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THE STATE OF

STEAK

Iowa's steakhouses are touchstones to the farms and small towns from which many Des Moines area families moved.

By Jim Duncan

The scent of freshly cut meat searing over open flames is primal — one that encouraged our progenitors to straighten their spines, walk on just two legs, fashion spears and invent fire.

During the second half of the 19th century, beefsteak became an international obsession and a status food. It transformed the American range into the world's largest feed lot. Between the Civil War and 1880, Midwest cattle populations increased 30 times over. Because Iowa's fertile soil grew the most grain, the state's fatted cows produced the gold standard of that new food economy at a time when food drove all economies.

For a century, the status of Iowa beef extended to New

York City steakhouses and beyond. In 1959, Des Moines businessman Harry Bookey, then 11, told Russian Premiere Nikita Khrushchev that the U.S.S.R. might have an edge in satellite technology, but our beef was superior. Though a staunch Russian chauvinist, Khrushchev conceded the point.

When Khrushchev visited Des Moines, Iowa beef represented the culmination of one of the great romances in the histories of both agriculture and human migration. After Europeans got word of Iowa's black soil, immigrants flocked across oceans, mountains, forests and the hellfire of the Great Plains to realize the American dream of owning land from which they could make a good life.

By the end of the 19th century, they made Iowa a rich state. That wealth was sustainable and a source of pride. Fields produced corn in such abundance that farmers fed it to horses and cattle. Muscle meat from those cornfed cows became the final link in the great 19th- and 20th-century food chain that stretched from Iowa to the dining rooms of the best-fed people in world history.

For the next 100 years, Iowa steakhouses conjured a collective longing for halcyon days when corn was used for the sustenance of superior livestock, not to fuel cars, sweeten soft drinks or to use as toothpaste filler. Our steakhouses are touchstones to the farms and small towns from which many of Des Moines area families moved. Eighty percent of Iowa counties peaked in population more than 110 years ago while the Des Moines area grew continuously.

Steakhouses used to cover the state. In smaller towns, they often became surrogate country clubs — places for people to celebrate special occasions of life. Towns as small as Doon had steakhouses that drew diners from afar. In Hawarden, a WWI vet built a steakhouse by dragging stones uphill from the Big Sioux River and commissioning a Chicago artist to paint a mural of the barmaid who had charmed him in France.

The steakhouses of the mid 1900s exuded leather, oak and brass testosterone. Their smoke signals entreated us to, in Christina Rossetti's words, "Sit down and feast with us, be a welcome guest with us."

Sadly, much of that is gone. The last time I tried to visit Hawarden, my photographer phoned before I got there. The new steakhouse owner had threatened him with a loaded gun. Police advised us to stay away. Doon still has a steakhouse, but Hawarden's grand dame, and most smalltown steakhouses, are now wind-grieved ghosts.

As recently as 1970, 70% of Iowa farmers raised cattle. Iowa led the nation in beef production between World War II and 1980, peaking in 1969 at 7 million. Big changes came in the 1980s as fossil fuels became cheaper and Iowa farm land more expensive. Today, less than one-fourth of Iowa farmers raise cattle. Our feedlot population sets a post-World War II low almost every year.

The cattle moved west to cheaper land while Iowa's old grazing fields were plowed over for row crop farming. Most of Iowa's cattle feeders moved to urban and suburban centers. Even the nickname "Cattlefeeders" has been scrapped by high school sports teams. We are the No. 9 cattle state now.

Hogs are Iowa's new brand, and it's not a pretty story. You can cross the length or width of Iowa now without ever seeing a pig. Some 23 million of them are hidden mostly in confinements. There are no pork chop houses, except at the Iowa State Fair. Big, non-Iowa restaurant chains have created an ersatz steakhouse culture that claims to be various kinds of Texan, Gaucho, Greek



801 Chophouse is the one all others use as a measure.

or Aussie.

The real deal survived in Montour with Rube's, in Anita at the Redwood, at Archie's Waeside in Le Mars and Kalmes' in St. Donatus, at Moe Brady's in Davenport and Bogie's in Albia, at J Bruner in Clarinda and Fireside in Anthon. As the center of the beef universe moved west, the woebegone aura of our steakhouses grew like nostalgia at a high school reunion.

Then, in the COVID-ravaged ruins of steakhouse culture, a revival emerged more glorious than ever. The Jordan Creek neighborhood alone suddenly boasts four high-end, all prime and aged beef steakhouses. 801 Chophouse branched out from its downtown origin and is about to open its eighth store, in Tyson's Corner, Virginia.

Here is the state of our steakhouse art.

EXPERIENTIAL

Experiential dining is a new, real thing. Stock market analysts specialize in it. It manifests in steakhouses that pair dining with self-involvement. Rube's emerged from a tavern in Montour, population 250, in 1973 when Glen Rubenbauer went all-in on offering food with booze. He brought outdoor grilling inside and sold steaks for guests to cook themselves.

Rube's Montour store now occupies an entire square block, virtually all of downtown Montour. The steakhouse raises its own beef and has a large mail-order business. A second restaurant opened in Waukee 25 years ago. The legend of Rube's was such that New York Times, Boston Globe and Gourmet magazine all visited Montour.

