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DES MOINES' GUIDE TO FOOD AND DINING



SPRING 2025

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Hospitality

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TODAY?

By Jim Duncan

Simon Goheen's restaurant, Simon's, won top-20 status nationally in the James Beard Awards (JBA) Outstanding Hospitality category. That was the first time an Iowa restaurant was honored with that distinction.

Goheen's neighborhood café at Merle Hay and Franklin is best known for hospitality in an old-fashioned, Iowa form. He grew up in a family that ate out every night because restaurants were

customers for the family business — Fancy Breads. He still serves a complimentary bread basket as well as a complimentary red velvet cake dessert. Bread baskets used to be standard in Des Moines, but only a handful of places still offer them.

By sheer force of personality, Goheen makes his customers feel like part of a neighborhood. Waiting for a table is an experience, not an annoyance. He makes an unusual effort to visit every table personally.

That’s a vanishing grace. From WWII into the early 21st century, Des Moines restaurateurs were almost always “front of the house” guys. Babe Bisignano, his brother, Chuck, and his niece, Linda; Johnny and Kay Compiano; Rocky and Ralph Compiano; Aunt Jenny Renda; Pete Riccelli; Gary Fatino; Paul Trostel; Red and Joe Giudicessi, their kids Rene and Ron; Noah Lacona; Guido Fenu; Rose and Jim Pigneri; Bobby Tursi; the father and sons team of Joe, Joe Jr., Louie and Mario Tumea; Prasong Nurack; Joe “Mr. V” Vivano; Mike LaValle; Steve Logsdon; Rabbi Yossi Jacobson; Mao Heineman; Alice Nizzi; Rosa Martinez; the Baratta family and the younger southsiders who now run that place; Marty Scarpino and his parents — all were the main attractions in their restaurants.

Babe told us that he would rather close his place down than operate it without his daily presence. Joe Giudicessi explained that, “If a first-time customer has a disappointing meal, you can get them back if you react and try to fix things. If he has a bad service, he’s gone forever.”

That kind of “Iowa nice,” personality-driven hospitality dissipated with the rise of chef/owners, was popularized by Food Network and the many



Oak Park has 9,000 bottles of wine in its cellar.

culinary schools that developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

You can count the places that still have an active owner hosting on your fingers. Simon’s, Macabee’s Deli, Christopher’s, Baratta’s, Jesse’s Embers and Tumea and Sons are still at it, but it is a lost art.

Goheen seems to be the last of a breed that does not fit the Geist of the 2020s. His JBA honor is symptomatic of changing definitions of hospitality. When we served as a JBA judge, hospitality was defined by the trappings of luxury: the size of your wine cellar, number of sommeliers and maitre d’s, the

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Only half of this year’s JBA hospitality nominees are traditional. Aria in Atlanta has won at least four AAA diamonds for 15 years in a row. Its wine list is 19 pages long and has won the highest awards from both Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast, with several bottles more than \$3,000. Atomix in New York City has two Michelin stars, three stars from the New York Times and ranked sixth in the 2023 World’s 50 Best Restaurants, the only USA restaurant in the top 15.

Compère Lapin in New Orleans has been on “best in America” lists by GQ, Conde Nast, Food and Wine, Wine Enthusiast, Saveur, Maxim and Esquire. République is situated in Charlie Chaplin’s house in historic Los Angeles and succeeds the legendary La Brea bakery there.

Harbor House Inn, in Elk, California, is always on best oceanfront hotel and restaurant lists. I once met New York Times legend RW Apple there. It has 27 adjacent wineries, two Michelin stars, and California’s only Michelin green star. Holly Hill Inn in Midway, Kentucky, is a hotel-restaurant in

the middle of Bluegrass country. Owner-chef Ouita Michel has won James Beard awards, plural. A table there during Kentucky Derby week is so cherished that reservations are resold on the black market.

Kai is the only AAA Five Diamond and Forbes Five Star restaurant in Arizona. It backs up against Komatke Mountain Range. Its art is museum class. It is one of very few places (along with the mess hall of U.S. Naval Academy, the Ahwahnee in Yosemite, and the wind-grieved Windows on the World) in which I was awed to be in the room.

In that traditional sense of hospitality, Splash, 801 Chop House, Prime & Providence and Oak Park would be Des Moines’ best examples. Oak Park and Prime & Providence won’t be eligible for this JBA till next decade. It used to be that hospitality wasn’t built in a day, or a year.

