

AIN'T LIFE GRAND

Foodie travels in Grand Rapids, Mich.



Executive Chef Matt Balmer of Everyday People Café



Crawfish sautéed in a mustard cream with roasted red pepper and served with a sun-dried tomato potato cake at San Chez, a Tapas Bistro.

PHOTOS/HOPE S. PHILBRICK



Food is treated to artful presentations at Everyday People Café.

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

If your idea of a great vacation involves great food, it's time to add Grand Rapids, Mich., to the list of places you need to visit. That recommendation may come as a surprise—after all, if you've been tracking my advice, this city now joins a list that includes better-known culinary destinations like Reno, Nev., and Umbria, Italy—but several factors converge to make Grand Rapids a true foodie find.

The hospitality department at Grand Rapids Community College offers one of the nation's most respected culinary education programs. Since culinary students and faculty make discriminating restaurant consumers, the school has encouraged and influenced the city's gustatory offerings. Plus, the award-winning chef-instructors supervise three student-operated restaurants: The Heritage, a 120-seat fine dining restaurant; Art and Bev's Bistro, a 60-seat deli-baker; and McCabe Marlowe House, a catering and conference center, all of which are open to the public when school is in session.

Many culinary school graduates choose to stay in Grand Rapids and, as a result, have made a positive impact on the local restaurant scene. But the region also draws plenty of talented chefs eager to take part in the high

quality of life. For example, Joe Pagano, executive chef at the Taste of the Gardens Café at the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, says that he left Caesar's in Las Vegas and moved to Grand Rapids when he and his wife started a family. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America with an impressive résumé, including a stint at New York's famed Windows on the World restaurant at the World Trade Center, Pagano could have moved anywhere. But he was drawn to the Michigan city for several reasons, including its reputation for being safe, clean and friendly—and, of course, its produce.

"They grow chestnuts here that are to die for," says Pagano, who also admires local eggs, cherries, greens, apples, game and more.

"There's a movement to feature local produce," he says, and working with Michigan produce gives him the opportunity to work with "better product" than he might find elsewhere. Grand Rapids' proximity to Lake Michigan gives the region a unique microclimate; rich soil and mild winters are ideal growing conditions for a variety of crops.

Crane Orchards is one of the pick-your-own facilities, with more than 15 different varieties of apples, peaches and sweet cherries. "Our fruit is more flavorful than fruit from out West, but not as pretty," says Rob Crane, a fifth-generation farmer at Crane Orchards. "Michigan should have a campaign: 'Try our fruit with your eyes closed, and it will beat anyone's.'" **SP**

IF YOU GO

WHEN TO GO

The eating is good year-round, but consider the harvest seasons: sweet cherries are typically ready by late June, peaches in July and apples in September and October.

WHAT TO DO

Entertainment options include museums, theaters, comedy clubs, the 12,000-seat Van Andel arena and much more. Consider the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright Meyer May House, Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium,

John Ball Zoo, Opera Grand Rapids, Master Arts Theatre, Boulder Creek Golf Club and the Berlin Raceway when planning your itinerary.

WHERE TO STAY:

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel
800-253-3590
www.amwaygrand.com

MORE INFORMATION:

Grand Rapids/Kent County Convention & Visitors Bureau
800-678-9859
www.VisitGrandRapids.org

While best known for its cherries, Michigan also boasts meats of consistently high quality and flavor, whether featured on sophisticated fine dining or casual bistro menus. The downtown area houses some 60 restaurants, but when planning your culinary getaway to Grand Rapids, I recommend including these stops:

THE 1913 ROOM AT THE AMWAY GRAND PLAZA HOTEL. Michigan's first and only five-diamond restaurant serves contemporary food with French influences. 616-776-6459.

BAR DIVANI This classy and cozy bar offers an eclectic array of cuisine, wine, beer and spirits. 616-774-9463, www.bardivani.com.

CRANE'S PIE PANTRY This casual restaurant showcases fruit grown on the Crane family orchards. 269-561-2297, www.cranespiepantry.com.

EVERYDAY PEOPLE CAFÉ Co-owner/executive chef Matt Balmer serves sophisticated cuisine in a friendly atmosphere. 269-857-4240, everydaypeoplecafe.com.

JOURNEYMAN CAFÉ BREAD CATERING This European-style cuisine is made using only local, organic or chemical-free ingredients. 269-561-2269, www.journeymancafe.com.

MARIE CATRIB'S This busy, funky bistro serves fresh, homemade baked goods, sandwiches, soups, salads and entrées with Middle Eastern influences. 616-454-4020.

SAN CHEZ, A TAPAS BISTRO Influenced by Spanish and Moroccan cuisine, these tapas are designed for a 10-minute cooking time to ensure fast service. 616.774.8272, www.sanchezbistro.com.

TASTE OF THE GARDENS CAFÉ Located inside Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, this restaurant serves soups, salads, fresh baked-goods and more. 888-957-1580, www.meijergardens.org.

THE HERITAGE RESTAURANT Lunch and dinner menus feature creations by students of the Grand Rapids Community College. 616-234-3696, www.grcc.edu.

WEALTHY STREET BAKERY Find artisan breads, decadent desserts, elegant muffins and more here. 616-301-2950, www.wealthystreetbakery.com.