Iowa Beef Steakhouse opened in 1982 after Pier owner Henry Schneider visited Rube's and saw a future inspired by Iowa rather than his native Eastern Shore. Today, it is a friendly, more economical alternative to Rube's, owned and operated by Schneider's former bartender and manager.

Range Grill & Golf does the grilling while customers play a round of golf, simulated on the world's greatest golf courses. The steaks are top notch, too, including wagyu, aged prime and several bison options.

DZÔ Korean BBQ brings self-grilling to the dining room table with inset grills. Because it is Korean, the experience includes banchan, virtual relish trays that elevate radishes, sprouts, spinach, cucumbers, cabbage and other common vegetables. Wagyu options are available. Short ribs are flanked, stews fabulous, and reservations recommended.

Guests stay seated at Terra Grill Steakhouse and Churrascaria, but they stay involved by hailing servers who slice various meats off large skewers. The full Brazilian cowboy experience also includes the most eclectic and exotic salad bar in the state.

TRADITIONAL

Traditional steakhouses lit their dark interiors with the simple charms of neighborhood and common wealth. Jesse's Embers has exemplified that since Jesse Rousch opened it in 1963. Besides the aroma of searing protein, the charm is the Embers' compact size — just one cozy room and a bar. Loyal clientele has included every Iowa governor since Bob Ray and most every local power broker since it opened. Clint Eastwood stopped in when filming in Winterset. Reservations are impossible, and even U.S. senators



Prime rib has been Chicago Speakeasy's specialty since it opened.

wait for a table.

Ron and Mary Jaeger opened Chicago Speakeasy in 1978. From day one, it featured a 50-item bar of scratch salads. It's still ice cooled, a labor intensive service that keeps salads colder than modern conveniences do. Prime rib has been the featured entrée since opening. John & Nick's is a spin off.

Culinary gunslinger Paul Trostel rode in from Colorado in the early 1970s with fine dining in his sights. He opened Greenbriar in 1983 on the far edge of town. Hidden from the authority of the day, he refined steakhouse culture with fine dining trappings. Every steak can still be accompanied with any sauce from the Escoffier handbook. The cowboy-style "gunpowder steak" is the most popular. Trostel's Greenbriar embodies both the outlaw and the steakhouse conservative. White tablecloths in one room are balanced by wood and brass testosterone in another.

The Big Steer opened on another edge of town in 1983. Its signature signage suggests that everything will be big, especially portions. Prime rib has been the menu signature from day one.

Johnny's Italian Steakhouse's three metro stores are a tribute to 1950s supper clubs and particularly to Johnny and Kays by master restaurateur Mike Whalen.

AJ's at Prairie Meadows has gone through several transformations. Once it was an all prime and aged more exclusive option to the casino's extremely popular buffet. Now that the buffet has been retired, AJ's is more affordable and less picky about its meats. Its excellent prime rib dinner was recently bargain-priced. Two things never change — trappings are deluxe, and scratch made desserts are both traditional and extraordinary.

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THE NEW HIGH-END

When traditional Iowa steakhouses lost their sway, big chains moved in and redefined the genre. Lone Star, Texas Roadhouse, Outback and several versions of inexpensive “Greek” steakhouses all brought unique takes on the subject, none of them uplifting. Fortunately, 801 Chophouse originated in downtown Des Moines in 1993.

It was the brainchild of Jimmy Lynch, arguably both the most visionary and the most noteworthy restaurateur in town. It was anointed by RW Apple, New York Times’ top political analyst and “food correspondent at large.” It has expanded to Omaha, Kansas City, Leawood, Minneapolis, Denver, St. Louis, and soon to Tysons Corner.

Options for wet aging, dry aging and A5 wagyu can be prepared with bone marrow butter, black truffle butter, red king crab Oscar, and cognac cream. Despite a plethora of new high-end steakhouses, 801

is still the one that others must use as a measure.

Irina’s Steak and Seafood has a Russian take on steakhouse culture. Jazz nights, Russian nights, Mexican nights, and other special events bring over-the-top touches like BBQ crocodile and vodka flights from all the great vodka countries. Prime beefsteaks are offered wet or dry aged.

Ruth’s Chris West Des Moines prescribes steroids for steakhouse culture. The biggest store in the entire chain, it encompasses two floors, 15,000 square feet, 450 seats, four dining rooms, three heated patios, two bars and several private rooms. It has its own wine club with private lockers. And, of course, it serves all USDA prime, aged beef. Trappings include tablecloth dining and a 1960s style dress code in the main dining room. When Ruth Fertel opened her first restaurant in 1960s New Orleans, she did it on \$4,000 of borrowed money. The West Des Moines store has a dozen chandeliers that cost that



DZŌ brings the fire tableside with banchan.

much and one that cost \$30,000. It’s also open for lunch, a rare thing for steakhouses.

Prime and Providence is the new kid on the Jordan Creek block. It is fully charged for the challenge with an oyster bar, caviar service, wet and dry aged steaks and options for A5 Kobe and bison short ribs. It also has resurrected cooking over real coals, something even Jesse’s Embers has abandoned. ■

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DES MOINES'

Food festivals

make their mark

Cultural events deliver cuisine from around the world.

