



THE MINI-APPLE TAKES THE CULINARY STAGE

THERE'S A HOST OF FOODIE DESTINATIONS TO CHOOSE FROM IN THE US, BUT MINNEAPOLIS IS UNLIKELY TO BE THE FIRST PLACE THAT COMES TO MIND - TIME TO PUSH IT TO THE TOP OF YOUR LIST, WRITES BRIAN THACKER.





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apple-chilli crickets served with mustard and pumpkin seeds. I certainly didn't expect to see insects featured on a menu when I moved to Minnesota from Melbourne four years ago. To be honest, I was expecting lots of hearty all-American fare (read: burgers and more burgers), but in Minneapolis it's possible to take your tastebuds on a culinary tour of the world from Laotian *larb* and Ecuadorian *llapingachos* to Nepalese *momos* and Afghani

kebabs. New York, Los Angeles and Miami might have all the accolades and gastronomic glamour, but Minneapolis has become one of the country's breakout foodie cities; *Food and Wine Magazine* named it "Sleeper Food City of the Year" in 2022.

Minneapolis, bisected by the Mississippi River and dotted with pristine lakes, is a vibrant, art-focused city whose occupants are known for being "Minnesota nice". The city also has a fundamental and deep connection to the rest of the world: Minnesota has one of the highest per capita number of refugees in the US and as a result has been influenced by a multitude of different cultures. The local Hmong, Somali, Middle Eastern, South American and Mexican communities have all played their part in shaping this city's modern-day culinary scene and have helped transform it into an epicurean epicentre.

Back to the crickets. This isn't some novelty menu addition concocted to garner curiosity – this is true local fare at Owamni restaurant. And when I say "local", I mean food that was eaten by the original inhabitants: Native American tribes have lived off this land for centuries. Owamni is dedicated to serving only precolonial indigenous foods, which means no beef, pork or chicken and also no flour, dairy or cane sugar. Instead, you have a one-of-a-kind menu that leans on locally grown produce, wild plants and indigenous game including bison, elk, deer, pheasant and insects.

I met with Owamni founder and Oglala Lakota "Sioux Chef" Sean Sherman at a local café. It wasn't hard to spot him – his dark hair hung in neat braids to his waist. "I originally wanted to put insects on the menu as a statement and to show protein diversity," Sean said with a shrug. "I think almost every table gets them now." When I congratulated him on winning the prestigious Julia Child Award (for making a profound and significant difference in the way America cooks and eats) he smiled sheepishly. In fact, he has a lot to be congratulated for. Less than a year after opening in July 2021, Owamni was named 2022's Best New Restaurant in the United States by the James Beard Foundation, followed soon after by Sean being named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people of 2023.

Growing up on an Indian reservation, Sean began working in restaurants when he was 13 to help support his family. By the time he was 27, he was an executive chef. "A



PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Yia Vang, chef at Union Hmong Kitchen; One of the tasty dishes served at Union Hmong Kitchen.

LEFT FROM THE TOP:
Third Avenue Bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis; The bar area at Owamni restaurant.

RIGHT FROM THE TOP:
Native American-style food served at Owamni; The view over Third Avenue Bridge and the Mississippi River at Owamni.

few years into my chef career, I just had an epiphany," he told me. "I realised that there was an absence of anything indigenous out there when it came to food. There were no cookbooks, no restaurants. So I wrote a cookbook and opened a restaurant."

That night, my wife and I were lucky enough to snag a spot at the bar of Owamni. Diners snap up reservations here, released a month in advance, in a matter of minutes. "People are always asking me how to get a reservation," Sean says. "I say, 'I don't know, I just grew up on one.'" The restaurant is bedecked in white pine and reclaimed wood beams, while large windows frame a view of the Mississippi River. A neon sign glows with a declaration: "YOU ARE ON NATIVE LAND."

We skipped the crickets (I'd had an unfortunate experience with a bowl of burnt crickets in Myanmar) but we did try a selection of dishes from the small but surprisingly eclectic menu, which included many ingredients I'd never heard of before: tepary beans, hominy, wojapi, berry dust, spicebush. We began with Marichou, caramelised sweetcorn and onions over green tomatoes, with a "warrior-blend" seasoning. My wife described it perfectly as "a symphony of flavours born from the earth." Next up was shaved bison picanha (a cut of meat), which had the perfect balance of lean and fat, served with a bright purée of berries and fermented fruits and a cured duck-egg-yolk aioli – the berries added a sophisticated tartness offset by the creamy aioli. The dessert, which was pawpaw custard with squash caramel and fermented berry dust, was dairy- and sugar-free, but not flavour-free.

Have you heard that funny Minnesotan accent from the movie *Fargo*? Those long



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vowels are influenced by Scandinavian immigrants. And there sure are plenty of them here: 46% of the state's foreign-born population were born in Sweden, Norway or Denmark. It's unsurprising then that the Minnesota American football team is called the Vikings. Despite this, a few years ago you would have struggled to find a Scandinavian restaurant in Minneapolis, but a surge of "New Nordic" cuisine has recently swept the city's restaurant scene.

