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RESTAURANT WEEK

AUGUST 21-30, 2020

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**2020 RESTAURANT WEEK
AUGUST 21-30**


LET'S DO THIS!

Now more than ever, *dsm* is excited to present Restaurant Week, 10 days of meals and deals now in its 13th year.

As events and activities throughout the city have been forced to change in response to COVID-19, so, too, has Restaurant Week. With the goal to elevate and celebrate our city's dining scene, this year's event will give restaurants additional flexibility, with dine-in and carryout options and the freedom to create a menu that works for them. Dine-in dinner menus will range from \$30 to \$35 per person, while carryout will be \$30. Lunches, both dine-in and carryout, will be \$15 per person.

Eateries were just starting to reopen when we produced this special section, but you'll find plenty in the following pages to make you even more eager for Restaurant Week: *dsm* writers Wini Moranville and Karla Walsh share some of their most memorable dining experiences over the past year, from sensational sweets (canelés, anyone?) to the best burgers. And in the insightful and moving essay starting on page 10, Wini reminisces on 40 years of Des Moines dining.

For the list of this year's participating restaurants, please visit the Restaurant Week website: dsmrestaurantweek.com. The Business Record, our sister publication, also will publish the list. Then plan your 10 days of feasting as you show support of your favorite restaurants. And try some new places, too! As Wini sums up so perfectly: "If we expect a city of great restaurants, it will be on us to show up—with gratitude and in full force."



On the cover: The hamburger at Tangerine at the Art Center brings an artful stack of beef, pepper-bacon, slow-roasted tomatoes, garlic-herb and cheddar cheeses, and fried leeks. Turn to page 4 for more on the cafe. Photographer: Duane Tinkey

DINING WITH DISTINCTION: MEMORABLE FAVORITES

WARNING: THIS
LIST *WILL* MAKE
YOU HUNGRY.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, or so the adage goes. So while the exemplary dining experiences in this story were notable at the time, they pack a whole new meaning after the pandemic caused our favorite restaurants to close for months.

That pause inspired us to reflect on the moments we missed most. The clinking glasses. Rubbing elbows with a friend sitting alongside us in a booth. Raucous laughter from across the room. Watching the flames stir-fry that entree to perfection.

We can't wait to experience all that and more during Restaurant Week, Aug. 21-30. In the meantime, *dsm* restaurant and food writers Wini Moranville and Karla Walsh share some highlights of the past 365 to inspire your culinary adventures at any time.

WINI MORANVILLE'S FAVORITES

REDISCOVERY OF THE YEAR:

Flying Mango

Last year, I began taking fresh looks at our city's enduring mainstays—places I'd overlooked while chasing down the next new thing on the dining scene. I kicked off the intermittent series with a visit to Flying Mango, and my appreciation for this Beavertown favorite grew even deeper.

With creamy grits topped by plump, sweet shrimp—all rimmed by a rich, heady stock—the shrimp and grits dish made me as happy as any I'd had in the Southern states. Barbecue? Of course: My dining pal tucked into a huge combo plate of brisket, ribs and chicken, but if I had to choose one, I'd choose the ribs. No, wait, the brisket ... or maybe the chicken. (You get the idea.)

Better yet, the joint was jumpin', the buzz was irresistible and the staff was totally in the zone, with owner Mike Wedeking at the helm of the well-oiled machine, doing everything from busing tables to making each diner feel like they were the most important person in the room. It felt so good to be in such great hands.

LUNCHES I LOVED:

Tangerine at the Art Center

When respected local caterer Tangerine took over operations of the Des Moines Art Center's restaurant last year, they immediately began serving the kind of ambitious, modern and fine-tuned food that you'd hope to find in an important art museum. Great finds include everything from elegant soups to great burgers, which are equally refined (in their own beefy way).

