

A CITYVIEW PUBLICATION

# RELISHDM

EAT // DRINK // COOK // SHOP



FALL 2025

# WHISKEY 101

Bubba owner Chris Diebel  
dives into the world of  
whiskey.

## THE DISH

6 MONTHS IN A WHIRLWIND

## DES MOINES FOOD SCENE

GROWING FASTER AND BETTER

## THE VALUE STALKER

LOCAL FAVORITES





# 6 months in a whirlwind

By Jim Duncan

The last half-year brought a cyclone of change to the food world. Most ominously, the new Cold War initiated a new siege in our fields of grain. A Chinese national working at the University of Michigan was caught smuggling a killer fungus into America. Two other Chinese students at Michigan were implemented in a plot to destroy U.S. corn, wheat, barley and rice crops and to make those who ate those crops violently ill. Then U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that 277,000 acres of American farmland is now owned by Chinese entities. Surprised? Smithfield and Syngenta are, too.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration flexed its brain initiating the first government efforts in nearly a century to remove poisons from our food system. Citing unprecedented and soaring rates of autism, obesity and diabetes, the FDA persuaded state after state, with Iowa going first, to ban synthetic dyes that Europeans banned decades ago.

Then they took on junk food. They persuaded Coca Cola to make a real sugar alternative to the high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) sweetened beverages that began in 1984 in tandem with rising diabetes and obesity rates. (Real sugar triggers a satiety response that HFCS does not. That is why people drink fewer and smaller servings of real sugar drinks than HFCS. At least, that is the theory.)

Corn growers don't like that anymore than they like being blamed for Des Moines' woeful water quality. People are finally listening to authorities other than Farm Bureau on that subject — now that Iowa has the second-worst rates of new cancer for two years running.

In less woeful news, Big Grove partnered with The Land Institute to make beer out of Kernza, a promising new trademarked grain similar to wheat invented to include several environmental benefits. Plus, it is a perennial.

Pacific northwest cherries had their best year ever, and Des Moines supermarkets responded with the lowest prices in years. CBS News explained that was because of lack of rainfall during the ripening and harvesting seasons. (Expensive helicopters must be used after rains to try to dry the cherries.) Other stone fruits soared in price. That was likely because of an unprecedented growth in the tree-killing rodent populations in central California.

## IN CORPORATE NEWS

USA restaurant bankruptcies hit the highest level in decades (excluding 2020) last year. **TGI Fridays**, **Rubio's Coastal Grill** and **Red Lobster** were among chains that filed for Chapter 11, closing hundreds of restaurants. The pace of bankruptcies slowed this year, but **Denny's**, **Applebee's** and **Hooters** closed locations. The company that owns **Bravo Italian Cucina** in Jordan Creek filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. **Krispy Kreme** ended its partnership with **McDonald's** saying it wasn't helping their (KK's) bottom line. McD's experienced its worst quarterly sales drop in the U.S. since 2020.


## LOCAL MOVES AND MILESTONES

**Americana** closed in September after 14 years... David Baruthio opened **Cafe Madeleine** as a unique prix fixe experience: two sittings, three nights a week, one menu, no substitutions... **Aposto at Cafe di Scala** turned 20 in July... Amara Sama opened Jamaican-West African bar and grill **The Palms** on Ingersoll... Christine Johnson reopened her Chicago style soul food cafe **Joppa Experience**, this time on Sixth... **Habesha Ethio-Eritrean Restaurant** opened at 3500 Merle Hay Road featuring a weekend Ethio coffee service... The heirloom **Cronk's** cafe in Denison closed and is up for sale... Kevin Liu closed the venerable **Mandarin Noodle House** in Johnston. That was the last place in town with a traditional Chinese menu... Ravi and Girija Menneni opened **Saffron Indian Restaurant** in the Mandarin Noodle House space... The Iowa Beef Industry Council's 2024 Iowa's best burger contest winner closed its doors - **JJ's Tavern & Grill** in Ankeny is no more... The legendary **Fog City Diner** in San Francisco closed permanently the end of 2024. It was the inspiration for the Drake Diner in Des Moines, which lives on... **Istanbul Cafe** opened marvelously in the space best known as Stella's Blue Sky Diner... **Masao** opened in East Village with state-of-the-art sushi and a ridiculously good European menu by Phil Shires... Carter Annett bought **Jesse's Ember's** and reopened seamlessly, even adding lunch service... **k-Pot** opened an outlet in Jordan Creek with the longest lines we have seen since the first Chik-fil-A opened here... At press time, **Casey's** of Ankeny was one of the top five stocks on the S&P 500 for 2025. ■

# A reintroduction to RELISH

When we began publishing RELISH in 2005 we thought that important things had no voice in mainstream food media. Things like free range livestock, label disclosure, farm to table dining, and dumbing down the legal definitions of words like organic, natural, humane and pure. In our first year, we advocated for an Iowa bacon festival; looser regulation on brewing and distilling to encourage an Iowa industry; buying fresh and local; and practical farming. We are 20 years older now and those original missions have been flown. Today we think that food readers are looking for value and pride in the local food scene. This newly designed RELISH will focus on those things. ■





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# DES MOINES FOOD SCENE

## — GROWING FASTER AND BETTER

Des Moines is a special food town, any way you look at it.