Housed inside the sprawling, castle-like American Swedish Institute is Fika Café. The interior looks like an Ikea café, while the sections on the menu, *Grönsaker* and *Smörgåsar*, sound like the names of Ikea furniture. The executive chef, Amalia Obermeier-Smith, spoilt us with an array of tasting plates. "I'm going to give you the favourites, but I'm really excited about you trying some things from our new winter menu," she said. The favourites were the wholesomely rich juniper-spiced meatballs (sorry Ikea, but this is how you should make them) served with mashed potatoes, mustard sauce, cucumber and lingonberry jam, and the gravlax (served with a divinely velvety horseradish crème fraiche). From the new menu was a juniper and sage venison sausage and, my favourite, winter vegetable pavé – three different potatoes thinly sliced then reconstructed as one potato resting on onion and wine-braised beluga lentils. It was all so sumptuously complicated yet simple. I asked Amalia what she loved about the Minneapolis food scene. "People just want to make really good food that's honest and real – and from scratch, and with so much



love and heart."

It's worth coming to Minneapolis just for the hilltribe crispy chicken and sweet tamar-glazed pork belly at Union Hmong Kitchen. I love how a certain flavour on your tongue – just like music – can transport you back to another place and time. The smell and taste of the spicy pork belly, perfectly crispy on top and tender underneath, immediately took me back to Luang Prabang in Laos. But Hmong food is not just from Laos. The Hmong are in fact a stateless, itinerant people without a nation, and so their history reveals itself in their cuisine, which combines flavours from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and China. Minnesota is home to the largest diaspora of Hmong people living outside Asia, but Union Hmong Kitchen – opened in 2021 by Yin Vang – was the first dedicated Hmong restaurant in Minneapolis.

While I revelled in the bold flavours of the chicken and the spicy, fatty richness of the pork, a photo of Yin Vang, with his shaved head, long goatee beard and large carving



CLOCKWISE FROM THE TOP: Swedish culinary delights on offer at Fika; The interior at Fika; Classic Swedish meatballs at Fika.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Classic Hmong dishes at Union Hmong Kitchen



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knife between his teeth, looked down on me (from right next to a James Beard Award for 2022 Best Midwest Chef).

I caught up with Yin in person after my meal and asked him how the food scene has changed in Minneapolis over the past few years. "I think the curiosity of diners has deepened," he said. "There's always going to be great food. There's always going to be some trend. But it's the stories behind these dishes that keeps people coming back."

I couldn't do a story about Minneapolis dining without having at least one quintessential dish – and probably the most famous of all is a Jucy Lucy. As the poster on the wall inside Matt's Bar & Grill (where the burger was invented) says, "No, Jucy Lucy isn't your hot cousin from Cleveland". It's a burger with the cheese inside the beef patty.

Visiting on a Wednesday night, there was a 20-minute wait just to get a table – despite it looking like a dive bar. When we were finally seated at a booth, we noticed a framed photo above us (among all the "Best Burger" awards

of Barack Obama – sitting in the very same booth and eating a Jucy Lucy.

When our server brought over our burgers (served on a sheet of paper – no fancy plates here) she gave us an earnest warning: "Wait". It's a good thing we did: the molten cheese inside would burn the roof of your mouth off. The burger, which was simply garnished with pickles and finely chopped caramelized onions, was well done on the outside, while the volcanically melty American cheese gave the burger a nice zing. Yes, this is simple fare, but that's the beauty of it. Not all food needs to be complicated and Minneapolis has a generous sprinkling of both.

From Somali-spiced goat meat on spaghetti at Quruxlow Restaurant to truffle hummus at Baba's Palestinian restaurant, food in Minneapolis has become as creative and unique as the hip neighbourhoods they're in. So, before you come to Minneapolis, work up an appetite, make a reservation – and be prepared to be deliciously surprised.



ABOVE: Scenes from Matt's Bar & Grill, including the famous Jucy Lucy burger.

Photo Credits: Lauren Cutshall, Jon Dahlin, James Perovich, Jason Tesouro, Meet Minneapolis, NATFS

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Minneapolis–St Paul International Airport is served by international flights; the light-rail transit (LRT) connects to the city's downtown.

BEST TIME TO GO

Unless you love lots of snow and cold, summer is the best time to visit – from June to August, daily highs flutter around 30°C.

CURRENCY

US dollar

TIME ZONE

GMT -6

FOOD

You can dine around the globe in one street – the appropriately named Eat Street. Here you'll find German *sauerbraten*, Greek *moussaka*, Vietnamese *pho*, Thai green papaya salad, Jamaican jerk chicken, Japanese *niku soba ramen* and New York-style pizza, among many others.

WHERE TO STAY

A few years ago, you wouldn't want to eat at a hotel restaurant – but now you can combine both: Mara at Four Seasons Minneapolis is run by James Beard-winning chef Gavin Kaysen, while the Rand Tower Hotel features Blondette, Bar Rufus and Miaou Miaou – all headed up by Argentinian chef Daniel de Prado.

HOW TO DO IT

For all the latest (and greatest) places to eat and drink check out twincities.eater.com.

MUST-PACK ITEM

Bring an appetite – and a thick warm jacket if you come in winter.

WHY GO

Come for all that great food, then walk it all off at the Mall of America (the largest mall in the US) or go water skiing and rollerblading (both were invented in Minnesota).