The Latino Heritage Festival has been held for more than 20 years at various locations throughout Des Moines.

By Cyote Williams

Individuals from around the world call central Iowa home, and with them come celebrations of their cultures and their countries' cuisines. Events such as the World Food and Music Festival, CelebrAsian, Latino Heritage Festival and Cajun Fest celebrate more than food, but there's no doubt about the role food plays in each. Organizers share the stories of how the festivals began, the importance of food in their events and cultures, and more.

The who, why and how

While the World Food and Music Festival, held in late August; CelebrAsian, held during Memorial Day weekend; Cajun Fest, held in June; and Latino Heritage Festival, still to come Sept. 21-22, aren't the only food and cultural celebrations in the Des Moines area, they represent the wide net of cultures and cuisines cast over Des Moines.

Cajun Fest, the youngest of these celebrations, comes from humble beginnings. Stephen and Jacey Smith moved to Des Moines from Louisiana. They missed the tailgate, block-party style of crawfish boils of their home state. What started as a gathering of friends and family in backyards and parks morphed into a full-fledged celebration now

held at Cowles Commons.

The World Food and Music Festival (WFMF), an all-encompassing event, was created in 2005 by the Greater Des Moines Partnership and Downtown Events Group to celebrate Iowa's cultural heritage, according to Amelia Klatt, director of events at the Greater Des Moines Partnership.

The year 2005 was the first one for CelebrAsian, which is organized by The Iowa Asian Alliance. The IAA was in part founded in 2002 by Kim Poam Logan. The festival is currently overseen by Executive Director Nu Huynh.

Slightly older than the other festivals mentioned, the Latino Heritage Festival dates

back to 2002. Joe Gonzalez, executive director of the festival, says JoAnn Mackey approached then-Governor Thomas Vilsack about starting a Latino festival. Vilsack challenged Mackey to make it happen, and she did.

The food

Each of the big festivals strives to feature a variety of authentic foods for attendees to experience.

Classic Cajun favorites such as jambalaya, gumbo, cornbread, crawfish and beignets are served at Cajun Fest through the help of volunteers and vendors such as Buzzard Billy's, a downtown restaurant with Louisiana roots.

"The last two years, we've had people say, 'Well, I'm not an all-you-can-eat person, so I feel like I'm not getting my money's worth,'" Stephen Smith said. "So, crawfish is for the masses, but if you want to try some of these from the vendors, that's now a thing that we can offer."

For the masses is right. Stephen says the festival went through nearly 2,000 pounds of crawfish.

"It was the first year we sold out. People are getting the flavor for it, which is awesome to see," Stephen said.

"A lot of people in Iowa have not had a crawfish before. So, it might be daunting. Now people are starting to embrace not only the dish but what it is. A crawfish boil is all about sitting around at one table with each other," Stephen said.

To become one of the 30 different cuisines that will be offered at the WFMF in 2024, vendors must apply at the beginning of the year.

Klatt mentioned some of the longest-standing vendors at the WFMF as Taqueria 3 Hermanos, Filipino Store, Puerco Loco and Caribbean Style Pina Coladas, Sugar Daddy's Lemonade/Simeca's Italian Sausage, Papillon and Boba Tea 168. Fifteen new vendors joined those staples at the festival this year, including Creme, Fresh Fusion, Good Day DSM, Home Sweet Cone, Hungry Boys, Ma-Der Sap Sap, MinGaLaBar Burmese Kitchen, Off the Griddle, Polish King, Rosechu, Ruby B's Kitchen and Catering, Sweet Treats, Tarboosh and Vibes Kitchen + Bar.

At CelebrAsian, 16 "villages" represent different cultures including Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Lao, Marshallese, Micronesian, Myanmar, Nepalese, Tai Dam, Thai and Vietnamese. Each of those cultures' cuisines are represented at the festival, but in recent years it hasn't just been limited to those of Asian descent, with Bosnian, Mexican and other Latino food trucks making their way into the event as well.



At the World Food and Music Festival, 30 different cuisines were available for consumption at its 2024 event.

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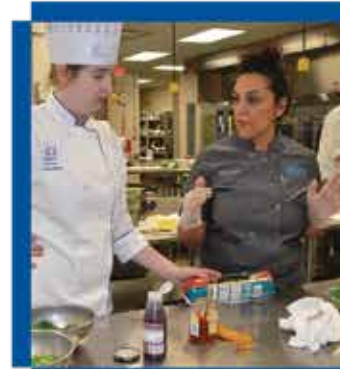
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“We also want to be inclusive and open, and part of doing this is not just showcasing the traditions, the cultural heritage, but it’s also inspiring others to embrace and to be open minded, whether it’s Asian fusion or somehow put your Asian flair spin on it,” Huynh said.

Mom-and-pop shops and full-scale restaurants are represented at the Latino Heritage Festival.

“Our greatest participant is probably the mom-and-pop type of vendor. Whether it’s a small business or just themselves wanting to do it and go to different festivals to sell their food. They’re important to us because they’re trying to better their lives,” Gonzalez said. “The challenge is getting the right mixture (of cuisines) represented so that people can see that there is a variety of food there.”