By Jim Duncan

Des Moines is now the fastest growing city in the Midwest. As we kick off our third decade at RELISH, we think it is time to make the case that our food scene is also growing faster and better than those of our Midwestern peers.

Two restaurant dinners in late July showed two marvelous aspects of the food scene's maturity here. One was a celebration of Aposto at Café di Scala's 20th anniversary. The other was a non-corporate wine dinner at Ruth's Chris. The former was a thank you tribute to Tony Lemmo's friends and customers for helping him launch his 21st century version of Calabrese cuisine. The latter was a \$2,500 per person extravaganza featuring the coveted 100 Acres line of wines. Both dinners were served to full capacity without any advertising.

Lemmo is the great grandson of Teresa Lacona, whose recipes directly inspired the menus of Noah's Ark, Mama Lacona's and Bambino's and became the epitome of Calabrian Iowa, which dominated fine dining in Des Moines from World War II to today. His Café di Scala moved that tradition into a venerable Victorian mansion in Sherman Hill.

Ruth's Chris is a renowned national steakhouse chain that rejected the metro for decades. Today, its West Des Moines store is one of the two largest in the entire chain. Their wine guy, Johnny Krohn, moves more wine than any other Ruth's outlet. The eight-course dinner featuring 100 Acres accompanied another \$500 per person wine dinner the same month. Both were sanctioned by the corporate department, but neither was held under its aegis. Both sold out so easily that more such extravagant dinners are expected.



IN DES MOINES, YOU  
CAN GET UNI FRESH  
FROM THE SEA URCHIN  
WOMB LIKE THIS AT  
MASAO.





GRAZIANO’S HAS ANCHORED THE SOUTH SIDE OF DES MOINES FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY.

“I think that corporate was a little stunned when they saw how successful our numbers were,” Krohn told RELISH.

The Aposto dinner recruited former Café di Scala chefs Phil Shires, Shawn Benningsdorf, Cory Wendel, Joe McConville and David Ryan to prepare five dishes. It also included a course each by Lemmo’s late mother Lou Ann, current chef Cole Gruis, and Lemmo himself with a nod to his uncle, Frank. That emphasized Aposto’s incubator effect of Des Moines’ restaurant scene. Its eight courses featured halibut in snapper bone broth; duck confit; eggplant; cavatelli; pasta made with squash, carrot and beets and truffles; and stuffed ausilio peppers with seeds derived from some that early Italians brought to Des Moines.


Benningsdorf and Ryan have moved out of town, but Shires now mans the kitchen at Masao, a “state-of-the-art” fusion restaurant in East Village. Wendel now owns the burger-as-life-style Lachelle’s cafés with adjoining taverns The Fitz and The Alpine. McConnville was co-founder of pizza chain Gusto and has a hand in Breakfast Club and Anna Dolce. Just as Aunt Jenny’s was an incubator for the great Italian restaurateurs of the second half of the 20th century, Aposto at Café di Scala looks to be its third millennium counterpart.

Krohn limited seating at the two big Ruth’s Chris wine dinners to 13 and 22.

“When you are opening lots of expensive wines, you have to limit the guest list. Otherwise, you lose money fast because wine has a short life span after a bottle is opened.”

Nevertheless, the eight-course dinner came off flawlessly. Three courses featured USDA prime aged steaks, one duck breast, one striped bass and one oysters and caviar. The amuse bouches included octopus. Dinner was prepared by Sydney Hendricks, who, like Krohn, came to Ruth’s from Proudfoot and Bird.

The Aposto dinner was an homage to the past. The Ruth’s Chris dinner was an expression of decadence not usually associated with Des Moines. Between them, they represented the magical eclecticism of today’s Des Moines dining scene. Rooted in history that is mostly Italian, the food scene here in 2025 has sprouted into things as different as Aposto’s garden and Ruth’s wine cellar.




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HEIRLOOM DES MOINES

Italian roots gave the city something to brag about when Des Moines still equated Italians with immigrants here. (In the mid 20th century, civil rights leader Joe Lacava said, “I was raised Italian before we were white people.”) The northern southside became an Italian, and mostly Calabrian, enclave.

