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Why Midwestern Food Is Trending In Surprising Places

Far from the heartland, chefs are drawing in, in with cozy Midwestern classics. Here, a guide to the best Midwestern menus outside the Midwest.



FLYOVER FOODIES The crisp-fried blooming onion at Patti Ann's, in Brooklyn. PHOTO: IVANA LARROSA

By David Farley
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"I GREW UP eating those," said chef Thomas Tilaka Kalb as he walked by my table at his restaurant, [Agnes Restaurant & Cheesery](#), in Pasadena. I had ordered the honey-baked ham balls.

At Agnes, which opened in June 2021, the hearty dishes are hardly typical Southern California fare. In the wake of the pandemic, however, it makes sense that restaurants serving feel-good food have recently opened across the country. We've been here before, or at least very close. In 2001, when I was covering the dining scene in San Francisco, I noticed that after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, restaurants focusing on "comfort food" began popping up around the city.



Emmett's on Grove, in Manhattan, evokes a Midwestern tavern. PHOTO: IVANA LARROSA

This time around, the cooking comes with a distinct Midwestern accent. At Agnes and restaurants such as [Mr. Digby's](#) in San Francisco, [Patti Ann's](#) in Brooklyn and [Emmett's on Grove](#) in Manhattan, meatloaf, twice-baked potatoes and other all-stars of the Midwestern potluck are finally having their (well deserved) moment on a national level.



At Agnes Restaurant & Cheesery, in Pasadena, the cornbread éclair has a chicken liver mousse filling. PHOTO: IVANA LARROSA

At Patti Ann's in Brooklyn, which opened in March 2022, I feasted on a gravy-smothered short rib pot roast, cherry-ketchup-glazed duck meatloaf, and a fun, crisp-fried blooming onion. "There are a couple of reasons why Midwestern cuisine is having a moment," said chef Greg Baxtrom, a native of Illinois. "One is Covid fine dining, for sure. Connected to that is a fatigue from fine dining. And after a period of fear and uncertainty, a lot of chefs, such as myself, have the confidence and passion to open up a restaurant we've always wanted but were too timid to risk before." For Mr. Baxtrom—also chef and owner at the lauded Olmsted, up the street—that means a Brooklyn-based, Midwestern-focused, family-friendly restaurant named after his mom.

"We didn't set out to open a Midwestern place," said Mr. Tilaka Kalb, who runs Pasadena's Agnes with his wife, co-owner and manager of the adjacent cheese shop, Vanessa Tilaka Kalb, whom he met working at San Francisco pasta destination Flour + Water. "But Pasadena was partly settled by Midwesterners, and when I learned this building was built in 1922, the same year my grandmother Agnes was born, I got the idea to serve the food I grew up eating in Cedar Rapids, Iowa."

At Agnes I loved the juicy bone-in pork chop and the cheese curds with dill-pickled celery, a "Fresno Buffalo sauce" and a blue-cheese dip. The menu's breakaway star is the gnocchi, which has the flavor profile of a Midwestern baked potato: spuds, sour cream, dill, chives and heaps of butter. At Midwestern-leaning Mr. Digby's, in San Francisco, one of the most popular dishes, the deviled eggs, offer another variation on the loaded-potato theme: The yolk is mixed with sour cream, topped with chives, bacon bits and cheddar, and finished with a

sprinkling of crumbled salt-and-pepper potato chips.

Lucy Long, a retired professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, has written at length on comfort food and Midwestern cuisine. "The food culture of the Midwest puts an emphasis on everyday cooking, something your grandmother would have made," Ms. Long explained in a phone call. "It's the opposite of fine dining, which tends to emphasize the individual, in this case the chef, instead of the collective. And Midwestern cuisine is all about the collective." She described the latest turn to Midwestern cuisine as a democratizing, anti-elitist trend: "We want good food to be accessible to everyone, no matter how much money they have."



The twice-baked potato at Emmett's on Grove, in Manhattan. PHOTO: IVANA LARROSA

At Emmett's on Grove, a buzzy new spot with a cozy supper club vibe in Manhattan's West Village, the menu is loaded with Midwestern, particularly Chicagoan, staples. In addition to the thin-crust tavern-style pizzas one doesn't often find outside the Windy City, there are twice-baked potatoes and a grasshopper milkshake. Owner Emmett Burke said he was eager to serve Chicago tavern-style pizza in New York City, and the pandemic only increased his sense of urgency. "Midwestern 'flyover country' has yet to get the respect it deserves in the culinary world," he said. "And after living through this pandemic for a couple of years, what we really need right now is friendly Midwestern hospitality and food that makes us happy. For me, that means Chicago."

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