Vino 209

This handsome wine bar in Valley Junction serves elevated takes on soups and sandwiches. Grilled cheese? Sure thing, but with oozy and translucent Muenster cheese, hefty thick-slab bacon, peppery arugula and a touch of opulence via a restrained truffle aioli. That's just one case in point among others I've enjoyed here.

Trellis at the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden (pictured below)

I love the way the ultra-fresh and thoroughly gratifying salads at Trellis never make me wish I'd opted for the heartier pasta dishes on the menu. I adore their vivid soups—always made without thickeners to mask the flavors. And I also treasure the graceful finale of each visit here: the presentation of a dessert tray brimming with delights crafted by noted pastry chef Nik Pugmire of Doré Bakery.





PASTRY OF THE YEAR:

Canelés from Scenic Route Bakery *(pictured)*

Canelés (pronounced CAN-lay) are a specialty of Bordeaux, France. Hallmarks of these rum-infused teacakes include a soft, custardy center and a lightly crisp, darkly caramelized crust—plus the unmistakable ridged cylindrical shape, traditionally gained through the copper molds in which they're baked.

A while back, Katy Nelson, a French-trained pastry chef and the owner of Scenic Route Bakery, decided to purchase the pricey copper molds, ace a recipe (including figuring out the tricky butter-beeswax ratio for greasing the molds) and introduce Des Moines to these marvelous treats.

Lucky Des Moines! Enjoy them as a midmorning treat with coffee, or an afternoon tea cake, but call ahead to find out which days the little gems are in the bakery's rotation. Then, set up an alert and get there early as they've been known to run out.

KEEPIN' IT CASUAL:

Truman's

If you follow my coverage of the Des Moines dining scene at all, you know I have immense affection for the drivers of Full Court Press' spate of beer-centric restaurants. They have a knack for running easygoing joints where the good-time vibe counter-intuits a serious dedication to quality.

In the past year, Truman's KC Pizza Tavern emerged as one of my favorites of the lot, especially after the kitchen revamped the menu with some pizza combos and well-wrought sandwiches. The Balboni—a meat extravaganza featuring warm bacon atop cool thin-sliced Italian deli meats—proved a great south side-inspired take on the club sandwich. Equally Italian-American was the Babe; named for legendary Des Moines restaurateur Babe Bisignano, this hearty pizza arrived with Alfredo sauce, capicola, black olives, mozzarella, salami and mortadella.

Oh, and there's pie: honest-to-gosh double-crust fruit pies, crafted locally by ChaCha's Confections and served fresh, never frozen. How sweet it is when such casual places take dessert this seriously.



ALL-OUT AMAZING PLATE OF GREAT FOOD:

Cheese Bar (*pictured*)

Just about anyone can arrange cured meats, cheeses and accompaniments on a platter, but in my estimation, only about 0.01% of the world's population can do it as wondrously as the Cheese Bar.

Of course, it's all about the best ingredients—and the exactitude of execution. Options include La Quercia prosciutto, sliced into glossy, delicate ribbons so thin you can see through

them; three world-class artisanal cheeses presented in artful ways to showcase their best features; bands of light-pink mortadella and paper-thin disks of spicy salami. Thoughtfully chosen sides, such as sour French pickles, marcona almonds, apple jam, piparra peppers and well-purveyed crackers, round out this fanfare of beautifully staged food.

Sometimes, I get this platter to go for a great end-of-the-week treat to enjoy at home. But dining in is a blast: With casual and communal farmhouse-style seating and 30 craft beers on tap, Cheese Bar is Ingersoll Avenue's own slice of hipster Brooklyn (and I mean that admiringly). I especially love the way the painstakingly selected beers are served in wine glasses, because each is worth savoring as much as any fine wine.

THE YEAR'S BEST BURGER(S): IT'S A TIE!

