TASTE & TRAVEL
Expand your culinary horizons

PLUS
KEY WEST
BALTIMORE
MADISON
CZECH REPUBLIC
AUSTRALIA
WELLINGTON

Spice Journey
KERALA
FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO read, LOVE TO eat AND LOVE TO travel

DISCOVERING
CALABRIA
SOUTHERN TABLES
WASHINGTON DC
ON THE BEAT
NEW ORLEANS
REDISCOVERING
VIETNAM
DAY OF THE DEAD
MAZATLÁN
REAL FOOD, REAL PEOPLE

Madison, Wisconsin

The up and coming ‘it’ spot on the farm-to-table dining radar isn’t where you would expect. The residents of humble Madison, Wisconsin are passionate and knowledgeable about food — but they don’t feel the need to shout about their incredible dining scene from the rooftops. It’s just the way they have always done things here — and why not when your restaurants, cafés, and even late-night diners have easy access to some of the best produce in the country?

by LANI KINGSTON
THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Wisconsin cheese; Marigold; Roast Public House brisket sandwich; Underground Butcher; Kirsty Schwinn of Marigold; Marigold; Fromagination.
Community spirit will never die in Madison...

Wisconsin is ranked second in the US for most organic farms and first for organic livestock, resulting in an abundance of high-quality meats and dairy. Known as America’s Dairyland for good reason, the state produces more cheese than the entire country of Italy. Many of Wisconsin’s hundreds of varieties of cheese can be tasted and purchased at Madison’s specialty cheese store, Fromagination.

Madison provides the ideal holiday destination in all seasons. In spring and summer, fresh produce is bountiful and accessible. The Dane County Farmers Market, held in the square around the magnificent Capitol Building, is the largest producer-only farmers’ market in the US. The crowd consists of chefs, tourists, bakers, food-lovers and locals — it is this constant face-to-face interaction that ensures exceptional quality. The Taste of Madison Festival has been held around Capitol Square over Labor Day weekend for over three decades. Madison’s finest food producers and restaurants serve ‘tastes’ crafted from fresh local produce. During the week Capitol Square is scattered with food trucks such as Good Food, who sell seasonal soups, wraps and salads to the lunch crowd.

Fall and winter are equally exquisite — while many cities import produce from thousands of miles away over colder months, Madison chefs stay local. Days are sunny yet crisp, covered in a thick blanket of crunchy snow, cafés and restaurants warm and inviting. Fine-dining, award-winning Harvest focuses on sustainability and seasonality, with 85–95 percent of the menu sourced locally year-round. A winter visit to Harvest will see perfectly prepared potatoes, squash,
crisp, sweet winter spinach, and toasted nuts. Spring is filled with fresh, crisp stalks of asparagus and summer sees the rise of the plump tomato. James Beard-heralded Graze and L’Etoile are other notable fine-dining mentions, Executive Chef Tory Miller starting with local, farm-raised ingredients and preparing everything from cured meats, butters to breads in-house.

Weekend brunch is popular in Madison. Locals congregate for markets, community events, or just to meet and celebrate the bounty of their town. Bassett Street Brunch Club serves brunch all day and night. From chilaquiles, shrimp and creamy grits to roti breakfast burritos, oatmeal brûlée and lox bagels, there is something for everyone. For a sweet pick-me-up, lattes can be made with steamed horchata, cinnamon-spiced rice milk and paired with fresh, pillowy donuts in rotating flavours such as mint slice or maple bacon.

Bassett Street Brunch Club joins a plethora of community-driven, local-minded dining establishments run by restaurant group Food Fight. Managing Partner Joey Connaughty proves even the ‘big guys’ in the restaurant business embody that small-town, caring spirit so typical of Madison. The big question is whether Madison will be able to sustain its endearing nature in the face of inevitable growth. Speaking to those at the forefront, it is easy to see community spirit will never die in Madison. “We will never be able to stray away from the core values of the town,” Joey says. “It’s bigger than your business plan — it’s about what you are going to do for this community. As a business owner, you want your community to be empowered by itself.”

Head to Marigold Kitchen for a relaxed bakery vibe. Executive Chef Kristy Schwinn is passionate about her food, and it shows in
her expertly crafted dishes. Kristy does hearty, home-style food with the skill of a chef — piles of blueberry pancakes with melting orange almond butter, guajillo chili potatoes or duck confit hash depart her kitchen with precision seven days a week. A chalkboard listing the producers that supply each ingredient of the popular Marigold Breakfast Sandwich is an example of the commitment to local produce. Roast Public House is another spot downtown for sandwiches with a local focus — handcrafted sandwiches like the Cajun Brisket or the Pineapple Pork Express list ingredient sources right there on the menu.

For a classy Sunday morning, head to the sustainability-focused, wood-panelled Sardine. They serve a buzzing white-tablecloth brunch, where you can gaze out over one of the lakes that flank the town. Madison is situated on an isthmus, and during winter it isn’t unusual to see ice fishers, stationary above holes drilled down to the water below. Sitting in the sunny window, the table fills with perfectly crisped waffles covered in orange cinnamon butter, banana and maple; Norwegian Salmon perched atop chili white beans, bacon lardons and poached eggs — and for hearty breakfasters a variety of grilled, local pork sausages are served with a mild saffron, squash and zucchini risotto.