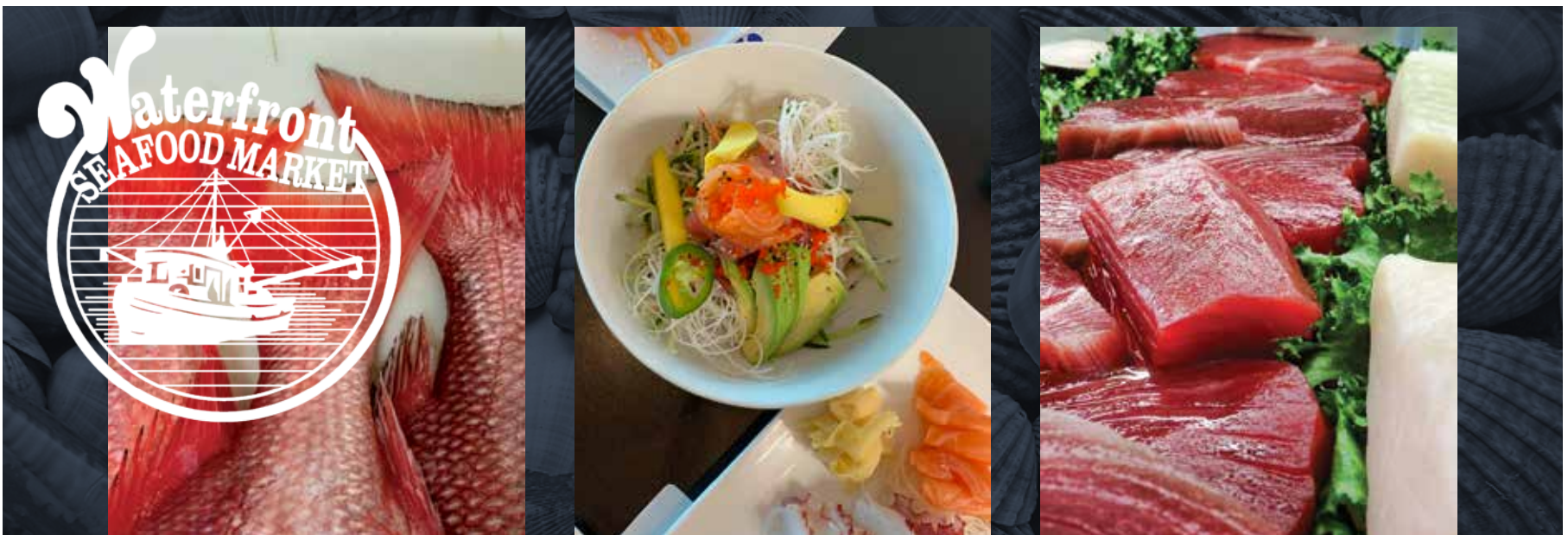
Lavish trappings no longer define hospitality. At least five JBA nominees look like DEI entries, humbly celebrating the foods of Burundi, the Philippines, Indian reservations, Greek isles, etc. Simon’s joins the legendary soul food café Melba’s in Harlem as a personality-driven success. Melba Wilson runs her place like Goheen, as a living room for the neighborhood. But she’s expanding and will spread thin soon.

Looking for the state-of-the-art of hospitality, we talked with two business people who live the subject. They had so much to say we will now get out of the way and let them elaborate. Cyd Koehn’s Catering by Cyd consistently wins “best caterer” designation by CITYVIEW readers.

KOEHN

“Hospitality begins when you answer the phone. That’s the first impression customers will have. You must answer professionally. That means good diction. You can’t have a mumblor taking calls. Basically, what you need to ask a customer is ‘How can we make your experience better?’

“In personal introductions, don’t ever leave a guest standing; don’t even rush them. Always smile. Never, ever chew gum, lean on a guest’s chair or table, or touch them. Make eye contact. Never sit down with customers unless they ask you to. Never show any annoyance with a customer, no matter how annoying they might be. Don’t rush people out the door; if they have lingered too long and you need to turn their table, you must anticipate that and make it clear at the beginning. You can’t just spring that on a party, but they will accept it as a condition from the beginning.



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“Hospitality is super-sensitive to transparency, mainly the lack of it. Nothing turns me off more than finding a service charge of 20% or more hidden on a check that also leaves a line open for gratuities. It makes me feel deceived into tipping double the amount I thought I was tipping. That’s the worst kind of hospitality. Be upfront. People hate hidden charges, like for ‘inflation surcharges,’ ‘non cash payments’ or ‘equality and equity.’

“Great hospitality means caring about your trappings — the best silverware, cutlery, table cloths, and the padding under them — those things matter at the top level of hospitality.

“Wine service, at the highest level, means correct crystal stemware, or stemless ware, for each type of wine. At any level, it means a new clean glass with each serving. Never just push the most expensive bottle. Good wine service means explaining the value of what you are serving. People want their sommelier to sell them a discovery that is not the most expensive.

“Never mention your own shortcomings. I dined recently at an upscale Italian restaurant in Colorado Springs. The wine steward told us that he’s ‘not a real sommelier and he only knows American wines.’ But



Cyd Koehn

their wine list was overwhelmingly Italian. Then he recommended a wine and brought a \$300 split (half-sized bottle) for a party of three. And he argued with us. Never argue with a guest.