George's Prime Rib Burger at G. Mig's 5th Street Pub

Crafted with fresh-ground prime rib and decked out with caramelized onions, a four-mushroom blend and Monterey Jack cheese, this glorious paean to beef is served on a tuggy ciabatta bun from South Union Bakery, with homemade horseradish sauce on the side. When it comes to beef-based burgers in this town, this is the one to beat.

The "Original Dirt Burger" at Dirt Burger *(pictured)*

Meatless burgers can be less than gratifying, but Dirt Burger nails it: Rather than trying to mimic beef, their patty lets the hearty vegetable-and-grain flavor of its wholesome ingredients—including mushrooms, flax, buckwheat and a slew of raw vegetables—shine through. Served on a brioche bun with raw onions, herb vegan mayo, ketchup, mustard, lettuce and a big, fat pickle slice, it may *satisfy* like a beef-based burger, but it *tastes* like its own wonderful thing entirely.



KARLA WALSH'S FAVORITES

ONE-OF-A-KIND EXPERIENCE OF THE YEAR:

Chef's Table at Alba

"Give me a price, a number of courses you're interested in trying, and alert me to any allergies, and we'll be happy to create a tasting menu for you," says Garrett Dotsch, general manager at Alba. "In fact, we prefer that rather than ordering off the regular menu so we can guide the experience and create a nice flow."

The custom tasting experience is available Tuesday through Thursday at the chef's table at the East Village new-American bistro. Otherwise, the table can be reserved any Tuesday through Saturday when Alba is open for dinner. (Monday it's often snapped up by people indulging in the \$6 burger-and-fries night available in the adjacent bar.)

On a blustery winter day in late 2019, I booked the chef's table with a dining companion, and we asked executive chef Mason Althiede and his kitchen wizards to team up with Dotsch to share the best of the best on their food and drink menu at the time. We still can't stop thinking about the luscious syrah, the peppery chorizo-sweet potato bisque, and the expertly seared scallops. The fires jumping in the background and the friendly banter with the chefs only sweetened the deal. With the sweet-tart Lemon Shaker Creme Brulee to cap things off, we had to restrain ourselves from standing to applaud the show we had just witnessed.



MOST ADVENTUROUS INGREDIENTS OF THE YEAR:

Harbinger (*pictured*)

Raised on Hamburger Helper and skillet chicken dinners, 14-year-old me would have never imagined devouring—and delighting in—halibut cheeks. Or crispy duck skin. Or sake kasu gelato (served as the a la mode portion of a creative spin on sweet potato pie).

But here we are, at this locally sourced, inventive Ingersoll hot spot helmed by five-time James Beard Award nominee Joe Tripp. Safer-and-still-scrumptious options are always available on the menu if you're bringing the family (*ahem*, my meat-and-potatoes Dad), but you'll get the best taste bud tour and culinary education if you opt for the five-course tasting menu.

THE BEST AL FRESCO MEAL:

Aposto's Porch

Come summer, the best seat in the house at this charming Sherman Hill Italian restaurant is, well, outside the house. The wraparound porch on the 1880 house that holds Aposto restaurant and its upstairs private dining venue is the place to share a bottle of bubbly and a generous spread of executive chef Shawn Bennigsdorf's charcuterie.

If you're lucky enough to arrive when Lou Ann's Italian Wedding Cake is on the menu, like I was when I visited with a pal last summer, trust your gut. Yes, you want a slice. Each. Owner Tony Lemmo, who bakes the mascarpone-frosted cakes from scratch in honor of his mom, wouldn't have it any other way.

THE MOST ARTISTIC PLATES:

R I

Scroll through the @rirerestaurant Instagram feed and you'll almost be convinced that chef/co-owner Jacob Demars' recipes are too pretty to eat.

Almost, until the plates land on your table at the Windsor Heights new-American restaurant. Minutes later, if you're anything like the trio that surrounded our table, you're holding yourself back from licking the plate clean. (I retract that statement. My friend did actually swipe his finger across the shell that held the artfully crafted Cape Ann Baked Stuffed Clam. No holding back and no regrets here.)

