

By Michelle Hueser

As a college student in Winona in the late 80s, my diet consisted mostly of chips and salsa and mega-margaritas at Chula Vista on Highway 61, along with the occasional midnight dinner at the Happy Chef after a late night of working or studying. As a self-absorbed college student, I was pretty clueless about good food, much less good local food. But after Carol, the fearless publisher of Edible Twin Cities, and I were in Winona for a forum on local foods this past spring, we decided it might be time to revisit the historic river town to see what it has to offer people enjoying the fall colors along Highway 61 in Minnesota and Highway 35 in Wisconsin.

Our first stop was a coffee shop in Lake City called Rhythm and Brew. Carol had been here before and could not stop thinking about a particularly tasty chicken salad sandwich and a bowl of soup she'd had there. It's just a couple of blocks off Highway 61. Rhythm and Brew serves the usual coffee shop drinks, but also has a great menu of breakfast items, such as organic eggs, hash browns, sourdough French

toast, omelets, and pancakes. For lunch, try their hot sandwiches or a BLT and a soup or a salad. If you choose to try one of their homemade cookies, biscotti or scones with your coffee, don't ask for the recipe because it's a secret. Rhythm and Brew is open for breakfast and lunch and is located at 220 E. Chestnut Street. (651) 345-5335. In the evenings, Rhythm and Brew becomes Manzanita, a Tex-Mex restaurant with different owners.

Rhythm and Brew shares a charming patio complete with an outdoor fireplace with Hope's Harvest, a natural food store that's been open since last September. Proprietor



Hope's Harvest Community Foods

Susan Draves has been able to bring just about everything a shopper could need into a tiny store that's probably no bigger than your living room. You'll find many of the same quality products available at stores in the Twin Cities, including Peace Coffee, butter and cheese from PastureLand, eggs from Larry Schultz, Salsa Lisa salsas, Poplar Hill goat milk, and pancake mixes and tortilla chips from Whole Grain Milling, as well as a variety of items in bulk. We couldn't resist smelling the wonderful soaps from Lustleigh Farms near Lake City, and getting a baked good for the road from Red Wing's Jenny Lind Bakery. Hope's Harvest Community Foods is at 220 East Chestnut Street in Lake City, (651) 345-3690.

After being on the road for a thirst-inspiring hour, Carol insisted on stopping at Pepin Heights' retail store in Lake City for a Sparkling Cranberry Apple Cider. Once a craving starts, it must be satisfied, so we grabbed a cold cider and dreamed of the day HoneyCrisps and Sweet Sixteens would be ready to sell. Not on this July day, but soon... Pepin Heights' store is located 1.5 miles south of Lake City on Highway 61, (651) 345-2305.

Continuing on to Wabasha we located Nosh, a restaurant that was recommended to me twice in the past week when folks heard I'd be heading to Winona. This being a Tuesday we knew it would be closed, but decided to find it anyway for the return trip on Wednesday. Seeing us standing outside the closed restaurant, a sympathetic local recommended driving across the bridge that was towering over our heads to try a new place in Alma, Wisconsin called Kate and Gracie's. After

quickly trying to conjure up images of any stellar offerings we may be missing between Wabasha and Winona on the Minnesota side (we couldn't think of any offhand), we headed to Wisconsin.

The late evening sun on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi made the drive to Kate and Gracie's a wonderful thing on this particularly beautiful summer day. The restaurant was not hard to find. It's located in a historic building right on Highway 35 through Alma with spectacular views of the lock and dam. Co-owner Ed Nagle says business has been good since they opened last fall. The views alone make it a wonderful place to stop during a trip down along the river. If you're lucky enough to nab a booth by one of the large picture windows, binoculars are provided so that you can peer over the river to see what Minnesota is up to, or catch a glimpse of anything in between. The special soup the day we stopped was chilled beet and raspberry, which was very tasty, but I will stop again to try the roasted butternut squash with spiced pecans, the penne with Italian sausage and sweet peas, and the pork tenderloin with roasted onions and apples. Wonderful old pictures of the restaurant's namesakes, the moms of each of the owners, hang in the restaurant. Kate and Gracie's: 215 North Main Street, Alma, Wisconsin, (608) 685-4505, www.kateandgracies.com.