“It’s very important that a server pay attention. I was at Harbinger recently and my server, Grace,



Joe Tripp with Simon Goheen

noticed our table was wobbling and asked if she could balance it. That really impressed me.

“The best hospitality means serving four or five meals a day, including afternoon tea and high tea. I was at the Brown Hotel in Denver, and they served both teas with completely different and appropriate

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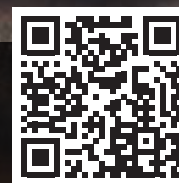
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service, down to different napkins. Of course, servers should crumb your table cloth after courses and always replace napkins when a guest gets up from the table during the meal.

“The best service means training your staff in CPR and first aid. If you could actually save lives, don’t you want to know how?” Koehn’s staff has those kinds of training plus training in etiquette, Tero (violence prevention) and bar service licenses.

ROTTENBERG

Paul Rottenberg heads Orchestrate Hospitality Group, mostly known for its restaurants but also active in the hotel and grocery businesses.

“I was very happy to see Simon included in the hospitality award. He’s a throwback guy like Bobby Tursi. There was no way that Latin King could ever be the same without Bobby. They also had the double whammy of losing Patrick (chef), too. I think a big part of Oak Park’s success was that (owners) Bill and Kathy (Ferhman) were there greeting people at the door.

“Trostel’s Greenbriar is a phenomenon. It survived losing Paul, Troy, Cody and still goes on the same way. Simon’s relaxed ‘owner on the floor’ style of hospitality is rare anymore. Baratta’s has it with

their owners usually working the floor. The Brooks brothers (B&B Meat, Deli and Grocery) have it, and Rabbi Jacobson (Maccabee’s Deli).

“I don’t think it’s good hospitality to not take reservations. People need to plan their time and not wait indefinitely. But Simon’s customers don’t seem to mind. They even line up half an hour before the doors open.

“Simon’s hospitality-without-pretension is refreshing. After all, hospitality began in inns before there were any restaurants. The innkeeper’s personality was what brought people back. That expanded to pubs and restaurants.

“The era of restaurants bearing the first name of the owner is dying. Simon’s is the last one in Des Moines that I can think of. There are several bars but not restaurants. Today, restaurateurs want to expand to multiple locations. An owner can’t be in two places at the same time, so he has to depend on the culture he builds to serve as that presence. That’s not reliable. That’s why Hy-Vee’s ‘a friendly smile in every aisle’ is brilliant. It implies that such presence is there in all employees.”

“Hospitality takes a village. If you can inspire pride in your dishwashers, you can create a village from the ground, or sink up.



Paul Rottenberg

“Many things about the restaurant business are cyclical. Hospitality is not one of them. COVID was unprecedented, and we’re still adjusting. Most restaurant and hotel businesses began layoffs with their marketing department. We never did that because we thought that marketing was essential to maintaining relationships during shutdowns. Gen Z is unprecedented in many ways. They like to cook more and go out less. I don’t think they relate to traditional styles of hospitality. They understand that it’s better, but they don’t think it’s so much better that it’s worth the added cost.” ■



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POUR me a GLASS

Des Moines is home to new and old breweries, each serving unique craft brews and good times.

By Cyote Williams

The History Channel says beer was likely introduced in the Middle East by the Sumerians roughly 5,000 years ago. Since then, the beverage has seen its fair share of changes and adaptations. Taps around the world feature lights, darks, stouts, sours, ales, lagers, porters and pilsners.

In Des Moines, residents are treated to a wide and growing range of craft beer options. The boom started in the late 2000s and lasted into the 2010s. In 2006, the U.S. had 1,460 breweries. By 2021, the number rose to 9,247. During that time, and before that time in the case of at least one local brewpub, several award-winning brewers opened their doors and poured Des Moines residents a glass of craft beer.

We wanted to know where these brewers got their start, what their process is like, what kind of food they serve and what makes them unique. Four breweries made themselves available for interviews: Big Grove Brewery and Taproom, Confluence Brewing Company, Court Avenue Restaurant and Brewery Company (CABco.), and Exile Brewing Company.

THE ORIGINS

“Des Moines’ original craft brewery,” as they claim it, is Court Avenue Brewing Company.

“Technically, I believe Raccoon River (Brewing Company) opened a little bit before us, but they’ve been gone for a long time now,” CABco. General Manager Bob Trader said.

Scott Carlson opened CABco. in 1996 after purchasing the nearly 150-year-old building in 1993. The building was damaged by the flood of 1993 with 19 feet of water on the first floor, but the spirit of what it would become was hardly dampened. CABco.’s impact on the brewing scene in Des Moines is now clear.

“Court Avenue Brewery was very integral in the legislation of being a craft brewery, so without what we did in the beginning, there are not 15 to 20 breweries around town right now,” Trader said.

One of those other breweries is Exile, which opened in 2012 and is owned by RJ Tursi, who was influenced by beers across the pond. A conversation with his dad convinced him it was time to get the ball rolling on a brewery of his own.



