.visitmadison.com.