We continued south to our destination for the evening, the Trempealeau Hotel in Trempealeau. Since it was 8:00 when we arrived and this was going to be our only dinner in Trempealeau, there was a decision to be made. Do we eat at Sullivan's Supper Club, the restaurant that holds many fond memories of family celebrations? (I can still conjure up the taste of their Irish potatoes.) Or do we eat at the Trempealeau Hotel, home of the famous walnut burgers—one of Carol's favorite co-op items? After an epic mental struggle, we decided to eat at the hotel, but not before driving the beautiful two minutes along the river to check out Sullivan's to see if it held up to memory. It was quite full for a Tuesday night, and as I gazed at the menu while standing next to the hostess desk, helpful servers and exiting customers, seeing what looked like indecisive potential diners, offered words of encouragement. "It's really good," and "You can't go wrong here." I felt as if I was betraying my nostalgia gene as I looked at the menu trying to locate the meal I always ordered. The restaurant is under new management since I was a regular, but the new owners had vowed to keep the Sullivan's family tradition alive by not changing things, and it appears they kept their word. If you get down to Sullivan's, order the Shannon Stopover for me. The restaurant is on Sullivan's Road in Trempealeau. It's been there since 1968, so just ask a local to point you in the right direction, or just take a right when you get to the river in Trempealeau. Their website is www.sullivanssupperclub.com.

Back to the Trempealeau Hotel, which is nostalgia incarnate for many, I'm sure, having been established in 1871. Hanging in the dining room are historic pictures of the town and the surrounding area, and the bar has a wall full of pictures of people who have performed there over the past

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several decades. I myself saw Arlo Guthrie perform on the hotel lawn with the Mississippi as a backdrop many years ago. The down-to-earth menu has something for everyone, including ten vegetarian items. The famous walnut burgers can also be ordered in the form of an appetizer as walnut balls with a honey mustard sauce. Other popular items are the Spinach Lasagna and the Canadian Walleye dipped in cornmeal and pan fried or blackened. This being Wisconsin, there are also plenty of local beers on tap. And all of the desserts are baked in-house. The Trempealeau Hotel is definitely worth a stop. 150 Main Street, Trempealeau, Wisconsin. (608) 534-6898. www.trempealeauhotel.com.

After a mostly peaceful night that was only occasionally interrupted by the sound of freight trains barreling down the tracks between the hotel and the river, we headed out. Although I was anxious to start eating for the day, we took a detour to the town of Galesville so Carol could see the swinging bridge that I had mentioned to her. After jumping around on the bridge, crossing over to the rocky walls of the bluff dripping with water and moss, spotting an Indigo Bunting, and finding some wild raspberries, we continued into town. We stumbled upon a charming natural foods store called the Common Market. We met Joyce Johnson, the owner, who has run the market for twenty years. While browsing on the original oak floors and below a beautiful tin ceiling, we found lots of local treasures, including Bumbleberry Preserves from Huber Family Preserves, and lots of other local and organic items. The Common Market is a very community-minded store and worth a visit. 112 E. Gale Avenue, Galesville, Wisconsin.

On to Winona to see if memory stacked up to reality. Our first stop had to be Bloodow's (Blay Dohz) Bake Shop with doughnuts so good they have to be eaten to be believed. This is the bakery that some of you may have heard news stories about when Krispy Kreme left Winona because they couldn't compete with the real thing. Why would any Winonan give a hoot about a Krispy Kreme doughnut when they've got Bloodow's? They wouldn't. They didn't, and you'll understand why if you stop in and try their doughnuts. These are the doughnuts that sustained me through four years of hard studying in college. The smell of nostalgia hit me even before I opened the door. After soaking up the atmosphere inside the small shop for a minute, I ordered my three favorites: a Long John, a plain cake doughnut (a true test of how good a doughnut is), and one of their cake doughnuts covered in chocolate frosting and toasted coconut. Memory did not fail. I was (barely) able to bring myself to split the Long John with Carol. The best thing about the plain doughnuts is that they have just the right level of sweetness to them and just a hint of crispiness on the outside. Writing about them several weeks later first thing in the morning is making me think quite hard about driving down right now just to get some more. It's probably lucky for me that I live too far away to drive down for doughnuts on a whim. But I am going to Winona for a wedding in November. Lucky me! Bloodow's is located on the corner of Broadway and Laird. They've been there since 1924, and one of the current owners has been baking doughnuts there since he was fifteen. I was there on a Wednesday, but they make Bavarian Creams on Mondays, Thursdays, and most Saturdays. Bloodow's is located at 451 East Broadway in Winona. (507) 452-3682.