Court Avenue Brewing Company

“There was really not a craft beer scene in Des Moines, or really even in Iowa, at that time. There were just a few craft breweries. I had spent some time in Europe and really had my eyes open to all the great beers that were over there,” Tursi said.

Confluence's early days came from MacGyver-like experiments by owner John Martin and high school buddy Sean McClain, who tried to craft a drinkable raisin almond beer. Through the help of another friend's parents, they made their first batch. How did it turn out?

“Not great,” Martin said. “It wasn't anything at all, really. It just made carbonated water.”

Martin eventually learned the tricks of the trade through books and magazines, and, with the help of startup money from his wedding gifts, he bought the necessary supplies to get started in 1995. Fast forward to 2012, and Confluence was open.

Des Moines attracted the eye of Big Grove in 2022, which opened its original location as a small brewpub in Solon in 2013. The brewery expanded to Iowa City, then Des Moines and now Cedar Rapids.

Head Brewer Payton Raso got his start with the company at the Iowa City location and has since risen through the ranks to be in charge of the Des Moines location's brewing operations.

“It has been a bit of a rocket ship, but we've always been focused on the quality of the product. The quality of the beer, quality of the food, quality of the people, making sure that we get all of those things in line and make sure that every single restaurant brewery that we open is set up for success,” Raso said.

TAKING AN IDEA FROM THE BACK TO THE TAP

Each of these breweries has its own concoctions. While their drinks are unique to the machines they come out of, the process is different for each. CABco.'s beers are made with the original equipment the brewery was built with. This can be a challenge for Head Brewer Dustin Strawn, but he welcomes it.

“Our system has charm, is what I like to say. There is a benefit to being able to control everything myself. It's like I'm one of those musicians playing the piano, pulling a string and a symbol crashes, there's a flute in place somewhere. As a brewer, it is very hands on,” Strawn said.

Strawn has a “bank” of ideas. Inspiration has come from places like seltzers, food or traditional cocktails.

“When I was a home brewer, I probably had two notebooks full of ideas. Most of them haven't seen the light of day. Not all of them are winners.

You cast a wide net, and you're going to catch something,” Strawn said.

For Tursi and Exile, the beginning years came with their own set of challenges.

“The early days were a big learning process, for sure. We worked a lot with my mentor on our early recipes and styles and all that stuff. He made sure that we weren't making a lot of mistakes in those first couple of years, and then, as we got our feet underneath us, we started experimenting,” Tursi said.

Tursi and the other breweries are similar in making sure they brew the correct amount for a new beer. Some beers are specialties and limited-time releases, while others could go on to become one of the brewery's staples.

“It depends on what we want that beer to be. Do we want it to just be a taproom release and on draft? Do we want it to be a wider draft release? Do we want it to be a limited release in a package, or do we want this to be seasonal or have this going all year round? Depending on which one of those you're looking at, the process is going to be more or less intense,” Tursi said.

John Martin has a spreadsheet with ideas he tinkers with from time to time. He says they have come from different people over the years.

“I really didn't know much about Belgian beers, but other people here wanted to brew those. So, you say, let's research that and figure out how to make an authentic Belgian Quad or a Dubbel,” Martin said.

Last year alone, Confluence brewed more than 105 different beers.

“It starts with an idea, and then you just flesh it out and keep working on it. Some of these recipes are a little tougher than others,” Martin said.

Raso at Big Grove says they like finding holes in what the beer supply looks like in the area.

“We're looking at what's missing in the market, or, conversely, what is the market really liking that we haven't made yet? How can we jump on something like that?” Raso said.

Since Big Grove has multiple locations, each with different brewing capabilities and staff, a lot of collaboration happens, from the ideas to the size and scale in which they want to brew a beer.

“I'm nowhere near the size of Iowa City's (location), but I'm significantly larger than Solon in terms of how many or how much beer I can produce at one time. Also, my equipment here is a little closer to Iowa City's,” Raso said. “There are a lot of open dialogs. Very rarely is the word ‘no’ ever said. If I have an idea, I'll pitch it. And, usually, the response is, ‘Yeah, go for it. That sounds awesome.’”



Payton Raso, head brewer at Big Grove Brewery

POUR ME A GLASS

The ideas and experimenting are aplenty, but what do each of these breweries do best?

CABco. says two of their beers come to mind when posed this question. Siesta, their Mexican lager, and Pointer Brown, an English brown ale, are fan favorites. The CABco. team says they will be entering Pointer Brown into the World Beer Cup this year.

Speaking of Mexican lagers, Exile is putting their version, “Maria,” into its permanent rotation. The beer started out just inside of the restaurant, but Exile customers made their voices heard. After conversations with Fiesta Mexican Restaurant, a favorite of Tursi's, they asked if Exile could brew them another batch. Tursi agreed, much to the restaurant's enjoyment. He says Fiesta helped them with the branding of Maria as well. Exile's current and longstanding favorite is “Ruthie,” a gold lager.