The works of art will live on in your photo album, but the flavors that result in his seasonal dishes are the true masterpieces. Don't miss them.

THE BEST FOOD AND DRINK PAIRING:

Illahe Wine Dinner at the Cheese Bar

Normally closed on Mondays, the Cheese Bar and its sister spot in the Shops at Roosevelt, the Cheese Shop, sometimes open for classes and tastings. A sure cure for any case of the Mondays is some meltingly smooth brie and warm bread, in my opinion.

This is one time it pays off to be a follower: "Like" both of owner C.J. Bienert's brands on Facebook and sign up for their email newsletters and you'll be among the first to know about these often-sold-out events. Invite your friends (and make some more along the way at the communal tables) and learn about everything from the cheese-making process to the best way to pair chocolate and cheese.

If all of the classes and pop-ups are as delightful as the small plates pairing designed by chef Brett McClavy and a vintner from Oregon's Illahe Vineyards, you won't want to be left on the waiting list. ■

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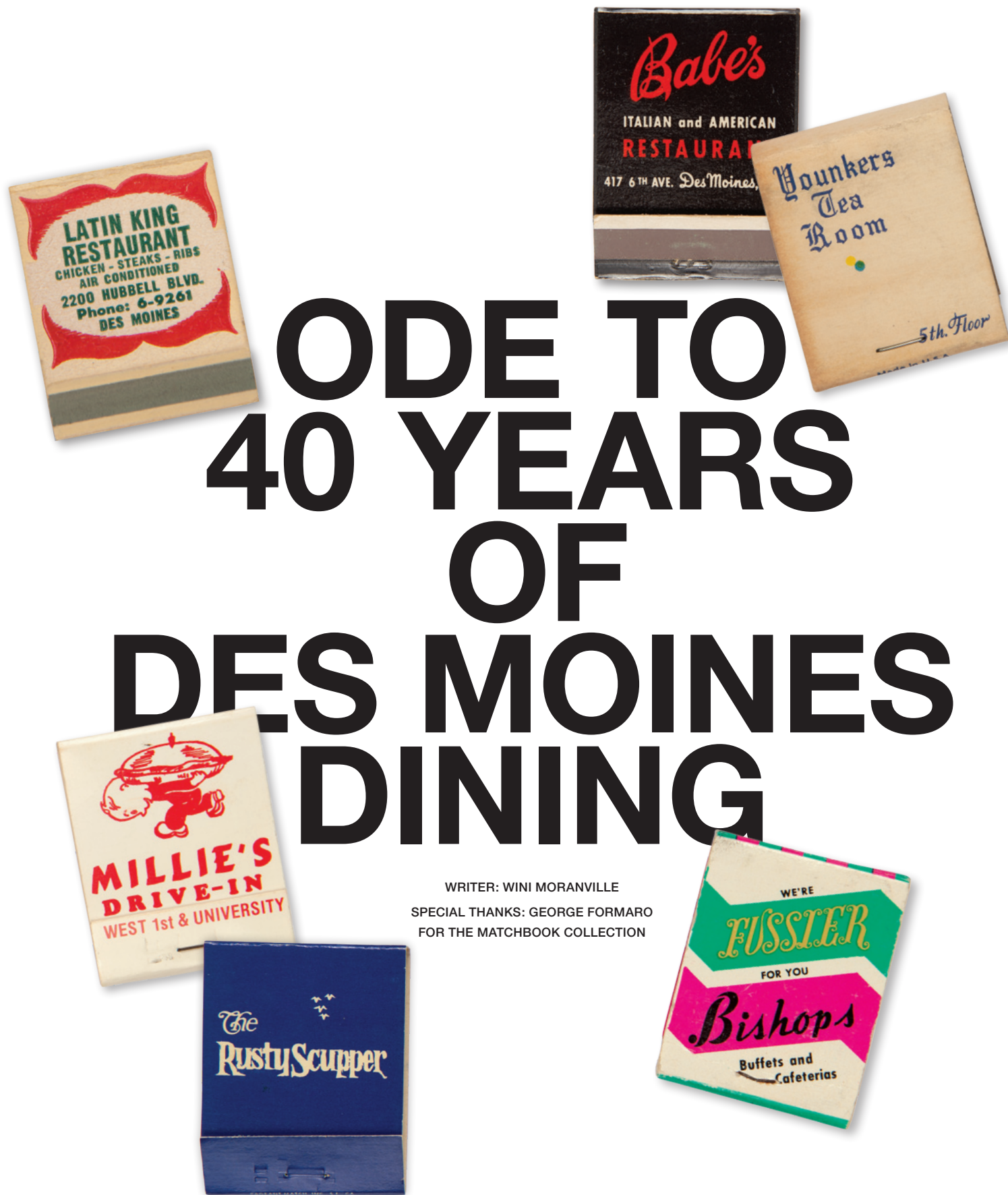
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ODE TO 40 YEARS OF DES MOINES DINING