Southside Italians broke out of their isolation by dominating the club and restaurant businesses in Des Moines between Prohibition and the 1960s. Babe Bisignano’s Babe’s, his brother Chuck’s namesake restaurant, Joseph Cimino’s Wimpy’s, Noah Lacona’s Noah’s Ark, Pete Riccelli’s Riccelli’s, Johnny Compiano’s Johnny and Kay’s, Rocky Compiano’s Rocky’s, Ralph Compiano’s Ralph’s, Jimmy Pigneri and later Bobby Tursi’s The Latin King, Joe Tumea’s Tumea & Sons, Joe and Red Giudicessi’s Christopher’s, Charlie Baratta’s Baratta’s, Mike Lavallo’s several places, the Bianchi family’s Hilltop, and Vic Talerico’s Vic’s Tally Ho were a few of the places that southern Italians brought to town. And that excludes the many pizza joints they also created.

When the Des Moines Civic Center hosted its first-ever sold-out event in 1980, they commissioned a survey of the audience. One question asked, “What else in Des Moines is worth driving more than an hour? The No. 1 answer was “Italian restaurants.” Noah’s Ark, The Latin King, Baratta’s, Chuck’s, Christopher’s, Tumea & Son’s, and Bianchi’s Hilltop are all still here. Sons and grandsons of Italian immigrants have added Lucca, Exile, La Mie, Scornovacco’s, Sonny’s, Basil Prosperi’s, Centro and Prime & Providence.

Also, to our scene’s great fortune, visionary thinkers like Bruce Gerleman and Kurt Blunck saved a lot of wonderful, historic buildings from the



GEORGE FORMARO AT CENTRO’S 800-DEGREE COAL-BURNING OVEN.

wrecking ball. Restaurants moved into newly designed, century-old real estate. Lucca, Centro, CABCO, Malo, Django, Bubba’s, Alba, W Tao, Splash, Egg Roll Ladies, Proudfoot & Bird, Mulberry Street Tavern, Stuffed Olive, and Masao are some restaurants that inhabit historic buildings.

Because most of the early Italians in Des Moines raised gardens, the phrase “garden fresh” is not bluster here. Aposto and Oak Park have multiple, magnificent gardens on the restaurant properties from which they harvest your dinner. President John Kennedy told Iowan Hugh Sidey, “It’s a shame they raise just corn and beans because that Iowa soil looks good enough to eat.” In Des Moines, you nearly can.



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## COSMOPOLITAN DES MOINES

On the other hand, state-of-the-art architecture added modern gems like Oak Park, Prime & Providence, 801 Chop House and La Mie at the Des Moines Art Center. And the man who did the most to create the great Des Moines food scene of today is late Governor Bob Ray. By sheer force of personality, “The Gov” pushed Iowa into welcoming boatloads of refugees from Vietnam after larger states had refused them.

When the great food writer and TV host Tony Bourdain played a sold-out Civic Center show, he began by musing, “Wow, you have a lot of fantastic Vietnamese restaurants, Des Moines.” Yeah, we do. We also have an international food market that has been called “an Asian Eatery” and “a Midwestern Ranch 99.” Those references are to supermarkets that include full-service butchers, full-service fresh fish markets and all kinds of exotic foods, including fully prepared foods. C Fresh Market is all of that, and where else can you find pizzelle (cow’s penis), bulk chicken feet, duck tallow, quail eggs, smoked pig’s heads, or Beijing duck in the deli? Plus, the market has a fabulous Vietnamese restaurant, Pho 515. The store is undergoing a 10,000-square-foot expansion and hopes to be fully renewed by the end of the year.

Gov. Ray’s expression of welcoming directly influenced the immigration and restaurant developments of other cultures. Our Mexican scene took off in 1988 when Eufracio Mayorga opened Iowa’s first Latino grocery store and our first Mexican restaurant modeled on the Zacatecas-Jalisco-Michoacan cuisines that Des Moines has come to love more than even Italian restaurants. Comedian Willie Fratto Farrell jokes about how many Mexican restaurants he has to pass to find an Italian restaurant on today’s southside of Des Moines.

Thai, Lao, Burmese, Japanese, Nepalese, Pakistani, Indian and Korean restaurants all thrive now as much in the suburbs as the inner city. MinGaLaBar in Urbandale is as fine a Burmese restaurant as one will find in San Francisco, Chicago or New York. Probably in Rangoon, too. Ankeny has two top-end Thai restaurants — Silk Elephant and Siam Table — plus a Singaporean restaurant that specializes in street food — Hawker’s Kitchen. There are exponentially more Indian restaurants in Waukee, West Des Moines, Johnston, Ankeny and Clive than in Des Moines



IOWANS GO WHOLE HOG. C FRESH MARKET ROASTS FIVE TO SIX OF THESE EVERY WEEK.

now. Most are Deccan and Madras inspired.