“We're hoping we can do what we did with Ruthie, with Maria. I think the reason why we've had so much success with Ruthie is because Ruthie brought in non-craft beer drinkers, people who weren't previously craft beer drinkers that tried Ruthie and made it their go-to beer,” Tursi said.

For Confluence, Des Moines IPA is their staple. Martin says he has been making the beer as a home brewer since 2006. Other beers he mentioned like their Capital Gold and Farmer John were also homebrews.

“I had a footprint already as a home brewer, and I just developed it into a large-scale batch. And then after that, it was just like, what else?” Martin said.

Big Grove’s Easy Eddy, a New England hazy IPA, has a large fanbase across the state. One of their more recent creations that has been gaining popularity is the Citrus Surfer, a citrus wheat beer that Raso helped develop.

“The concept a couple of years ago was, how do we make a really good American wheat beer that is drinkable all year round, but especially crushable in the summer? You don’t have to bring a knife and a bunch of citrus fruit with you when you’re drinking it. You can just crack it, and it’s all in there with you,” Raso said.

Raso said Big Grove brewed several different test batches with different fruits, put them on their tap line, and had guests give them a try. He added that another Big Grove brewer, Keaton Scott, also had a big hand in the development.

FILL MY PLATE

Aside from Confluence, each of these breweries also has a kitchen. While each one of these breweries has a major dedication to the brewing operations, the kitchens kick out fantastic meals, too.

CABco. recently underwent a large change with its menu. One of the things that has not changed, though, is their approach to food, even with how the pandemic affected the food service industry.

“There are very few things that we don’t make in-house. We make our own focaccia bread. We’re making our own pizza dough. We make our own sauces. We make all of our dressings. Nothing’s getting brought in and just poured out into a pan. Everything’s got a recipe. Everything’s unique to us,” Trader said.

Trader and Strawn agree that the wings at CABco. are worth a try and receive praise from locals to travelers.

Exile’s menu has grown over the years. What was once a small menu is now full-sized. When they release a special menu item, they keep track of how it has sold to potentially add to the next menu.

“Our burgers are the most popular thing that we have down here by far, and we grew our burger and sandwich selection quite a bit over the years,” Tursi said. “At this point, we don’t change the menu too much, like maybe an item or two a quarter. We try to get that creativity on those monthly specials.”

With Big Grove having multiple locations, the menu stays mostly the same across each — but there is some diversity. Their most popular menu items, though, like the Giant Pretzel, can be found at each location.

“As a company, we’ve come up with kind of a



Confluence Brewing Company’s award-winning patio

recipe Bible that all of the locations can use or sort of riff on, but we have certain things that are going to be on every menu. If you go to Big Grove and you want a giant pretzel, we’ve got a giant pretzel for you,” Shauna McKnight, taproom marketing manager, said.

McKnight says the big three for Big Grove are the giant pretzel, the tap house burger and the tuna poke bowl.

Confluence does not have a kitchen. It’s something Martin and his wife have discussed over the years. An unconventional addition could happen in the future, but there are no certainties in place.

“It just keeps coming back to, let’s not do food. We already have three businesses. Retail, production, sales and distribution. I’ll say this. I think our business would do better if we had a really nice kitchen or something. I did save space up adjacent to the tap room for more retail. So, at some point, we might do more retail. I like making sourdough, and I think that would be fun to have a sourdough bakery. We could do pizzas,” Martin said.

WHAT MAKES THESE BREWERIES UNIQUE

Each of these breweries has its own way of doing things, from how they opened their doors, the beers they craft and the food they cook.

For CABco., uniqueness is built into the walls. With a 144-year-old building located downtown, it is challenging to find a more historic location to have a drink in Des Moines.

“We’re focusing on our neighborhood. We want to be the place to go for people downtown. We want to hold on to who we are and hold on to the history of who we are but still keep moving forward, which

is a very tough balance. You don’t want to be a place that’s stuck in time, but you also don’t want to lose your history,” Trader said. “When you go out to eat, six months later, if I talk to you about it, you probably couldn’t tell me what you ate or what you drank or how much it cost, but you do remember if you had a good time or a bad time. It’s the experience, the vibe, the people that really sell the place, and that’s our focus.”

Tursi separates what makes Exile unique in two.

“I would say that, on the brewery side, it’s the lager beers. Then on the taproom and restaurant side, it’s got to be hospitality service. You’re never going to order off a QR code at Exile. You’re never going to be asked to pull up the menu on your phone,” Tursi said.

With Confluence, Martin says it’s the people who make a difference.

“People work here because they love beer, and I think they love Confluence, too. I think they like working here, but they work here because they’re passionate about beer, and they do the little things every day that you take care of to try to make that beer the best it can be,” Martin said.