Gonzalez says there’s no shortage of Mexican cuisine represented at the festival, but they do pull in plenty of vendors that represent other countries, such as Tullpa, which is Peruvian; 58 Venezuelan; and several Puerto Rican food vendors. To keep up with the demand, two to three El Salvadorian pupusa vendors and two churro vendors will be there.

The festival doesn’t have a vendor that’s been there since the beginning, but several come close.

“Jose’s Tacos has been there a long time. Sabores De Mexico, a lot of years. Those are the two that have been with us probably the longest,” Gonzalez says.



Cajun Fest attendees ate through nearly 2,000 pounds of crawfish during the 2024 event.

Growth over the years

Food festivals draw big crowds, and those crowds continue to grow, organizers say.

The Smiths’ eventual goal for their Louisiana-inspired festival is to see it become the Mardi Gras of the Midwest. While its rapid growth was unexpected, it has been appreciated.

“It definitely grew faster than we would have anticipated. Just seeing that growth made it that much more exciting to throw the next year. So, though not anticipated, it’s been super fun the entire time,” Jacey Smith said.

The Smiths have been learning on the fly and have been getting



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help from hundreds of volunteers to put together the growing festival.

Changing venues is something the World Food and Music Festival knows all about.

“The Festival began to grow and moved to the bridges between the East Village and Downtown. To continue to accommodate the growth, in 2017, the festival moved to Western Gateway Park. In 2023, we had the largest attendance of over 105,000 guests over the three days and featured over 50 food vendors,” Klatt said.

That’s quite the growth from the first festival in 2005, which had two dozen vendors and a few thousand guests.

Even more used to changing venues, CelebrAsian was first held at Gray’s Lake, with somewhere between 500 to 1,000 people in attendance, according to Huynh. Once it outgrew Gray’s Lake, the festival moved to Water Works Park. Unfortunately, flooding concerns moved the festival to the Blank Park Zoo with less than a week’s notice. After a few years at the zoo, the festival moved to its current spot at Western Gateway Park.

The festival also moved its date and went from one day to two. Previously, the festival was held in early May, which avoided competing with Memorial Day weekend. Instead of dodging the competition of the national holiday, Huynh and the IAA decided to face it head on.

“Why don’t we give them a reason to stay in town?” Huynh said. “Why don’t we give a reason for people to come here?”



CelebrAsian has 16 villages throughout its festival that each represent a different Asian countries culture.

That change has worked out for CelebrAsian, with Huynh noting the success they’ve experienced in not only bringing in Iowans who are looking for something to do during the holiday weekend but also those from out of state.

The Latino Heritage Festival got off to a shaky start, as the tragic events of 9/11 occurred two weeks before the originally scheduled date of the inaugural festival.

The following year, the festival was held on one of the bridges in downtown Des Moines. Intense winds and adverse weather sent several tents into the river. The event has since bounced around from Water Works Park to Southridge Mall, to the Blank Park Zoo, and now to its current location, Western Gateway Park.

Akin to CelebrAsian, the Latino Heritage Festival has a cultural

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“village” in hopes of representing as many Latino countries, cultures and cuisines as possible.

“We hopefully represent as many other countries as we can. Food is the same way, but it’s a little more difficult. It’s different having somebody come in with artifacts, flags, clothing typical to their country to represent than it is to be there cooking for two solid days,” Gonzalez said.

Plans for the future

Most of the food festivals for 2024 have wrapped up and are already planning for the 2025 events.

Since Cajun Fest is still in its early days as a festival, at least compared to the others mentioned, its future may be harder to predict.

“Do we want to be a 10,000- to 30,000-person Southern rock show, or do we want to be a 1,000 person crawfish boil?” Stephen asked. “Although we had the vision to bring cool events to a cool place that did some cool things, now we’re learning the business side of running a festival.”

This year, Cajun Fest partnered with SingleSpeed Brewing Co. to make the Bayou Brew. That type of innovation and fusion are some of the things the Smiths hope to continue.

“I think, next year, we have some cool vendors who aren’t from the Cajun states who are going to put a Cajun flair on items that are more familiar versus the other way around. I think having that combination will be great,” Stephen said.

The WFMF is closing in on 20 years and has no plans to slow down.

“We plan to continue the strong tradition of hosting this festival. We are always looking to feature new food vendors and always looking to grow and improve on a year-to-year basis. This year, we have a record 60 food vendors,” Klatt said.

Another change in venue might be on the horizon for CelebrAsian, as rising costs and a growing number of patrons might take them elsewhere in Des Moines.

“When it comes to Western Gateway Park, it’s a beautiful central

location. It has the right amount of shade, lawn and concrete, but it’s also getting quite expensive,” Huynh said. “We’re always thinking, what other locations will Iowa or Des Moines build to host events such as this that will also to be cost-effective and friendly for festivals?”

As for the future of the Latino Heritage Festival, Gonzalez mentioned bringing in more musical acts and dance performances from outside of the U.S., even though they focus on bringing in local groups.