Des Moines is home to three excellent Peruvian cafés — Tulpa, Panka and Uchuu. Peruvian cuisine is the ultimate fusion cuisine with Chinese, Japanese, Spanish and indigenous influences. It comes from the ocean and the mountains. Music often breaks out.

Our late-night food culture is unique. Whenever road crews check into town for a long-running Broadway show, former Civic Center Director Jeff Chelsvig told us that they are mainly interested in two quirky places to eat — Zombie Burger and Fong’s Pizza.

Iowa beers and pizza cover every style in the world. Big Grove took over an old Chevrolet dealership. Exile brews in a downtown heirloom that used to be a shampoo factory. Centro cooks pizza in an 800-degree coal oven.

Des Moines restaurants initiated top holiday events. Zombie Burger has a Halloween parade. Hessen Haus, a fabulous German restaurant, held the city’s Oktoberfest until it outgrew downtown. Exile’s Christmas decorations are a tourist draw.

## DES MOINES BRINGS THE OCEANS TO TOWN

The miracle of Fed Ex delivers fresh daily fish, from Hawaii, the Caribbean and both coasts to Waterfront Seafood, Splash, Masao, Prime & Providence and several sushi restaurants. Des Moines markets like Hy Vee, C Fresh, Fresh Thyme and Whole Foods have made locals familiar with formerly exotic fruits like custard apples, jackfruit, dragon fruit, rambutans, lychees, durian, guava, longan and even mangosteen,



LA MIE LAMINATES THEIR CROISSANTS A DOZEN TIMES.

which used to be so rare in the U.S. that they fetched \$50 each on the San Francisco black market just 20 years ago.

And that rich black dirt that John Kennedy admired produces the best sweet corn, tomatoes, apples, squashes and peppers on Earth. Visit one of the great farmers markets of Des Moines, Iowa City or Decorah, and you can hear the mighty music of tomato names — Cherokee Purple, Brandywine, Green Zebra, Opalka, Moonglow, Jaune Flame, Trifele, Wapsipinicon Peach, Hungarian Heart, etc.

Des Moines chefs love to work with these foods. Dozens of local restaurants will develop their own version of sweet corn chowder in summer and of squash soup in fall and winter. Iowa cider houses are as great as anywhere. Some, like Fishback and Stephenson in Fairfield, go to extremes like raising their own cattle on apple mash to make hamburgers.

Iowa dairy is very special with the most concentrated number of organic farms in America within 30 miles of Kalona. You can buy milk so freshly grazed that it is yellow from the chlorophyll in summer from Radiance, Kalona or Pickett Fences. You can taste the difference immediately. AE dairy is so good that James Beard double winner Eric Ziebolt imports its sour cream dips to the east and west coasts.

Des Moines is a special food town, any way you look at it. ■



# WHISKEY

## 101

Bubba owner Chris Diebel  
dives into the world of  
whiskey.

By Cyote Williams

Have you ever sat down at a restaurant and opened the drink menu, only to be shown a page full of whiskey options with absolutely no idea what to choose? Have you strolled through the aisles of a liquor store looking for something to sip on at home with various bottles of brown spirits from floor to ceiling, only to leave with a six-pack instead?

Knowing what type of whiskey suits your taste buds, how to order it, what whiskeys go best in certain cocktails, and which one would best suit your home bar are all questions that whiskey novices want answered. After all, there are bottom-shelf and top-shelf brands. Rye, bourbon, scotch, American, Canadian, Irish, Scottish, and even Japanese whiskeys, all with their own distinct tastes, prices and personalities.

We wanted these questions answered, so we turned to one of the most knowledgeable whiskey minds in Des Moines. Chris Diebel is the founding partner of Bubba, a downtown southern food restaurant staple. It is also home to one of the best whiskey selections in the city.



Chris Diebel







BUBBA'S LIST OF COCKTAILS, SCOTCHES AND MORE SHOULD BE TASTED IN BULK. PHOTO COURESY OF BUBBA

**BOURBONS, RYES, SCOTCHES, REGIONS AND MORE**

Whiskey takes shape from its flavor, colors and process. Diebel says bourbons are his game, and his expertise in the spirit reaches each drop of the dark liquid.

“I really focus on bourbon— and to a lesser extent, rye, and that is a native spirit to the south — and so it made sense for Bubba to have a real focus on bourbon. Bourbon tends to be a little sweeter, and, I think, a little bit more approachable than some of the other ones out there, so I think it’s a really great place for folks to start exploring the whiskey world as a whole. Whereas scotch can be peaty and smoky and really taste specific to certain people, bourbon oftentimes is a little bit more palate-pleasing to the newly initiated,” Diebel said.