The opportunities and his coworkers at Big Grove sprung to mind for Raso.

“I’m going to steal a quote from the owner of Lua (Brewing) when asked that same question about Big Grove. We just have the best damn people in the industry, and we consistently try and go out and find the best people in the industry, or we build the best people in the industry. Our retention rates are really high, especially on the brewing and kitchen side. The opportunities for growth here are huge. I think it fosters a lot of that passion, and that makes this type of work a career,” Raso said. ■

Why doesn't Iowa have any official foods?

By Jim Duncan

Forty-eight states, including all that border Iowa, have official foods by legislative fiat. Some are dishes invented or made famous there. Others are bountiful crops associated with them.

Identifying with good foods is considered an asset by most states. For instance, Vermont made maple syrup its official state flavor, and Maine made it the official state sweetener. Louisiana has two official state jellies, sugar cane and mayhew, plus an official state cuisine — Gumbo because it's both Creole and Cajun. Alabama has an official fruit, tree fruit, game bird, legume, dessert, vegetable, nut and cookie.

Beth Howard
with pie

Massachusetts has an official state doughnut (Boston cream) plus an official bean, berry, dessert (also Boston cream — pie or cake), cookie and muffin. New Mexico has two official vegetables — the New Mexico chile and the pinto bean. Its official state question is “red or green?,” referring to choice of chile sauce. Connecticut has an official cookie, the snickerdoodle, and an official dessert to eat it with — ice cream. Its official food is pizza, named so after the movie “Mystic Pizza” that made Julia Roberts famous.

California, which has declared four different nuts as its official state nut. That’s kind of degrading to almonds because California produces 80% of the world’s almonds.

Some seem weird. Hawaii is famously known for pineapples, cane sugar, coffee beans, and SPAM, but its only official food is the coconut muffin. Similarly, Georgia is known as the Peach State, but its legislature proclaimed grits and Vidalia onions the official state foods. Seeing an opening, Delaware made peach pie its official state dessert. Kentucky is probably most famous for Bourbon, but its official beverage is milk. Really?

Less confused, Maryland, Idaho, Mississippi and Florida know exactly where their best foods are buttered. Maryland designated crab its official

food and blue crab its official crustacean. Idaho’s down-to-earth official food is the potato. Louisiana’s official food and official doughnut is the beignet. Mississippi named the butter cookie its official food. Florida designated oranges the official state fruit, Key Lime the official pie and Tupelo the official honey.

Texas, of course, has the most official foods with 11 including a dish, fruit, pepper, native pepper, vegetable, snack, nut, bread, cobbler, pie and squash. Oklahoma, which calls Texas “Baja Oklahoma,” has an official state meal with 11 courses.

In Iowa’s neck of the woods, Illinois has an official state snack, vegetable, fruit, pie, grain and bean. Pumpkin is the pie because the state grows most all the pumpkins that end up in cans. The brownie was invented in Chicago when a chef at the Palmer House got so drunk he forgot to add yeast to a chocolate cake. Illinois popcorn is an important part of Illinois’ agricultural production — making it a natural choice as the official snack food. Wisconsin has an official grain, fruit, pastry and dairy product. South Dakota has an official bread and dessert.

Minnesota has an official muffin, pop, fruit, mushroom and grain. The mushroom is the morel, which should have been Iowa’s. The grain is wild



Iowa has a fabulous ciderhouse culture.

rice, which isn't even a rice. Missouri has an official tree nut, grape and dessert. The tree nut is black walnut, which should have been Iowa's because this is the only state where black walnuts grow in all

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counties. Missouri designated the ice cream cone its state dessert. It's usually agreed that it was invented at the St. Louis' Louisiana Purchase Exposition, sometimes called the St. Louis World Fair, in 1904.

Besides Iowa, only Arizona's legislature has so resolutely refused to designate any food as official. In Arizona, fans of the chimichanga petition the legislature every year on behalf of that deep fried burrito.

WHY NOT IOWA?

We have been asking that question since 1990 when we teamed with the Lou and Larry in the Morning radio show. We began by recommending possible official state songs which we also lack. Listeners voted for "All I Have to Do Is Dream," made famous by the Everly Brothers who lived awhile in Shenandoah and were discovered there on "KMA Country School," a talent show produced by radio announcer and seed salesman Earl May. Our recommendation went nowhere with the Iowa legislature.

Iowa used to call itself The Corn State, but as our population moved from predominantly rural to mostly urban and suburban, we have developed a bipolar disorder identifying with our most bountiful

agricultural product. Now Iowa corn is more likely to be found in toothpaste, glue, automotive fuel and the dreaded high fructose corn syrup than in foods to be proud of. Only our Latino population thinks of corn as sustenance. Should our official state bread be the corn tortilla?

Vegetables have their most historical context in squashes. The acorn squash is native to the state, not too far from Des Moines. The Sibley is far less known but a favorite of many chefs. In Des Moines, people think steak de Burgo should be the official state dish, but it's mostly unknown outside the city.