“We have a women’s group coming in from Columbia, an all-women mariachi band. We try to rotate the music, and we haven’t had a mariachi band in a long time. We have folkloric dancers coming from Veracruz, Mexico. We have a Brazilian bossa nova group. We’ve never had that type of music or any Brazilian band play at all and they reached out to us with interest,” Gonzalez said.

Why are they important?

Other than being a great way to get outside during the summer months in Des Moines, food festivals provide attendees the opportunity to experience a new culture and taste their food offerings — and perhaps dine in local restaurants they hadn’t tried before. They are also a great way to bring Des Moines’ variety of communities together.

“I feel like the reason we have done well, and continue to do well, is because we are an authentic, super, community-based event. The individuals that come, and the leaders we have that have been there from day one, consistently come and engage with us,” Jacey said. “I feel like we truly built a community. And, for me, personally, that is a priority. Would it be fun to grow into something larger? Of course. Because, the bigger the party, the more fun. I think there’s something to be said about keeping a close-knit group and having it really feel like a community that comes together.”

The 60-plus food vendors at the WFMF give those attending the chance to experience a wide range of cultures and tastes. With more than 100,000 attendees, those vendors and restaurants that get that exposure continue to grow a diverse food scene in central Iowa.

Huynh recalls the Eggroll Ladies, now a popular spot on Des Moines’ north side, got its start with a vendor stall at CelebrAsian, showing how a successful stint at one of these festivals might lead to starting a business.

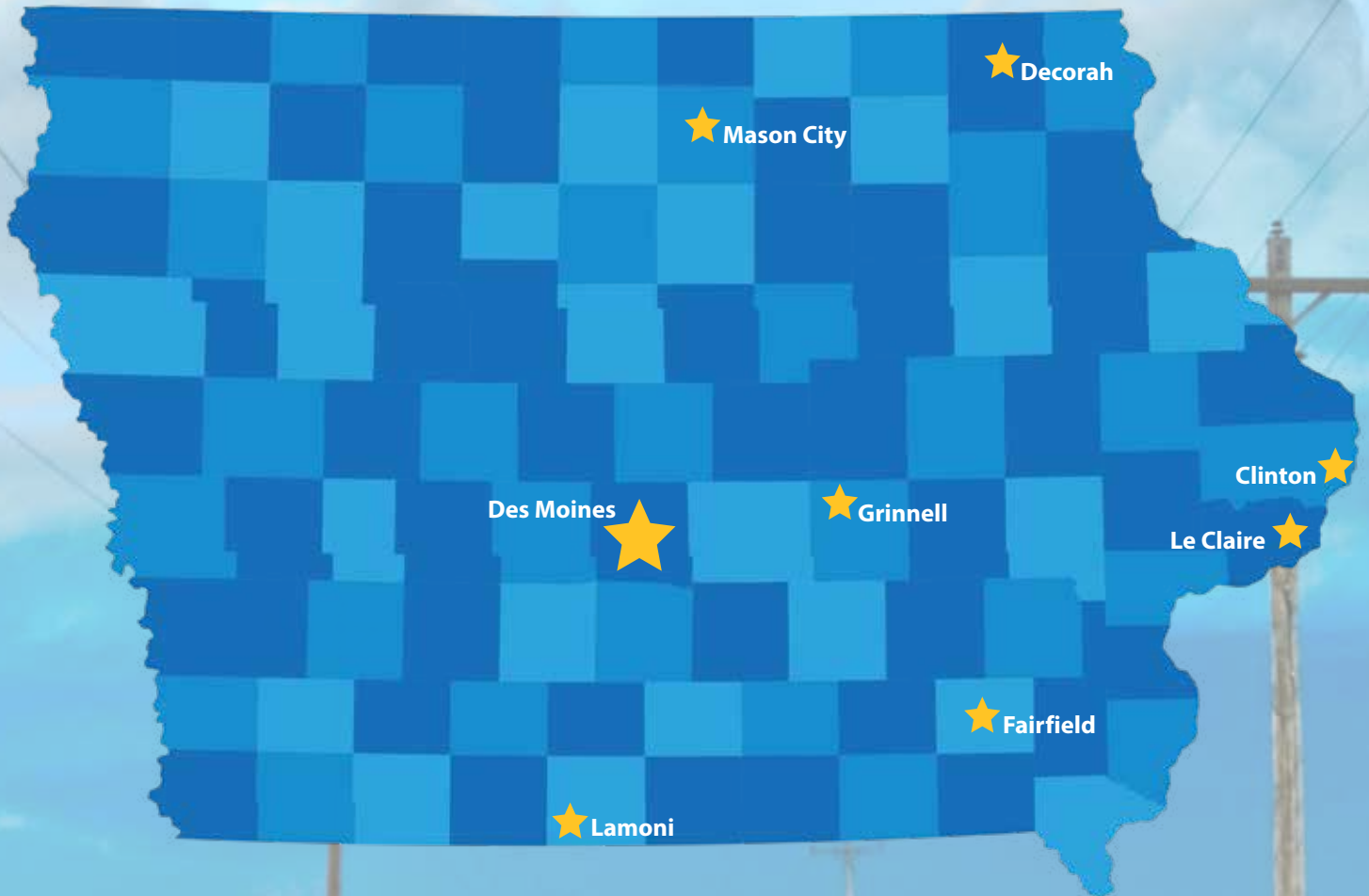
“It’s really cool to see these small, one- to two-individual stands grow and develop their businesses,” Huynh said.