What are the main differences between these variations?  
“The core differentiator is the use of corn. With bourbon, the mash bill, or the recipe, has to include a minimum of 51% corn — and 51% or more ryes for ryes,” Diebel said.

That sounds like something Iowans can get behind. Diebel says the real differences for bourbons and ryes is in what the other 49% is made of.

“Corn products tend to be a little sweeter and mellower, whereas rye gives you some of that spice. The more malted barley is in it, the more you’re likely to get a toasted cereal note in the final product,” Diebel said. “When you think about an Irish whiskey, some scotches, those are malted products. The barley is going to be what comes out.”

As for why something might taste different if it’s from a different region, several other elements might change the flavor.

“There’s a lot of interesting stuff coming out of different Asian countries. They’re using different aging techniques with different woods that’s imparting different flavors as well. So, the sky’s really the limit. I would also say it’s a common misnomer that all bourbon has to come from Kentucky, and, certainly, that is the undisputed home for most bourbons. You can make a bourbon anywhere as long as it’s 51% or more corn. And that’s why you see places like Cedar Ridge right here in Iowa that are making bourbon, or in my home state of Texas,” Diebel said.

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BUBBA JULEP

- 2 oz. bourbon (we use Old Forester)
- 1 ½ oz. Mint Simple Syrup
- Splash Seltzer



INSTRUCTIONS

- Combine bourbon and simple syrup in a Julep cup filled halfway with crushed ice stir until chilled
  - Top with more crushed ice to form a small dome and add mint garnish
- Glass: Julep Cup with crushed ice  
Garnish: Large Bunch of Mint Sprigs (slap them first to get the oils active)

Courtesy of Bubba

OLD FASHIONED

- 1 ½ oz. bourbon of your choice
- ¾ oz. simple syrup
- 3 dashes Angostura Bitters



INSTRUCTIONS

- Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass with ice and stir until chilled
  - Strain into a rocks glass over a fresh large cube of ice and garnish with orange twist expressed and then dropped into the glass
- Glass: Rocks  
Garnish: Large orange peel

Courtesy of Bubba

KNOWING WHAT YOU ARE TASTING

The best way to taste whiskey? That is an art form in itself. Diebel says to remind yourself that the first sip is going to burn. Do not let that discourage you from slowing down and taking another sip, properly, to enjoy the flavors. The first step is to start with a lower-proof whiskey.

“Start with a lower proof and then work your way up. You don’t want to blast your palate right at the beginning,” Diebel said.

Starting without ice and a lower proof to begin with helps to acclimate yourself. Then, you can add a few drops of water or an ice cube. The lower the proof, the quicker it becomes diluted. When whiskey becomes diluted, it makes it easier to drink. Diebel recommends this for people just getting into whiskey.

“Oftentimes, seasoned whiskey drinkers want a slightly higher proof, because it’s going to hold up to the ice longer in the summer months. In the summer months, I like a lighter whiskey, even with rocks,” Diebel said.

Lower-proof whiskeys and whiskey cocktails are better enjoyed in the summer heat, whereas a higher proof, or a scotch, with its spice, is better enjoyed in the colder fall and winter months, he says.

When it comes to identifying smells and tastes, Diebel has a few tips.

“I like to tell people, you want to take a big, deep breath with your mouth slightly open, and then you’re going to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. You really do start to pick up some of those (in this case, Old Forester bourbon) caramel notes, maybe a little honey suckle. Take a sip, hold it in your mouth before swallowing for a few seconds, and let it coat your tongue. The roof of your mouth, the whole palate, you are going to feel a little bit of a burn on the first one, but that’s really just getting everything ready to really enjoy it.”

Diebel recommends that beginners use a whiskey tasting mat when trying to identify different flavors. These will give you keywords that can help you define what it is you are tasting.

“Whether that’s wood notes or floral notes or caramel notes, chocolate notes, cherry notes, dark fruit versus dark berry fruit versus stone fruits, there are readily available graphs out there that help you with those phrases until you’re comfortable with it on your own,” Diebel said.



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BUYING WHISKEY OUT AND AT HOME

Sitting down at a restaurant, opening the drinks menu, and being flooded with several pages worth of different whiskeys to choose from can feel intimidating. Even a singular page can give people pause, causing them to go back to what they already know.

“That’s why, on our menu, we try to use some brief tasting notes throughout. You see that under each one, it gives you a quick tasting note description, and then also the price. Quite frankly, nothing’s enjoyable if it’s too expensive for your budget. So, what I always think is first look within your budget and then start doing research on what the top-rated whiskies are in that price category,” Diebel said. “There are really great, readily available products that don’t break the bank.”

You would think Diebel, as a business owner, would want you to splurge on the higher-priced items. While he likely would not say no to someone ordering top-shelf whiskey, he advises finding out what you like best first.

