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TOP FOOD TOWNS TO VISIT

Summer fresh!

Flavorful recipes from local produce
Best flowers for cutting gardens
PLUS: Easy brunch • Celebrate Lincoln

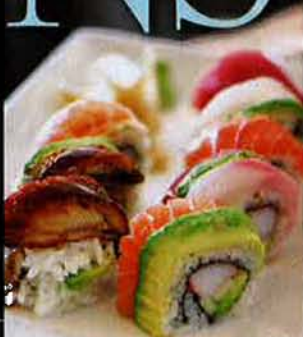


Grilled chicken with polenta at Gratzl in Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Right, from top) The Dane County Farmers Market in Madison, Wisconsin. Fresh Michigan cherries in Traverse City. The Scholars Inn in Bloomington, Indiana. Rainbow rolls at Miyabi 9 in Des Moines.



FIVE STAR FOOD TOWNS

★★★★★ The best road trips hinge on great food. Not the sandwiches Mom used to pack, but the restaurants along the way, with pancakes or prime rib so good, you want second helpings on the way home. In fact, some of us build whole vacations around food. Travel experts call it culinary tourism. We just call it eating well, and it's what we do best. We've picked the Midwest's five top food towns, plus 60 other places to have a great meal. (Since most big cities have strong dining scenes, we skipped metro areas of 1 million or more.) We looked for fresh ingredients, a range of prices and cuisines, farmers markets and neat food shops. Trust us. Visit anywhere on our list, and you won't go home hungry.



1 MADISON, WISCONSIN

By 2012, Nichole Fromm and JonMichael Rasmus plan to eat in all 600 or so restaurants in Madison, Wisconsin—in alphabetical order. Their endeavor, addictively documented at madisonatoz.com, perfectly captures our top food town: quirky, totally democratic and full of great taste, not pretension. The couple attribute the vibrant food culture to the University of Wisconsin and the city's working-class roots. Being a state capital amid rich farmland helps, too. "Madison has a lot of identities," Nichole says. "It's fun to watch them sort themselves out in the restaurant scene."

No matter your taste, budget or ethics, Madison (population: 555,000) serves a meal to match. For eco-eaters, the Great Dane Brewing Company offers an all-local Sustain-a-Burger, and L'Etoile turns farmers market veggies into delicate soups.

Students scarf pancakes at Mickie's Dairy Bar, while a trendier crowd nibbles tapas at the Icon. On State Street, enticing smells waft from ethnic restaurants such as Afghani favorite Kabul, where salads come with a curry-cucumber dressing. And for those who want to tap Wisconsin's own heritage, Bavaria Sausage makes a mean *weisswurst*, and the Old Fashioned supper club cheekily lists Bud and Bud Light as "import" beers.

One place, the Dane County Farmers Market, appeals to most everyone. Around the capitol, some 150 vendors sell amber honey, tomatoes and tiny potatoes that still smell like damp soil. Come early, and you'll see all kinds of people, including, perhaps, L'Etoile's Chef Tory Miller, buying shiitakes for that night's risotto.

To plan your trip, turn to page 136.



Pork at L'Etoile—always tender, no matter the sides.



Sidewalk cafes line State Street.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MADISON FOOD TOWNS; MADISON: JEFFREY STEVENS; SEVIN MARYZAKUREGUSA; COURTESY



(Clockwise, from top left) Marigold Kitchen's chorizo omelet with sweet corn relish. Middle-Eastern restaurant Casbah. Pleasant Ridge Reserve, a top-selling cheese at Fromagination. Sardine serves high-end dishes at affordable prices. Chef Tory Miller changes L'Etoile's menu with the seasons. (Opposite) The Dane County Farmers Market.



FIVE FABULOUS PLATES

We would happily feast on farmers market fave Stella's Hot and Spicy Cheese Bread, but here are five "real" essential Madison meals.

Brunch @ Sardine

A golden-crispy Belgian waffle with crème fraîche and berries.

Lunch @ The Casbah

Grilled lamb shish kabob with smooth, house-made hummus and, to start, a surprisingly light lentil soup.

Dinner @ L'Etoile

Pan-roasted pork chop with creamed corn, bacon and braised collard greens—all local.

Sweets @ Chocolate Shoppe

A scoop of dark, sinfully rich Zanzibar ice cream, featuring a blend of three African cocoas.

Souvenir @ Fromagination

A block of cave-aged, five-year cheddar from Hook's Cheese Company in Mineral Point and, to serve it, a bag of the shop's Potter's crackers.