The Latino Heritage Festival is one of the few festivals that does charge admission, \$5 for adults, with children 11 and younger free.

“It helps with administrative costs for the following year. But, more importantly, the more successful we are because of what we get out the gate, beer sales and soda sales, we are then able to give back to the community. So, the last two or three years would have averaged giving back about \$25,000 to nonprofits that are specifically in the Latino community,” Gonzalez said. ■

ROAD TRIPS for foodies

Iowa has much to entice travelers who follow their noses and taste buds.



By Jim Duncan

Food tourism is a rather new big thing. To justify reports that Florida had paid expenses for Michelin to create a restaurant guide to the state, Florida's tourism department announced that Tampa brought in \$1.09 billion in food spending last year, Orlando \$7.33 billion, and Miami \$4.88 billion, and that tourism accounted for much of that.

Iowa has a lot of tourist attractions but does little to promote them. That is left to towns like Dubuque, counties like Van Buren and private entities like the Newton Speedway and the Field of Dreams. Yet, Iowa has much to entice travelers who follow their noses and taste buds.

For Iowans, in-state, food-driven road trips are best taken in autumn. September's harvest is the year's best as seen in extraordinary farmers markets of Iowa City, Decorah, Fairfield and Lamoni. The state's rich black soil

grows the world's best tomatoes, and they are in peak season in September in the company of late summer's melons and autumn's early treats — squash, apples and fall spinach, so different from summer's version it's like another food.

Orchards are in "you-pick 'em" glory, particularly in the Loess Hills, Winneshiek, Greene and Jefferson counties. Homecoming parades and games with their marching bands, football teams and tailgating opportunities are rife in towns like Harlan, Orange City and Grinnell, as well as on university campuses. Indian summer and campfire huddles can share the same weekend.

These are some of our favorite Iowa road trips taste-tested over the seven decades since we got our driver's license and began seeking things to eat that neither Mom nor Grandma made at home.

AN HOUR OR SO DRIVE

LAMONI is a food lover's roadside attraction. An hour down U.S. 69 or I-80, it offers an Amish Farmers Auction where food vendors buy truckloads of produce to resell at other farmers markets. Smaller lots are usually sold by vendors at the same time. Those happen on Wednesdays and Fridays in growing months.

On Thursdays and some Saturdays, the Sales Barn auctions livestock, up to 500 a day, in a timeless barn where little has changed in a century. Humans still bid against one another, with auctioneers officiating to control the fates of other animals. The Sales Barn Café does a fabulous job on old-fashioned favorites like buttermilk-marinated breaded pork tenderloins, and thin, freshly cut and battered onion rings; plus pies and pastries.

McBee Meat Company has one of the best shopping cases of all Iowa's wonderful meat lockers. Lamb entrails, beef hearts

and back ribs, deer jerky, four kinds of bacon and just about every part of any animal raised or killed for meat are for sale. Bring a cooler.

The Amish Country Store & Maid Rite offers great prices on spices and carries hard-to-find ones like whole nutmegs. They also have homemade preserves, jellies, jams and fruit butters always sweetened with real sugar not HFCS or any chemical you can't pronounce.

Beyond food, Graceland University sports teams play in the Closson Center, a giant architectural covered wagon. Its roof is suspended by three huge arches twixt a network of steel cables and wire mesh covered by rubber and nine coats of polyurethane foam. Nothing else like it is left in America.

In the area, the Dinky Diner in nearby Decatur City draws people from near and far for their chicken fried steaks, hot beef sandwiches, homemade pies and



McBee's Meat Company in Lamoni is a star of Iowa's comprehensive meat locker scene.

pastries. It is one of a dwindling number of Valentine diners, famous and far flung in the 1940s and 1950s. Plus, legal enticements suddenly banned in Iowa are less than 10 miles south in Eagleville, Missouri.

Or...

GRINNELL has a renowned college with an extraordinary endowment and impressive art museum. That's well

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known. The town also now boasts of a unique, charming hotel, wine houses, coffee shops and cafés that are more urban than small town. Homecoming and its parade are big deals here. Prairie Canary is one of Iowa's top cafés.

Hotel Grinnell is a repurposed 1921 junior high school smack dab on the town square. It's a true boutique hotel — uniquely combining spa trappings, old school ambiance and a recess mindset with a nod to the college town it serves. Its bar/restaurant is named The Periodic Table.

TWO HOURS OR SO

FAIRFIELD is a trip, in the 1960s sense of the slang. Maharishi International University and its penchant for attracting worldly transcendental meditators have created an astonishing business community including the world's leading marble cutter and Iowa's best organic dairy — Radiance. Bring a cooler.

You can find Ayurvedic restaurants and even an Ayurvedic spa, healers of all sorts and almost any type of cuisine you can't find anywhere else in Iowa.