“I would highly encourage people, rather than coming to a restaurant and splurging on the highest-priced item, to go and do your homework first and cut your teeth on more affordable products, and then, once you’ve learned what you’re tasting and what your personal preferences are, you can go out and splurge on occasion,” Diebel said.

For your home bar, Diebel recommends having at least one lower proof and one higher proof bourbon and one rye. Diebel mentioned Larceny bourbon as one that won’t break the bank under 100 proof. He also mentioned Bulleit, a Kentucky brand of whiskey that has both bourbons and ryes that



RUSSELL’S RESERVE, KNOB CREEK, MAKER’S MARK, LARCENY AND BULLEIT ARE ALL GREAT OPTIONS FOR A HOME BAR. PHOTO COURTESY OF BUBBA



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MANHATTAN  
ON THE ROCKS



- 2 oz bourbon
- 1 oz Sweet Vermouth (our favorite is Carpano Antica)
- 3 dashes Angostura bitter

INSTRUCTIONS

- Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass with ice and stir until chilled
- Strain into a rocks glass over a fresh large cube of ice and garnish with brandied cherry

Glass: Rocks

Garnish: Brandied or candied cherry (My favorite are the brand Luxardo Cherries, and, at home add a barspoon full of their cherry juice in the mix as well.)

The Black Manhattan riff replaces the Sweet Vermouth with and Amaro (Averna Amaro is one of my go-tos for this) and gives it a very aromatic and rich twist to the traditional recipe.

Courtesy of Bubba

are friendly on the wallet and are also good in cocktails. Russell’s Reserve was mentioned as another solid option that can be found at grocery stores. Diebel also named Knob Creek and Maker’s Mark as other reliable options for those starting their own collection at home.

If you are planning to use bourbons in a cocktail, Diebel says to go with something on the more affordable side. That includes cocktails at restaurants when asked what kind of whiskey you would like used in an old-fashioned, Manhattan, or whiskey sour.

“I don’t love it when people use really expensive whiskeys to make cocktails. I would prefer that they use something a little bit more readily available and save that highly allocated product for people who want to try it in its purest form,” Diebel said.

If you’re going to make those drinks at home, Diebel also had a few tips.

“I also like to think in terms of those higher proof or ‘hot’ whiskeys, balancing them with a sweetness. That might be where you come in with a Manhattan or an old-fashioned, because it’s going to have some simple syrup or a sweet vermouth in it, and that balances the sweet, balances the heat. A light whiskey is certainly great for a Julep, but it’s going to blend into the drink a little bit more because it’s not as hot,” Diebel said. ■



GET COMFORTABLE WITH MORE AFFORDABLE WHISKEY OPTIONS BEFORE REACHING FOR THE TOP SHELF. PHOTO COURTESY OF BUBBA

# SIAM TABLE

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# Creamy tomato soup is rich with sun-ripened flavor



By Jolene Goodman

There is something special about cooking with ingredients grown from your own backyard. Recently, I was watching our grandson at my daughter and son-in-law’s house. He and I ventured outside to check on their garden and discovered a bumper crop of tomatoes. Since the weather was cool, I decided that a batch of tomato soup for dinner would serve the harvest well. Our grandson, just 8 months old, is already a curious observer in the kitchen. He keeps me company from his high chair, happily armed with a dozen measuring cups to toss and a few snacks to keep him content. This creamy tomato soup, made with an abundance of fresh-picked tomatoes and a blend of herbs, is rich with sun-ripened flavor. Paired with a golden, melty grilled cheese on homemade sourdough, it was the perfect fall dinner — simple, cozy and made even sweeter by sharing it together with my grandson. ■



Information provided by Jolene Goodman, vice president of Big Green Umbrella Media.

## CREAMY TOMATO SOUP RECIPE

Total time: 45 minutes  
Servings: 4

- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3-4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive or avocado oil
- 2 pounds fresh tomatoes (about 6 large), blanched, skins off and chopped
- 2 cups chicken broth (low sodium preferred)
- 1/3 cup Parmesan cheese, grated
- 1/2 -3/4 cup heavy (whipping) cream
- 2 tablespoons honey
- Salt and pepper, basil, oregano — more of everything than you think
- Pinch of rosemary
- Fresh basil or parsley (optional, for garnish)

### INSTRUCTIONS:

- Heat oil over medium heat.
- Add onion and sauté for about 5 minutes until soft.
- Add garlic and cook all for 2 more minutes.
- Add tomatoes and cook for 10 minutes.
- Add chicken broth and bring to a boil.
- Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes, uncovered. Stir occasionally.
- Blend until smooth by using an immersion blender and scooping the mixture into a traditional blender.
- Return soup to the pan.
- Add whipping cream and honey and stir. Season with salt, pepper, basil, oregano and other herbs of choice.
- Simmer for 5 more minutes.
- Serve immediately. Garnish with fresh basil or parsley. This pairs well with a grilled cheese sandwich on sourdough bread. Enjoy!