Bloodow's Bake Shop



Common Market

Our breakfast came late in the morning since we'd spent some time in Galesville. Since it was now 11:00, there was no choice but to go straight to lunch. After all, we had to leave time for more eating in the afternoon. So we headed off to Signatures Restaurant just outside of town and right down the road from where I used to live. The sky had been darkening rapidly when we left Bloedow's and the rain started coming down right after we stepped inside the restaurant. When the hostess brought us into the dining room we couldn't believe our good fortune. There was no better place to wait out a storm than our table by the corner windows. (Although some would argue there are safer places.) The dining room is essentially a wall of windows with tables along them. Even if you're not one to appreciate the golf course aesthetic, this particular view is stunning. A grassy hill drops away from the window toward a creek with trees and shrubs growing alongside it, before sweeping up to the tree-covered bluff. As the storm clouds roiled over the hills toward us, a deer and her fawn ran along the creek seeking a safer spot. As the rain came down and spectacular bolts of lightning reflected off the windows, we enjoyed a Bison Burger with bacon, blue cheese, and caramelized onions over a glass of wine and tried to name the plants we saw growing in the kitchen garden. Tomatoes, peppers, herbs. After our delicious lunch, we decided to order dessert and another glass of wine—it was still raining after all. Carol had a beautifully presented (and yummy) Pavlova with kiwi and strawberries. Signatures is located at 22852 County Road 17. (507) 454-3767, www.signatureswinona.com.

There are some downsides when trying to sample most of a town's food in one day. Even I can only eat so much. What to do when my favorite sandwich shop closes at 2:00 and we just ate lunch? We went there anyway. You know—for The Cause. Although Beno's Deli had moved to a new location since I lived in Winona, I was excited when I swore I recognized the woman behind the counter as someone who made my sandwiches for me 18 years earlier. (Nostalgia has that effect on me.) Yes, indeed, it was the owner, Penny. She has worked at Beno's since the very first day her friend started the

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Signatures Restaurant



Benos Deli

business in 1984. Penny herself has owned it since 1988. Benos moved to its new location after a fire in a neighboring business caused a lot of smoke and water damage to the original location in January of 2001. Penny bought this new building, which used to be the city hall and is on the Historic Register. She likes the new location much better, partly because it has more room. I must admit I have fond memories of the old space with its dark wood and only nine tables, but anything that brings Benos more business is fine with me. Although I was still quite full from lunch, after learning that they'll sell any of their sandwiches as halves, I immediately ordered one of my old favorites, the Three's Company—ham, turkey, and swiss cheese on a poppy seed kaiser roll. This sounds like a pretty normal sandwich, but just try one and taste how good it is! Benos gets its buns from Bloedow's Bake Shop, which I never knew but helps explain why they're so good. Other favorites include the Dutch Treat (ham and provolone on the same said kaiser roll) and the Up in Smoke with smoked turkey and Swiss on, hmm, a poppy seed kaiser roll. I'm seeing a pattern emerge. But it's more than just the poppy seed kaiser rolls from Bloedow's. I swear. Hey, I also like the Pepin Pastrami, which is served on rye. You could also try the Waltz Me Willy—roast beef, braunschweiger and swiss on rye, and several others. Benos is located at 78 East 4th Street. (507) 452-2761.

Now it was off to another old favorite, one that didn't involve eating—just ice cream! I've always held the belief that it doesn't matter how full you are, there's always room for ice cream. The Penguin Zesto now has two locations, a larger location in the Winona suburb of Goodview opened four years ago. But I returned to the original walk-up location on Third Street, which has been there for 58 years, and ordered a cone with nutty sprinkles called a crunch cone. The Penguin Zesto's soft-serve ice cream is not as rich as a custard, but richer than ice milk-type ice creams. They also have sundaes, and the usual ice cream treats, as well as a variety of hot dogs, chili dogs and burgers, French fries and onion rings. On this day, I only needed a crunch cone to make me happy. If the ice cream doesn't make *you* happy, try an order of the Smiley Fries. Who could be sad with a plate full of delicious, fried potatoes smiling back at you? The Penguin Zesto is located at 602 East Third Street in Winona, (507) 452-9444, or at 5355 West Sixth Street in Goodview, (507) 453-7961.

On the way to our next destination, we spotted Priscilla's Country Mercantile. Finally a food-related place that really didn't require eating! This is a charming antique store billed as "Your Vintage Kitchen Store and More." It's located in the former home of the Bluff Country Co-op, which moved on to bigger digs. Priscilla's is full of cool kitchen



gadgets, and the owner was quite tolerant every time Carol and I asked the question, "What's this?" So many simple gadgets for so many specialized things... Some of which seem like smarter and easier designs than the high-tech things available in home stores today. They'll even buy your vintage kitchen items. Check out Priscilla's Country Mercantile at 114 East 2nd Street, (507) 474-2002.

