

Just say cheese, and fish

TRAVEL



Peter Wilson

MADISON, Wis. — Friday evening is a good time to begin some serious knife and fork explorations in Madison, Wisconsin's capital, and ground zero for fanciful foodies like myself.

It's not just any other "TGIF." This is the night tourists can join Madison residents and experience the city's legendary Friday Night Fish-Fry. It's a long-standing dining tradition across the state, and Madison restaurants are especially faithful to the cause with fish-frys offered at many local eateries, from upscale restaurants to simple taverns.

According to folklorist Janet C. Gilmore, the tradition of the Friday night fish frenzy took off in the 1920s and '30s, and has kept going to the present day. Reputedly three out of four restaurant meals served on Fridays in some centres in Wisconsin will be fish, she says. That adds up to more than a million eight-ounce servings of fish being consumed each Friday in the state.

Whether your choice is to dine off china or paper plates in a cozy tavern setting, or if your decision is to try the sizzling grouper, haddock, cod, walleye or catfish, this Madison dining experience will be memorable. The fish is always accompanied with potatoes — fried, boiled or baked — and side orders of mayonnaise-splashed coleslaw, vinegar and bread, along with a guaranteed supply of excellent Wisconsin-made beer.

It might be a good idea to stay conservative with the beer consumption. Saturday morning in Madison, you should be making an early start on the Dane County Farmers' Market. It's the largest producers-only farmers' market in the United States.

People drive for miles to check out local the farmers' produce and to sample local seasonal specialties, such as vegetables, fruits, meats and cheeses, baked goods, specialty goods and fresh cut flowers.

With 170 stalls crowded around the perimeter of the impressive State Capitol Building's grounds in downtown Madison, the market is a vibrant razzmatazz of commerce, where shoppers and vendors do business the old-fashioned way.

The market's location on Capitol Square is also excellent jumping off spot for visitors interested in sampling some historical flavours. Just off the square, you'll find a very different atmosphere and set of experiences, with three of the city's museums within a five-minute stroll from the market stalls.

Madison's Childrens Museum (MCM) offers a fascinating hands-on experience for children up to age 12, providing a place where every child can learn through play in an interactive environment. MCM's hands-on exhibits and programs encourage children's imaginations and trigger the power of play as the cornerstone of learning.

The Wisconsin Historical Museum is located on Madison's Capitol Square and is full of wonderful information about the state's history. Explore Wisconsin's distinctive heritage and a variety of other American history topics through artifacts, full-scale dioramas, audio-visual presentations and interactive multimedia programs.

Also on the Square, the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum honours Wisconsin's citizen-soldiers through large-scale exhibits, displays and presentations. The 10,000-square foot museum contains two main galleries.

For a distinct flavour of the region, take a drive out into beautiful rural Wisconsin, into Green County (www.greencounty.org), just to the south of Madison. It's in this American heartland where thick stands of corn grows eight feet tall, and dairy cows produce the rich milk that goes into the famous cheeses for which Wisconsin is famous.

Travelling these quiet back roads, you'll also discover the state's strong Swiss connections.

Start at the National Historic Cheese making Center in Monroe, a showcase of cheese and dairy heritage in Wisconsin, and home to the authentic Imobersteg Farmstead Factory, dating to the late 1800s. It is complete with all original equipment. Take a pit stop at Emmi Roth Kase and the Alp and Dell Cheese Store — a showcase of local cheese with observation halls into the factory — and meet store proprietor Tony Zraggen. Get this transplanted Swiss native and cheese expert to demonstrate his yodeling prowess.

There are 53 different cheeses made in Green County, including the stinky limburger, a prize-winning variety that will either get you running towards it, or running away. Try it like the locals do, on rye bread with a slather of spicy mustard, a slice of onion and a pickle, and washed down with cold beer.



Tony Zraggen is proprietor of a cheese store and a yodeller

And talking about beer, there are a couple of good breweries in the county that have tasting rooms.

At Minhas Craft Brewery in Monroe, brewmaster Kris Kalav holds up a pint glass of his work and sighs. He has a smile lighting up his face that says: "I really love my job."

As brewmaster, Kalev is a big cog in a serious beer-making machine in this small rural town that's helped shape the taste buds of thousands of beer drinkers around North America.

The brewery tour offers samples straight from the pumps and bottles of this successful Canadian-owned brewery. The brother and sister team of Ravinder and Manjit Minhas are young Calgarians who purchased the 165-year old brew-



Minhas Craft brewmaster Kris Kalav holds shows off his work

ery in 2006. They sank \$5 million into new equipment and buildings. They introduced new beer lines, a compelling marketing plan and renamed the company. Buying the oldest brewery in the U.S. Midwest and the second oldest in the country, might not have been every young entrepreneur's cup of

tea. However, being the youngest brewery owners in the one of the oldest breweries has paid off for these Canucks, with their sales in the U.S. and Canada taking off in a big way.

For more information on Madison, go to visitmadison.com



Fridays are fish day in Wisconsin