WRITER: WINI MORANVILLE

SPECIAL THANKS: GEORGE FORMARO
FOR THE MATCHBOOK COLLECTION

S ometime in the summer of 1980, while I was waiting tables at the Younkers Meadowlark Room in Merle Hay Mall, a rotund 30-something man and two young women were seated in my section minutes before closing time. Because the restaurant was almost empty at this hour, the trio had my undivided attention, which is why I noticed something odd: As he walked around our extensive salad bar, the man was jotting down notes in a little oblong notebook.

After the polite but reserved party left, I conferred with the cashier: Sure enough, the name on the credit card receipt was Richard Somerville, who was at the time the Des Moines Tribune's restaurant critic, then known as the "Grumpy Gourmet."

Two anxious weeks later, the review appeared in the afternoon paper. His verdict? A disappointing three out of five stars.

"Just about everything at the Meadowlark Room is classy," he wrote. "Everything, that is, except the food."

He told of a chicken cordon bleu topped with something akin to a thick, yellow sauce he last saw at the Hi-Ho Grill. Bits of gristle marred the chicken crepe's filling, and the prime rib was well past the medium-rare doneness requested.

That he deemed his server (me) "very attentive and cheerful" did little to assuage how flattened we all were by his review. The sous-chef who'd overseen the kitchen the night of the critic's visit—usually one proud, swaggering dude—could hardly look the rest of us in the eye.

Over the next few days, the responses among the management and staff progressed from "how dare he say such cruel things?" to "how can we do a better job tomorrow?"

The question in my mind, however, was, "How do I get that guy's gig?"

HAD I TAKEN on restaurant reviewing in 1980, I would have spent the next few years covering steakhouses, red-sauce spaghetti joints, cafeterias, diners and just a handful of fancy chandeliered restaurants with tuxedoed maitre d's.

And I would have thought it was grand.

Some days, I would have headed to casual coffee shops and cafeterias for well-crafted everyday food. Reviewing Baker's Cafeteria, I would have reveled in the crisp fried chicken livers, the homemade chicken gravy, and meringue-topped raisin-cream pie. I would have gladly tucked into the plank of fried sole and some French silk pie at Bishop's, hot roast beef sandwiches at DeCarlo's and chicken-fried steak at the Hi-Ho Grill.

I would have praised Younker's Tea Room and its outposts the Meadowlark Room and the Peacock Room not only for their famed rarebit burgers, sticky rolls and classic chicken salad, but with an admittedly biased insider's view: I knew that everything from the daily soups to the ice cream were made in-house. That wee bit of gristle in Mr. Somerville's crepe was indeed a flaw, but it attested to the way the meat was cooked fresh and plucked from the bone every day.