Next, another great stop that didn't require eating: the Winona Farmers' Market. Even on a rainy Wednesday, folks were coming by to pick up fresh produce and we saw too many beautiful summer vegetables and flowers to name. We chatted with Market Manager Katie Mueller who told us that the demand for local food in Winona has grown quite rapidly over the last couple of years. CSA farms in the area are at capacity for their shares, and more and more vendors want to be a part of the farmers' market. The market would need to expand to take on any more than its current Saturday average of 35 vendors. Located at Main and Second Street, the market often features live music and cooking demonstrations to keep the crowds entertained. Check out the Winona Farmers' Market on Wednesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and on Saturdays from 7:00 a.m. to noon through October. www.farmwinona.org.

We were very curious about our next stop, the Blue Heron Coffeehouse. So many people told us we had to stop at the Blue Heron. Seems that it is a much-loved place that was

closed for almost a year and just recently re-opened in a new location, much to the joy of its many fans. I can see why people love it. It is owned by Larry and Colleen Wolner, two former organic farmers, who run the business in a very conscientious way. They emphasize local, organic, and fair trade, and all of the breads and pastries are made in-house. I had a delicious bowl of Rosemary White Bean soup, but other menu items the day we stopped in were a Scandinavian Egg Salad Sandwich on Rye, a Southwest Turkey on Ciabatta, and Creamy Green Bean and Mushroom soup. They were also serving Potato Oat Waffles and Whole Wheat Waffles, both with Black Raspberry Sauce. Also featured are cakes, brownies, cookies, scones, muffins, and cheesecakes, several other sandwiches, and salads. The atmosphere is great. Sit at the coffee bar, or at one of the many tables in the large blue and yellow seating area. The Blue Heron is only open for breakfast and lunch most days, but they also host music events some evenings. The Blue Heron's philosophy, listed on their website, says it all: "We believe that the preparation and cooking of food is one of the most delightful activities a human being can do and recognize that the enjoyment of wholesome food is essential to the pursuit of happiness." 'Nuff said. The Blue Heron is at 162 West Second Street, (507) 452-7020.

Pretty much right across the street is the new and improved location for the Bluff Country Co-op. This is a beautiful store that is chock full of wonderful local goodies. We found fresh herb-infused sea salts from Renaissance Farms in Spring Green, Wisconsin, raspberries from Hoch Orchards in Onalaska, locally roasted Kickapoo Coffee from Viroqua, Wisconsin, lots of different flours and cereals from Great River Organic Milling, cultured buttermilk from Farmers' Creamery in Kalona, Iowa, fresh organic chickens from Earth-Be-Glad Farm, bison from Buffalo Gal in Houston, Minnesota, and Castle Rock Ice Cream from Osseo, Wisconsin, including Sweet Cream and Molasses Chocolate Chip. The over-sized papier-mâché fruits and vegetables decorating the produce department are a wonderful, whimsical touch, too. Bluff Country Co-op is located at 121 West 2nd Street. www.bluff.coop.

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The Blue Heron Coffee Shop



Bluff Country Co-op

Our last stop before heading out of town was Ledebuhr Meats. "The friendly little meat shop with the big selection." This is very true. Store Manager Bob Sula was very friendly, and the selection was big. Everything from bratwurst to smoked beef can be found here. They've been certified organic since 1999, too. It's definitely worth a stop if you're looking to stock up for camping at Whitewater State Park in nearby Altura, or if you're headed back to the cities and have your cooler handy. The retail shop is located at 125 Harriet Street, (507) 452-1644.

Since it had been an hour since we had anything to eat at this point, it was now time to stop for dinner at Nosh in Wabasha. This restaurant in historic downtown Wabasha has a very big-city feel with its deep-blue tones and stainless steel toilets which, unlike many things in Wabasha, are not on the Historic Register. The menu changes often based on the availability of meat and produce from surrounding farms, and we had even met a grower at the Winona Farmers' Market who provides produce to Nosh. We didn't know where to start, so we started at the beginning with the small plates, ordering the house-made bourbon and black pepper sausage served with Manchego cheese, house-made currant and cider mustard, and grilled bread. Yum. We also couldn't resist ordering the Roasted Exotic Mushrooms with fried leeks in a sherry-butter reduction with grilled bread. It went on from there, but suffice it to say that the meal was great, and we returned home to hungry husbands full of stories of the wonderful food we had eaten over the last day and a half. Nosh is located at 260 Main Street West in Wabasha. (651) 565-2277, www.noshrestaurant.com.

Every morsel in Winona lived up to my memories. And I was pleased to see even more good, local foods available to people living in and traveling through this part of Minnesota and Wisconsin than when I was a resident.

As we headed north on Highway 61, catching glimpses of the setting sun between the bluffs, we vowed to return again to all these places, but armed with our husbands next time so that we could sample even more. ♦