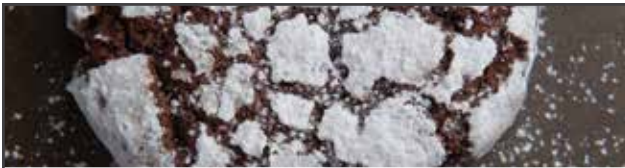
Iowa's ridiculously good cider house scene is represented by Fishback & Stephenson. They also provide a kitchen that mainly turns out burgers. Oh, what burgers. They are sourced from whole cows, including prime ribs and filets that are pasture-raised



Hotel Grinnell repurposes a 1921 Junior High School with resort flair.

nearby from birth to finishing by the Adrian family of Jefferson County. The cattle are finished on a diet of apple mash from the cider house.

I have never tasted a better burger. They are six-and-a-half-ounce patties in various styles. Sides are unique, too. Where else can you call your kale? Dazzling Blue and Westlander kales from the Maharishi University Organic Regenerative Gardens



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are used. The Caesar kale salad includes anchovy filets, freshly shaved Parmesan, and croutons roasted in bacon fat.

“Cowboy caviar” combines black eyed peas and sweet corn with three peppers. Hard cider and clam chowder are served as sides with burgers.

Or...

MASON CITY has the largest Greek American population in Iowa, and its Northwestern Steak House, dating to 1920, is the best Greek restaurant in the state, as well as one of the best steakhouses. The town has fabulous city parks, a hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and excellent Victorian homes, including one that houses the MacNider Art Museum.

Van Buren County boasts “Iowa’s only county without a stoplight.” The Villages of Van Buren are nestled in a river valley and a time warp. When the Mormons were run out of Nauvoo, many

of them stopped along the Mormon Trail to earn enough to move on. The historic buildings in Bentonsport, Bonaparte and Keosauqua were built by such superb craftsmen when those towns were rich on river commerce. Silt and the railroads ended that prosperity, and things blessedly froze in time.

The Manning Hotel opened in 1899 in Keosauqua with Steamboat Gothic architecture and river views. The Mason House in Bentonsport was a Civil War hospital and does not discourage rumors that Abe Lincoln slept there, near his beloved Anne Rutledge’s home and grave.

The Dutchman’s Store in Cantrill and the Milton Creamery offer excellent Amish products. The county’s charms drew 20th-century artists including the great painter Wendell Mohr and the first family of contemporary folk music, Greg Brown and Iris Diment.

THREE HOURS OR SO

On one trip to **DECORAH**, a local chauvinist told me the town was now the “preferred retirement center for liberal Lutheran clergy.” In hopes of running into oxymorons, I extended my stay and discovered things that attract them.

Decorah occupies a part of Iowa unlike the rest. It’s surrounded by mountains, river valleys and land that has never been suitable for planting row crops. As a result, its farmers markets are unique with the bounty of organic foods that grow in rocky fields and at variable elevations. It even has a geological nickname — The Driftless.

If that isn’t why Seed Savers Exchange (SSE) settled here, it explains why it thrived here. SSE is one of the world’s biggest banks for rare seeds, and the only private one. It specializes in heirloom seeds carried over oceans by immigrants to America. It is a big reason why Iowa grows the country’s best tomatoes. Listen to the

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mighty music of their names — Sheboygan and Brandywine, Earliana and Opalka, Kanner Hoell and Wapsipinicon, Green Zebra and Hungarian Heart. This year's Grand Tomato Tasting is Sept. 7.

The 890-acre SSE Heritage Farm headquarters is called the “most diverse farm in the world” by ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan. More than 25,000 rare fruit, vegetable and plant varieties are regenerated, refrigerated and preserved. It has its own underground seed vault held at below-freezing temperatures, a herd of White Park Cattle, and 900 apple tree varieties.

The Historic Orchard, the Amy Goldman Heritage Orchard, heritage poultry breeds, roaming Ancient White Park cattle, a century barn, miles of hiking trails and a trout stream fill out its charms. The annual Orchard Tour and Apple Tasting will be Oct. 5.

Decorah also sports one of Iowa's great hotels, the 1905 Hotel Winneshiek

with terrazzo floors, marble walls, cherry woodwork, mahogany doors and a grand staircase complementing modern amenities. Oh, it also has its own opera house.

The great fisherman and sports writer Bryce Miller raves about the local fishing waters. Circle the 11-mile Trout Run Trail. Dunning Springs Waterfall is a primary location for wedding photos.

The Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum is a great history lesson. Holiday season brings out julebukklers, a cross between Halloween pranksters and Christmas carolers. Rubaiyat restaurant serves such Middle Eastern exotics as camel burgers and boasts Iowa's best collection of Levantine wines.

Or...

The most popular Iowa destinations of the fall are mostly on the Mississippi River. Beyond the changing leaves, one of Iowa's best restaurants awaits in **CLINTON**. Rastrelli's was founded by Tuscan immigrants Pete and Ida Rastrelli in 1939

as a candy shop. They later became one of Iowa's very first pizza makers. Today, steaks, seafood and Italian dishes are also served. Their quite famous bread was created in 1957.