In Sioux City, Muscatine and Ottumwa, loose meat sandwiches, by many different names, are revered as a sandwich. But breaded pork tenderloins are beloved statewide. And bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches are blessed with the best tomatoes on earth, plus myriad great bacons and superb artisans of both Italian and French breads.

So, we think our best chance of getting any food, drink or dish designated for all Iowa is to focus on either a cocktail or dessert — and pie in particular.

Only a few American cities and states have their own cocktails, either official or all-but-official. New Orleans has the sazerac. Wisconsin has the Wisconsin old-fashioned, made with brandy not



Really good Iowa boozes

whiskey. New Jersey's cocktail is the Jack Rose, a sour made with juice, grenadine and apple brandy, a spirit with its own long history in the state.

Cedar Ridge in Swisher makes an apple brandy

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with Iowa apples, aged for three years in American, and finished in French oak casks. Iowa has some incredible cider houses. Fishback & Stephenson in Fairfield even incorporates their hard cider mash in the diets of their exclusive cattle herd, raised for their hamburgers.

We asked Jesse's Embers owner Marty Scarpino about identity cocktails in Iowa.

"The unofficial Iowa cocktail is the 'Polk County.' It's 7&7 — half Seagram's 7 and half 7 Up. (Polk is the 77th county in Iowa counting down from west to east and from north to south.) It goes back to before liquor by the drink."

Templeton Rye (TR) has carefully created an infamous identity, in a good way. Their Carroll County distillery claims roots growing out of Prohibition legends. That county, mostly heavy drinking Irish and Germans 100 years ago, flaunted laws against booze. Al Capone reportedly called TR "the good stuff."

An official Iowa cocktail should include apple brandy, apple cider or Templeton Rye. TR is partnering with Iowa brewers Toppling Goliath, Confluence, Peacetreer and Exile on new boozes that are made with the grain bills of the brewers' best products, aged to TR specifications.

PIEOWA

Beth Howard is a baker, food writer and filmmaker. Her books include "Making Piece: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Pie;" "Ms. American Pie;" and "World Piece: A Pie Baker's Global Quest for Peace, Love, and Understanding." She preaches the healing powers of pie.

We asked her what Iowa's official dessert should be.

"Of course, I think it should be pie," she answered to no surprise. From 2010 to 2014, she lived in the iconic American Gothic House in Eldon, where she ran the Pitchfork Pie Stand. In 2015, she embarked on a round-the-world journey teaching pie classes in nine countries to promote world peace. As a widow who understands grief, Howard responded to the Sandy Hook Shooting in 2012 by organizing 60 volunteers to bake 250 pies for the residents of Newtown, Connecticut.

She is currently making a documentary film called "PIEOWA." It might be released by press time but more likely by state fair time.

"I quit a good job in web production for one baking pies at a gourmet bakery in Malibu. I am pretty sure that I got that job because I was from Iowa. When they saw that on my resume, it closed

the deal. Other applicants had better kitchen credentials, but they weren't from Iowa." In Malibu, a pie-maker from Iowa is authentic.

Howard believes that pie and Iowa have an intermingled destiny.

"Making my film, I came to realize that everyone has a pie story. Pie touches that part of their soul where they store their cherished memories. 'The first time I went out for pie with my grandfather;' 'I had a wedding pie instead of cake;' 'Pie was the first thing my mother ever let me make with her.' That sort of thing."

On KFMG's Kitchen Insider, Howard and George Formaro agreed that they would rather have a pie than cake, "even at a wedding or anniversary." If Iowa made pie its official state dessert, should we also have an official state pie, and what should it be?

"I don't know how it got started, but every time I google 'Iowa and pie,' I read that sour cream raisin is our state pie," Howard noted. That likely started with Stacey Mei Yan Fong, a Singaporean living in Brooklyn who wrote about that odd connection in her book "Fifty Pies, Fifty States."

"I hardly ever meet an Iowan who bakes sour cream raisin pie. I know from my years selling pies that the most popular pie in Iowa is strawberry

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rhubarb. It's always the first to sell out at RAGBRAI and such events.

"But making the film, I learned that Iowans love all pies, savory or sweet. Trang Pham (Eggroll Ladies in downtown Des Moines) told me that dumplings and eggrolls are pies, so is anything that is stuffed into dough."

Why is pie so Iowan?

"Diane Sheehy thinks that pie is the perfect Iowa farm food. She raises everything she needs to make pies on her farm, even her pig lard."

Sheehy is a pie goddess in Iowa.

Mostly retired now, she dominated state fair pie contests for decades. Once, I walked into an apple pie contest with her, and contestants seated in the audience sighed, as if defeated. When they realized she was judging, not competing, they cheered among themselves.

"Diane is kind of a bad ass. She and her husband used to be long haul truckers, even ice road truckers."