At the great Italian-American steakhouses, such as Gino's, Imperial House and Johnny's Vet's Club, I would have loved questing for the perfect thin-sliced onion rings—so hot they burn your fingers, so crispy they flake all over your shirt, and just so soft, slithery and sweet inside.

I would have applauded ice-cold gin gimlets, prime rib and steaks nailed a perfect medium-rare, zippy red-sauced pasta with hot, fennel-

enhanced Italian sausage, and yeasty homemade dinner rolls. I would have felt so sophisticated, ordering Pink Squirrels



and Golden Cadillacs and other pastel-colored ice-cream drinks.

But when it came to the city's high-end dining, I would have hardly been able to believe my good fortune: duck à l'orange flambéed tableside at Ducks and Company, lobster at the Pier, Steak Diane with Gratin Dauphinoise at Quenelles, Champagne brunch with eggs benedict and petits fours at the Crystal Tree. Sitting in a plush half-moon booth at Guido's, I would have watched as Guido himself carved my prime rib from a tableside cart.

Would I have grown weary of having to choose between diners, spaghetti joints, steakhouses or continental fare? Heavens, no. Besides, I would not have known what else to look for.

BUT I DID not snag the Grumpy Gourmet job in 1980. Instead, I moved to New York City. Then England. And then Ann Arbor.

Those years in exciting elsewhere opened my eyes and palate to a wide world of food, from the Middle Eastern venues on Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue to London's Indian and Malaysian restaurants. I discovered sushi at a spot in the shadow of the Empire State Building, a proper cappuccino at Caffe Dante in the Village, foldable thin-crust pizza in Brooklyn. At Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor, I learned just how crazy-good chopped liver and corned beef tasted together in a sandwich. Though I sometimes missed Midwestern cooking, I soon gleaned an appreciation for fresh seafood and a lighter, brighter side of Italian and French cooking, for vinaigrettes and mesclun. Homemade pasta. Fresh cilantro.

AS IT HAPPENED, 17 years after waiting on the Grumpy Gourmet, I finally did get his gig.

I moved back to Des Moines in 1991; soon after, I fused my ongoing love for food with my experience in publishing to launch a career as a freelance food writer and editor. Later, in 1997, the Register's restaurant reviewing gig opened up; I tried out and snagged the job. With the Tribune long gone, the column now ran in the Des Moines Register and was called "The Datebook Diner."

At first, I worried that my far-flung dining experiences might not serve me so well. In addition to all that worldly eating in the '80s, by the '90s I'd begun spending long stretches of each summer in France. While I'll always admire

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a great steak and an icy-cold gimlet, I also knew there could be more to a city's dining life than what we already had.

The full parking lots and long waitlists at some of the so-so restaurants I reviewed led me to believe that Des Moines diners seemed pretty happy with the way things were—did anyone really want me to point out that they could be better? Des Moines hates a snob; the city could not care less how things are done in New York, much less the South of France. As I began to find my voice as a reviewer, I struggled between being a cheerleader for the status quo and saying what I really thought.

I didn't have to struggle all that long.

Just a few months after I penned my first review, Bistro 43 opened in Beaverville. Jeremy Morrow started serving chef-driven, local, seasonal cuisine from the bustling open kitchen amid a delightfully unstuffy decor in an old brick neighborhood storefront. He was among the first to tell us—smack-dab on the menu—where our food came from, putting words like Cleverley Farms greens and Eden Farms Berkshire Pork into our city's culinary vocabulary.

To be sure, previous restaurants had also tried to similarly energize the scene, but Bistro 43 was the first to do so with any staying power on my watch. Other innovative, fresh-focused restaurants popped up alongside and soon after. The successful runs of Carpe Diem, Brix, Danielle, Corner Cafe, Bistro Montage and Sage confirmed that Des Moines was hungry for more innovative styles of



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dining; the standards had been raised. Soon, I stopped having to define words like chef-driven, heirloom and artisanal in my reviews.