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SCAN ME  
TO VIEW OUR MENU!





# The Value Stalker

By Jim Duncan

One quarter of the way through the 21st century, we are convinced that people who read food news are looking for value more than anything else. As we begin our third decade of RELISH, this new section of the magazine plans to hunt it and breathe it and shout it out loud.

While other local media do that when a celebrity shows up, we will tell you where Greg Abel eats. Who dat? Abel is Warren Buffet's handpicked successor at the ultimate value hunting enterprise of all time — Berkshire Hathway. As reported in CITYVIEW and The Daily Umbrella, Abel is a fan of Lucca in Des Moines' East Village, a restaurant we think epitomizes Des Moines value-oriented culinary identity.

In Iowa, we support extravagances, like we write about in the Food section of this magazine. We support ethnic cuisines like very few other states. We support farmers who support practices that do not poison our rich black earth and water. And we support tradition. But we crave value.

Enter RELISH's Value Stalker. We have it on the best authority that the most popular part of our food section in The Daily Umbrella is our "deals of the day." We read the supermarket ads and report on their best deals. We do the same with restaurants from 801 Chop House to Eastside Eddie's. We test and recommend new products from state-of-the-art dehydrators to new kinds of peanut butter and honey.

The Daily Umbrella should be required reading for value stalkers in Des Moines. It is free, and all you need to give up is your email address. Then it will be delivered to your mail box by 6:30 a.m. each weekday.



## THE PROTEIN HUNT

Vegans come and vegans go (their numbers in the U.S. have reduced three years in a row), but in Iowa people have always looked first at meat and seafood for their protein hunt. Meat shopping changed utterly here in 2000 after Walmart butchers successfully unionized in Jacksonville, Texas. The chain, which has used the word "price," not "value," in all variations of their motto, simply fired all their butchers and went exclusively to prepackaged meat of dubious origins. Other supermarket chains followed suit.

Against the wind, Fareway stores remained centered around their butchers' expertise and face-to-face communication. They only sell USDA Choice or Prime beef. No other chain here does that. Fareway even has stores in Ames and Beaverville that go further with their emphasis on their butchers.

Other chains stock USDA Choice and Prime but rarely ever advertise specials that include it, Fresh Thyme excluded. We also believe that Fareway looks for consistent value in their pork.

Poultry is a matter of preferences. Fareway sources chickens that are larger than those in other stores. Many people believe that air chilled chickens are healthier and give better value. That is because water processing adds weight and health risks that one cannot taste. Smart Chicken is 100% air chilled and is sold at Hy-Vee and Price Choppers.

Among chains, Hy-Vee excels at seafood. Fresh Thyme offers sales specials on seafood items that are so good we think they are loss leaders — like the \$5 rotisserie chickens that Sam's Club and Costco use to drive memberships. But Hy-Vee has more variety, and their seafood is all sourced through Ankeny, guaranteeing freshness here. Only select Hy-Vee stores have butchers and

fishmongers. Those that do operate on another level than those that don't or than other chains.

Fresh Thyme has the best advertised deals on certain cuts of USDA prime beef or lamb, but only on occasions. McBee's offers a great selection of frozen beef, lamb and goat parts in their Lamoni store. I know local chefs who go there for things like lamb pancreas, aka sweetbreads. Mostly, that store attracts more fans of the BRAVO soap opera about the McBee family.

B&B Grocery, Meat and Deli is the oldest butcher shop in Iowa. It has been in the Seavastopol neighborhood since 1922 and in its current location since 1962. Joppa Experience owner Christine Johnson told us that it is the only place that can fill her need for oxtails in bulk. B&B takes as many as 500 orders for Christmas Eve standing rib roasts. They age meats to customer requirements of any length. They deal directly with local farmers on beef purchases.

Old Station Craft Meats in Waukee challenges the notion that pork should be white, something that was bred into pigs in the early 1980s when Big Pork went with a "the other white meat" ad campaign. That was after the American Medical Association passed a resolution, by two votes, to label cholesterol as the top cause of heart disease. That led to horrible ideas like replacing dairy products with trans fats in the diet. Old Station only deals with Heritage breeds of pig like Berkshire with deep red color, rich marbling and higher fat content.

Old Station beef comes from two superb farms — Grass Run, which is 100% range fed, no grains at all, and Upper Iowa Beef, known for humanely raised animals. Old Station also deals in elk, bison, veal and lamb.

The Good Butcher deals exclusively with Iowa farmers and takes the Old Station model deeper. They excel at salumi and jerky products that they make, the only company around that has facilities to do that. Their freezer and counter show high-end cuts — Mangalitsa pork, wagyu beef, local lamb, elk, bison, venison.