So, if all fillings make great pie, what is Howard's recipe for the fat in the crust.

"Fifty-fifty butter and vegetable shortening, though the best crusts I have made and eaten used animal lards." ■



Diane Sheehy is a pie goddess in Iowa.

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2 seasons of flux

By Jim Duncan

Transition has been rife since the autumnal equinox. After replacing RC's Diner in 2022, Little Brother closed in Windsor Heights, leaving the town with just one Jewish deli... It was replaced by **Blue Agave**, half a block from another Mexican cantina and Puerto Rican restaurant... Suman Hoque replaced the venerable Lisa Lavallo at Trellis, now **Flora** at the Botanical Garden... Dom Iannarelli left Splash and opened **Prime & Providence** with Cory Gourley. That restaurant defied normal restaurant warfare tactics by becoming the fourth high-end fine dining steakhouse within a mile of one another in the Jordan Creek neighborhood. They distinguished from the others with real ember cooking.

Amruth, a superb South Indian café with a dosa buffet, replaced Monterrey on Swanson Road after decades of Mexican restaurants replacing all other kinds of cuisine. Amruth brought choles ("Chennai croissants") back to town... **Table 128** completed its move from Clive to downtown... **Hot Off the Presses** moved indoors in the latest food truck success... Without doing anything, **The Station on Ingersoll** became a "dive bar," according to something called Geek Nexus at least... Across the street, **Jesse's Embers** went up for sale... **k Pot** burst into Central Iowa with the biggest splash of the year. The Korean buffet chain from Maryland, with a two-hour time limit, has drawn long lines since day one.

Trang Pham moved **Egg Roll Ladies** downtown... Accepting the family blood curse, Eva Lavallo returned to Des Moines and took over **Purveyor** in East Village. Eva's restaurant

genes derived from two legends of Iowa food — father Mike and mother Lisa, both of whom "retired," although Mike redefined retirement to accommodate "my compulsion to intermingle daily with a couple hundred people in a restaurant."

The northerly burbs grew some needed restaurant diversity: Jennifer Vayding opened **Hawker's Kitchen** in Ankeny, bringing a Singaporean hawker center serving pan Asian street foods; **Red Chillez** opened in Kohl's Plaza in Ankeny with a menu covering the Deccan and south India; **Arcadia** opened in Polk City "rooted in peace, simplicity and harmony with nature," plus 30 different whiskeys to help the peace along; **Cheba Hut** opened an outlet store in Johnston with cannabis-themed subs.

THE UNSEEN HAND

A seven-year plan by city managers turned Ingersoll Avenue into a parking desert — to the degree that some businesses are now forced to pay off-duty police to protect their parking lots from customers of other businesses. All of those others lost a lot of street parking to the grand design of whom? No one wants to be credited for this mess.

WINNERS OF 2024

Anthony Nace of **Park Street Kitchen** was selected Chef of the Year by the Iowa Restaurant Association. Along with Proudfoot & Bird and Mulberry Street Taven, downtown hotels in Des Moines now have dining options usually only found in big city hotels... **Platinum Kutz's Ron Pressman** turned his Thanksgiving generosity into a culinary

event with upscale, local products and partners... **Rinehart Room** distinguished itself as the top venue for culinary events while giving **George Formaro** and **Derek Eidson** a place to show off their specific, often historical, food research like their magnificent Charles Dicken's "A Christmas Dinner"... The **Italian American Cultural Center of Iowa** pushed forward toward an early 2026 opening. Plans were made to host a speakeasy, and veteran **Marty Scarpino** signed on to run it. They are also talking about a three-room hotel in the center but plans to bring the Iowa Genealogical Society in are now on hold.

IRONY AND HYPOCRISY OF THE YEAR

Ivy League assassin **Luigi Mangione** professed to hate the evils of capitalism enough so to convince New York City's super-soft-on-crime DA Alvin Bragg to try him for terrorism. Yet Mangione's undoing began with the screw-up leaving his DNA at Starbucks and concluded with his being captured eating at McDonald's.

One last cup of kindness raised. For **Bob Conley**, whose passing left Des Moines with only one locally owned hotel... For affordable THC lost to the stupidity, or worse, of the Iowa Legislature... For **Orlando "Lanny" Lynn Sharp**, who left the Jesse's Embers' grill without a smile master... For **Troy Trostel** who left way too young, leaving the city's restaurant scene with nary a culinary gunslinger... For El Patio's longtime owner chef **Brook Smith**, who died. ■

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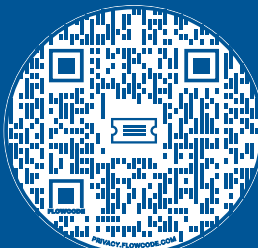
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30 1:08 OMA		1 5:35 IND	2 5:35 IND	3 5:35 IND	4 5:35 IND	5 5:35 IND
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