During my 15-year stint as the Datebook Diner and later, as I've covered the scene for *dsm*, our restaurants improved in so many ways, both seismic and small. Early in the 2000s, I nipped into the Wine Experience, where a teenager behind the cheese counter astounded me with an almost frenzied knowledge and enthusiasm as he regaled me with samples. C.J. Bienert was just out of high school when he started cheesemongering, but already he was well on his way to becoming this city's champion for all things artisanal, later moving to Gateway Market, then progressively opening his own always-buzzing spots, the Cheese Shop and later the Cheese Bar.

While I still loved Gino's and Noah's and Latin King for what they did best, it was exciting to see newer restaurateurs in the genre nudging diners off the beaten path. Jerry Talerico of Sam & Gabe's showed us a more fine-tuned style of Italian-American supper-club cuisine, while Steve Logsdon at Lucca hit his stride by looking to Italy's north for inspiration.

Centro beckoned us all back downtown, throwing a great party night after night, with everyone invited in for as little as the price of a pizza. Americana and Django also helped usher in a rebirth of our city's core, with other hot spots to follow.

Coffeehouses, craft cocktails, signature desserts—all have flourished in the 20-plus years I've enjoyed my front-row seat. Pizza got more exciting thanks to Gusto, sushi became more daring, and the barbecue scene exploded.



Spots like Thai Flavors and Tacos Marianas helped us discover a fresher and more vivid side of Southeast Asian and Mexican cuisines.

As new beer connoisseurs sought something as well-crafted as the brews in their glass, Full Court Press restaurants (Royal Mile, Fong's, Truman's Pizza Tavern, Iowa Taproom, et al.), Cheese Bar, Lua Brewing and others have stepped up to the plate.

To be sure, it hasn't been all Bistro 43 and Sage, great cheese and Jerry Talerico's cannelloni. I dined through a slew of lackluster sports-bar meals; I sat through some lifeless hotel dining. My heart often broke for the also-ran venues that aimed high, but for whatever reason just couldn't pull it off. I witnessed once-greats like Younkers Tea Room, Crystal Tree and Quenelles hang on by a thread, all but giving up until they finally did.

And yet, for each good thing that came to an end, something else would emerge. We may have lost our last department store dining room, but cafes at the Art Center and Botanical Garden have hit their stride. Saying goodbye to favorites—Bistro 43, Sage, Bistro Montage and the like—was hard, but Alba, Harbinger, Table 128, Splash, Aposto, Proof and others continued to give us plenty to love.

Oh, Des Moines, it's been a great run, hasn't it?

AS I WRITE THIS, our city's restaurants are starting to reopen; a few have closed permanently, and I fear more difficult news will come. Restaurateurs have told me that in the aftermath of this pandemic, our dining scene will have changed in ways they can't yet foresee.

What's next, no one can say for sure. Yet this is an ode, not an elegy.

As I try to envision what it will all be like when our restaurants reopen, I think back to an article I wrote in 1999 when I was asked for predictions on Des Moines dining in the new millennium. I was optimistic, but I reminded diners that we all had a role to play. I wrote: "*A city gets the restaurants it deserves, the restaurants it will support.*"

That's always been true, but it's never been more urgently true than now. The restaurateurs that pull through will do so by being flexible, creative and resilient, by rolling the dice on untested approaches, and by working even harder than they did before. If we expect a city of great restaurants, it will be on us to show up—with gratitude and in full force. ■

DES MOINES. THE Ss ARE SILENT.

The fun goes

CLINK, CLINK.



FONG'S PIZZA

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Fun is on the menu in Greater Des Moines, whether you're donning fighter helmets while devouring Crab Rangoon pizza, slurping and crunching your way through the Farmers' Market, or boldly scraping that last bit of Steak de Burgo sauce off your plate. Because when you're here, it's always happy hour. [Catch what you've been missing at **CatchDesMoines.com**](https://www.catchdesmoines.com)



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