



A Fork in the Road

Chicago's deputy dining editor samples the cuisine of Indianapolis and Cincinnati by Jeff Ruby

MY DINING ROAD TRIP BEGAN with a death wish in the afternoon. As Chicago's deputy dining editor, I had been assigned to eat my way across three states to see how some of the most celebrated Midwestern spots measured up—and my pregnant wife was asking me to pull off I-65 for Taco Bell. “We’re on our way to the best restaurant in Indianapolis,” I barked. “And you want a chalupa?” She shot me a deadly look. I pulled off.

By the time we hit downtown Indianapolis, my wife was already hungry again. Fortunately, our first stop was **ELEMENTS** (415 N. Alabama St.; 317-634-8888), the brainchild of the chef Greg Hardesty, who also owns Indy's red-hot H₂O Sushi. His smart-looking Elements is the city's hippest spot, with its bold orange undertones, inviting patio, and ever-changing contemporary American menu. A stylish crowd packed the room—including our hipster waiter, who looked like the bass player for Weezer. This place would be right at home in Wicker Park.

The hype turned out to have been well deserved. Our meal began with a crisply fresh salad of ripe Indiana tomatoes,



shaved fennel, Picholine olives, and pine nuts—and ended with carrot cake, elaborately topped with white chocolate and cream cheese, with a pineapple-carrot coulis. Indianapolis is one of the largest landlocked cities in the world, but you wouldn't know it based on the outstanding seared ahi tuna with bok choy and applewood-smoked bacon we enjoyed between those two courses.

Everyone told us the best breakfast in town was at **CAFE PATA CHOU** (4911 N. Pennsylvania St.; 317-925-2823), so the next morning we headed to Broad Ripple, a historic Indy neighborhood with old houses and funky stores. This bright breakfast standby bustles with families and college kids, and the magazines and free house-roasted coffee make the wait for a table

>> This page, top: The St-Jacques sea scallops at Jean-Robert at Pigall's; middle, from left: The legendary burger served at the Moonshine Store; an ice-cream cone from Graeter's, a 135-year-old Cincinnati institution; the offerings from Marx Hot Bagels top anything available in Chicago. Opposite page: Jim Staten, a loyal Moonshine customer, helps out at the cash register.

bearable. We scored a counter spot—front-row seats for the Cinnamon Toast Guy, a man who frenetically cut loaves of fresh bread in perfectly uniform slices and made toast by the boatful. Our breakfast was crispy homemade granola with yogurt and fresh fruit and a wonderful crêpe-thin omelet with Brie, white mushrooms, tomatoes, and basil. Everything was simple and packed with quality ingredients; even the fresh-squeezed orange juice was fantastic.



From Indianapolis, our 106-mile drive into Ohio was largely uneventful, save for two things: the gorgeous rolling hills welcoming us to the Buckeye State, and the numerous signs for a chain of popular Cincinnati restaurants owned by a guy who shares my name. We had no idea just how popular until we arrived at Cincy's downtown Hyatt and gave the valet my name and keys—though his starstruck expression faded when he saw that this particular Jeff Ruby was driving a 2000 Grand Prix with Cooler Ranch Doritos ground into the carpet.

Mark Twain reportedly said that he hoped to be in Cincinnati when the world ended, as it's always 20 years behind everywhere else. A stroll along the beautiful Ohio River past Great American Ball Park, the Reds' shiny new stadium, suggests

that that perception of the city is somewhat outdated. On the other hand, there is the throwback **MONTGOMERY INN AT THE BOATHOUSE** (925 Eastern Ave.; 513-721-7427), the town's famous rib joint. Cincinnatians love their barbecue, and our table sagged with a half slab of ribs, a mound of meaty pulled pork, and slices of moist beef brisket served (continued on page 112)





Vintage Values

The antique shops of Iowa and Wisconsin yield yesterday's treasures—and the occasional regret by Cassie Walker

REGRET. IT CREEPS INTO MY BRAIN somewhere in the middle of the Mississippi River valley. A hundred miles or so back, I passed up a country-washed antique cupboard with a \$950 price tag. Picturing it cozy in my living-room corner, I consider turning around. But then I recall the acres upon acres of farmland I have already traveled and decide to push on in my quest for the next treasure.

I am following **HIGHWAY 151** as it meanders through eastern Iowa into southwestern Wisconsin—prime territory for Midwestern antiques dating from the mid- to the late 1800s. Whereas Missouri and Ohio are well-known destinations for antique collectors on the hunt—which generally means higher prices—the tiny hamlets in farm country offer a largely undiscovered cache of country wood furniture and handmade “primitives,” or simple utilitarian items (such as benches and bowls) that hark back to the area's modest agricultural roots.