LE CLAIRE's historic charms are many. Buffalo Bill Cody was a native. History Channel's American Pickers originated in Le Claire's antique shops. Mississippi River Distilling Company offers daily tours and a cocktail lounge. Their spirits are concocted with grains and herbs grown within 50 miles. MRDC's River Rose is my favorite gin anywhere with botanicals from orange, grapefruit, lemon, lavender, rose petals and locally grown cucumbers.

Fullmer's Fish Market is Iowa's last old fashioned fish shack business. They offer Mississippi River yield including sturgeon, buffalo fish and several kinds of carp and catfish. I know people in Chicago who make the trip just to buy their smoked sturgeon. ■



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'More deals heading your way'

By Jim Duncan

COVID 19's long-term effect on the restaurant business is clearing up. Revised numbers from the National Restaurant Association (NRA) now put the death toll at 90,000 restaurants. **Victor Fernandez**, Black Box Intelligence's VP for Insights and Knowledge, said quick-service restaurants and fast casuuls held their own better than most full-service eateries, but they, too, feel economic sluggishness now.

Fernandez said most mid-priced family concepts and casual-dining restaurants have fared the worst compared to the grab-and-go spots.

"You might not go to Chili's but may pick up from Chipotle," he said.

The way restaurants are coping with the pandemic aftermath and with four years of inflation changed the last six months. McDonald's gave in to customer defections and, after five years, finally tried to match Wendy's successful \$5 meal deal. Even Starbucks, long opposed to any kind of discounts, gave in. "50% off a drink. It's on," Starbucks said in an email to customers. "Keep checking the app all summer for more deals heading your way." Keep track of new bargains in our Daily Umbrella column www.thedailyumbrella.com.

David Portalatin, Senior VP and Food Adviser at marketing analysis giant Circana, told the NRA that burger, pizza and taco chains have performed well, but a new crop of chicken specialty menu items have become favorites of bargain-seeking customers. He added that franchise restaurants fared better than indies in the pandemic aftermath because of their deeper pockets. Still, Red Lobster paid the bankruptcy penalty for committing the unforced error of selling all their real estate and leasing it back. And, no, it was not

"endless shrimp" that took them down.

The U.S. Department of Labor continued its persecution of Iowa's, and only Iowa's, independent restaurant owners. Yet, locally, the comeback is obvious and the reason why we have more good news than bad to report.

THE GOOD NEWS

Trang Pham moved her food trucks business **Egg Roll Ladies** into permanent digs on Second Avenue in Saylor Township. ERL delivers totally scratch signature delights. The name includes Trang's delightful daughter who sometimes waits on customers, when she is not napping... **Good Eatin's** resurrected "meat and two" Southern cooking in all its catfish/chicken/collards/sweet potato/peach cobbler glory, in the old Luigi's on Southeast 14th...

Dominic Iannarelli and Cory Gourley opened **Prime & Providence**, a decadent take on the modern steakhouse and oyster bar, in West Des Moines with Kobe beef options and coal-fired grilling... Seven years in from his first food truck, Arturo Mora of the Flame Mexican restaurants opened superb fusion restaurant **Roots 95** in the former Wasabi in Johnston... Lynn Pritchard resurrected the excellent **Table 128**, this time just south of downtown. He also opened **Hugo's Wood Fired Grill** just west of Drake on University... Chelsea Lyons, whose popular **Players** was seized by the city, opened **Chelsea's Courtyard Diner** in the 300 MLK building near the ballpark's players... Former Jenny Lee's owner Jenny Symonds returned as co-owner and executive chef at **The Handlebar** along the Raccoon River Valley Trail... Michael Hanstad debuted **Pepp's Pizzeria** in the former Mema's Italian Grinders in Grimes serving pizza by the

slice in Brooklyn style, but just 200 a day, then it closes. That works for BBQ...

Wilson's Orchard of Iowa City opened Cumming operations, but super chef Matt Steigerwald retired... The owners of Pho Real Kitchen & Bar opened **Zavy Kitchen** with "modern Vietnamese" fare in East Village... **What Dak** opened "in the heart of West Des Moines" with bulgogi, octopus dumplings and Korean corn dogs complementing their signature Korean double-fried chicken... **Egg Bistro** diner in Ankeny took over the former Georgio's Greek Grill on Delaware Avenue in a whimsical clash of Pop Art and Parthenon murals... Both the **Grimaldi's** and the **Home Grown** chains added stores in the Jordan Creek hood... **HiFi Brew Lounge** opened in the former Fox Brewing location on South 11th.

THE SAD NEWS

Peace Tree Brewing ceased production and began phasing out its taproom operations after 15 years. The East Village tap room closed, and the Knoxville mother store was due to close by press time. They were the face of Iowa craft brew culture. They won many "best" awards, and their Blonde Fatale was the strongest beer in Iowa and an essential rite of the Red Rock summer... Lynn Pritchard closed **503 Cocktail Lab & Tasting Room** after two years in East Village... America lost a wine legend in June with the passing of **Warren Winiarski**, founder of Stag's Leap. His cabernet sauvignon famously bested all of Bordeaux in the 1976 Judgment of Paris tasting, showing that American wine could compete with France's top bottles. He also was the leading sponsor of Smithsonian's Food History Project at the National Museum of American History. ■



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