Wisconsinites take their sausages very seriously. A rich German, Bohemian and Polish heritage brought sausage making to Wisconsin early. Butchers started to experiment with local and native ingredients, creating a fusion sausage culture entirely unique to the region. Wisconsin’s deep-rooted sausage tradition ensured small-batch producers thrived, leading to a seemingly endless variety of sausages.

New nose-to-tail butcher shops such as Underground Butcher create unique artisanal charcuterie items such as the fennel-scented finocchiona and goat salami with rosemary and cinnamon. Owned by the Underground Food Collective — a community that cooks together with no head chef or owner — they draw from their experiences and skills to produce food that is better than one head chef could create alone. The Collective’s restaurant, Forequarter, has a distinct woodland vibe and serves meats from Underground Butcher, from an ever-changing menu that reads like a carnivore’s bucket list. From smoked mackerel to cider-braised pork belly, quail and guinea hen to miso lamb, the diversity shows off the talents of the many hands that lead the kitchen.

So beloved is the sausage that a typical Wisconsinite would list the ubiquitous bratwurst as a ‘state food.’ A visit over Memorial Day Weekend will see the town flocking to the world’s largest BratFest, or at any time of the year, The Old Fashioned on Capitol Square serves a hearty, local, award-winning Sheboygan brat sandwich. The Old Fashioned is also an ideal destination to experience a traditional Wisconsin supper club. With a number of varieties of the traditional Old Fashioned cocktail, a selection of local cheeses, and lazy Susans filled with cured meats, dips, breads, pickled vegetables, salads and smoked fish, evening drinks can turn into late night dining feasts filled with tastings of delicious morsels from local producers.

If you enjoy the one-stop-shop sort of dining that offers a broad range of local foods, Merchant is the place to go. With some of the best fried cheese curds in town, a Ploughman’s Platter that represents about 25 local food producers on one
plate, and Executive Chef Anna Dickson’s seasonally changing menu, Merchant should be at the top of every dining wish list. Merchant is also Madison’s first craft cocktail bar, winning awards with an expertly crafted cocktail list featuring such gems as a pear and cinnamon cocktail, crafted with the elusive wormwood liquor, Dolin Genepy Des Alps.

After feasting on the incredible meats and cheeses of the region, a sweet stop for balance might be needed. Gail Ambrosius handcrafts artisanal chocolates that have the town raving. Madison Sourdough’s selection of viennoiserie, cookies and scones is divine — or you could visit the Babcock Hall Dairy Store and eat ice cream right from the factory.

For late night or takeaway, the name on locals’ lips is Ian’s Pizza. A student haunt and late-night, carb-loading destination, Ian’s follows strict local and sustainable philosophies. Marketing Director Adam May says “We have seasonal partnerships with local farms. We source from local farmers markets, and our chefs make up recipes based on what they find there.” While their pizzas change with the seasons, count yourself lucky if you find a slice of the delicious, incredibly popular Mac n’ Cheese pizza. They also have slices topped with Shepherds Pie, Smoked Brisket and Tots, or an entire traditional Thanksgiving meal.

Many local food businesses get their start at the Madison Common Wealth Development Business Incubators. Madison Eats runs tours of the facility, where you can meet artisan food producers and see behind the scenes of local food businesses, whose doors are normally not open to the public. Otehlia Cassidy, owner of Madison Eats, runs other specialty food tours throughout the year. From walking tours through historic neighbourhoods to bicycle brunch tours, or craft beer and food pairing tours, there isn’t a better way to experience all that Madison has to offer.

In every corner of Madison a culinary traveller will find passionate people creating excellent food and drink. For a food lover it is a delight to visit a place where everyone you meet is an active participant in the food community, and where ‘local’, ‘organic’ and ‘seasonal’ aren’t just catch phrases.

Lani’s trip was organized by VISIT MADISON: THE GREATER MADISON CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU. Visit their website www.visitmadison.com to plan your trip to Madison, Wisconsin.

SERVES 8–10

**Steel Cut Oat and Yogurt PANCAKES**

MAKE THE BATTER for these tasty pancakes 24 hours in advance to let the oats soften and absorb the liquid.

| Steel Cut Oats | 1 ¼ cups |
| Yogurt | 1 cup |
| Whole Milk | 1 cup |
| Honey | ½ Tbs |
| All-Purpose Flour | ¼ cup |
| Wholewheat Flour | ½ cup |
| Baking Soda | 1 tsp |
| Salt | 1 tsp |
| Eggs | 4 |
| Yeast | 1 tsp |

1. **COMBINE** ingredients with a wire whisk and put in the refrigerator overnight.
2. **MELT** a little butter in a cast iron frypan or heavy skillet. Cook pancakes in batches, using a quarter cup of batter for each and adding more butter as needed.
3. **SERVE** with butter, maple syrup and, if you like, fresh fruit and a dusting of powdered sugar.