C Fresh has the largest, and by far most exotic, butcher shop and seafood shop. They also roast ducks and pigs. About six whole hogs a week are roasted to a crisp skin and tender flesh. These hogs are sourced from the heritage Berkshires of Winneshiek County's Lynch Livestock. C Fresh fish all come in frozen on the boat and includes many species (eel, pompano, snake fish) one never sees in chain supermarkets. They also have live lobsters and blue crabs. Waterfront Seafood has been air-freighting the best seafood and fish from all over the world for half a century.

## LOCAL PRODUCTS OF EXCEPTIONAL VALUE

Des Moines is fortunate to have many Italian dressings choices from local sources with good reputations before getting into the retail sector. We are convinced that Graziano's Italian dressing is on a higher level. For starters, it uses EVOO exclusively, not just mixed with seed oils like most others, including those like Newman's that advertised as "olive oil dressing" before they had to change that name because they also used more seed oils. Plus, Graziano's uses fewer ingredients overall. Its distribution has recently expanded. Graziano's excellent bottled sauces (five) are also on more shelves beyond the southside.



NOSTALGIA SHOPPING

When Dr. Pepper followed the rest of American soda makers and substituted high fructose corn syrup for real sugar in the 1980s, they also continued to make the original recipe in their mother factory in Waco, for local distribution only. People began traveling to Waco for the good stuff. A Waco CVB docent told me that “real Dr. Pepper” was the town’s No. 3 tourist attraction, behind only the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame Museum and Baylor University. Now, you can get it in Des Moines. The venerable B & B Grocery, Meat & Deli stocks it amongst their best-in-town selection of vintage sodas.

Dutch ovens, though never out of use, are the essence of nostalgia. People who sell stuff on TV are constantly inventing new forms of Teflon products, but few remember their grandmas cooking in anything but cast iron Dutch ovens. Nothing regulates heat better for slow cooking.

Dutch ovens come in all shapes, colors and sizes. The ideal Dutch oven heats evenly on a stovetop, is heavy-bottomed enough to retain heat within the oven, can be transferred between those two places fairly easily, and features a tight-fitting and heatproof lid that is great for both braising and browning. Wall Street Journal Buy Side concluded that experts’ favorite Dutch oven is the Le Creuset Round Dutch Oven, particularly the 7.25-quart version.



Des Moines has a Le Creuset outlet store where unpopular colors and such sell at true bargain prices. I know one Prairie Meadows horse racing fan who always treats himself to a new Le Creuset product when he wins.

Still, Le Creuset is the top of the line. For a lower-price option, WSJBS believes Lodge’s Essential Enamel Cast Iron Dutch Oven (\$99 for 6 quart model at Bass Pro Shop and Target) delivers performance well above what its price tag would suggest. And, if you’re not married to the idea of an enameled Dutch oven, you may find Great Jones’ The Dutchess (\$205 for 6.75 quart model at Great Jones) for an oval shape.



PRESERVING

Because this is our autumn issue, we tested a few dehydrators and decided that Excalibur’s Select Digital Dehydrator was the best value for our needs. It is \$179 at the Excalibur website and offers a temperature range of 85°-165° F and a timer for up to 60 hours, allowing you to efficiently dehydrate a wide variety of foods, including meat, fruit and herbs. With 7.2 square feet of drying space and eight chrome-plated trays, it provides ample room.

THIS STUFF IS THE BEST, PASS THE WORD

Wall Street Journal Buy Side does serious research to pick superior products of myriad stuff. Here are a few of their recent verdicts about the best of kinds in food and drink.

- Best overall drip coffee maker – Oxo 9 Cup, \$230 at Williams Sonoma.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, tall - Stolzle’s New York Collins glasses, set of six, \$39 at the webstaurant store.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, short, stout and versatile – Viski’s crystal Negroni tumblers, set of two, \$22 at Walmart.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, metal – Barfly’s julep cup, \$14 at Walmart.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, shaken drinks – Cocktail Kingdom’s Leopold coupe set of 6, \$50 at Amazon.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, classic V – Riedel’s vinum martini glasses set of two, \$79 at Amazon.
- Best cocktail glasses for your home bar, whiskey sipping – Glencairn’s whisky glasses set of two \$25 at Walmart.
- Best wine preservation tools - Coravin Timeless Three Plus, \$249 at Coravin.

Traditionally, when a bottle is properly opened and exposed to air, it becomes oxidized, which means it will likely only hold up for so long. For certain wines, it is weeks, and for others, a matter of hours. Coravin Timeless Three Plus is a tool used to pour a glass of wine without actually opening the bottle. The brand’s site says the gadget can preserve wines for “weeks, months or even years.” ■



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