The area is peppered with small mom-and-pop shops and antique malls, and I easily drop in to 24 places in four days. If my experience is any indication, the odds are good that you will find something valuable, or at least something with a story—like the early wooden school desks embellished with students' pencil etchings or the crosshatched quilts that have been handsewn with precision, ten stitches to the inch.

I begin my search three and a half hours west of Chicago in the **AMANA COLONIES**, a communal settlement with German roots. There are 12 antique shops spread out among the community's seven little towns, and I dawdle longest at **CRICKET ON THE HEARTH** in West Amana (404 6th Ave. W.; 319-622-3088). The soft-spoken Julie Le Clere owns the little shop (and the house next door), and she generously offers a few tips. One is to dine at **P.H.A.T. DADDY'S** in nearby Marengo (1185 Court Ave.; 319-642-7332), where the chef, Michael Curry, gives



Five Essentials for the Hunt

When you're going after big game, it pays to be prepared. Don't leave home without these indispensable items:

1. A big book worth lugging along. **LEGGETTS' ANTIQUES ATLAS** profiles worthy stops by region (Three Rivers Press; \$18).
2. Price guides are a must. Dealers recommend **THE GARAGE SALE & FLEA MARKET ANNUAL** (Collector Books; \$19.95) and **KOVELS' AMERICAN ANTIQUES** (Random House Reference; \$24.95).
3. Impulse shopping happens, but it pays to shop with a plan. Make a list of the things you truly need.
4. Take a measuring tape to size up furniture and art, as well as fabric swatches, paint chips, and a list of room dimensions so you can better match your purchases with the fixtures back at home.
5. Many dealers take credit on big purchases only, so carry some cash to pay for smaller trinkets.



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ON THE ROAD

(DINING continued from page 77)

with a bowl of thick, sugary Ohio-style barbecue. It was solid fall-off-the-bone barbecue, though the sauce was too sweet, at least by Chicago standards.

Dinner that night was at the city's finest French restaurant, the hallowed **JEAN-ROBERT AT PIGALL'S** (127 W. 4th St.; 513-721-1345). What Jean Joho is to Chicago, Jean-Robert de Cavel is to Cincinnati. He has outfitted his soaring space with antique saltshakers, cushy banquettes, and a gracious, well-trained staff. An elegant three-course, \$75 prix fixe included a wonderful plate of floppy rock shrimp ravioli with spinach purée and oyster mushrooms. Charlie Trotter's influence hasn't stretched this far, because we also sampled a trio of foie gras that included a cup of watercress and deep-flavored foie gras purée; a melt-in-your-mouth pâté sprinkled with kosher salt; and an absurdly large piece of seared foie gras on a puff-pastry crust with a duck demi-glace. Our desserts: a wondrous cheese plate and a lemon mousse with fresh raspberries. This ranked with Chicago's four-star fare, and portions across the board were slightly larger. When I asked for a doggy bag, my wife pointed out that we had no fridge. Jean-Robert: you don't want to know what we did with the leftovers.

The next morning, we drove to Blue Ash, a charming suburb 12 miles northeast of downtown, in search of **MARX HOT BAGELS** (9701 Kenwood Rd.; 513-891-5542). The salty owner, John Marx, calls himself "the Bagelman," and his kosher restaurant features complex bagel diagrams and 39 varieties of the chewy beasts, so you know he's serious. The lox were fresh, the egg salad not too eggy, and the doughy bagels phenomenal—better than any I've found in Chicago.

Cincinnati considers itself the chili capital of the United States. The most popular purveyor is **SKYLINE CHILI**, with more than 80 locations in the area; we were told the one at 7707 Montgomery Road (513-791-7902)—a clean place where employees stand over big cauldrons and deal out instant satisfaction—was the best. "You're going to want a small 5-Way [that's chili, spaghetti, diced onions, red beans, and shredded Cheddar] and a couple of Coneys," said the hearty young woman on the other side of the counter. OK. Thirty seconds later, she slid two heaping plates in front of me: one had two glorified mini-chili dogs, and the other was my 5-Way. Both were covered in a mountain of Cheddar. Maybe I've been in Chicago too long, but the dogs were pret-

ty standard. Skyline's chili, on the other hand, was worth the trip: the ground-up beef eschews chili powder for chocolate and cinnamon, and a few squirts of Tabasco opened up a whole new world, balancing distinctive sweet and piquant tones.

Next stop: **GRAETER'S ICE CREAM** (7369 Kenwood Rd.; 513-793-5665), a 135-year-old Cincy institution that uses a "French pot" to make its goodies. (As the ice cream thickens, a blade scrapes the sides of the pot, which prevents the whipping of air into the ice cream, making it heavier and creamier.) From an endless array of choices, we picked a bowl of mocha chocolate chip with marshmallows and hot chocolate sauce, which was smooth, rich, and insanely creamy. It was about here that my wife, a lifelong Chicagoan, asked how much I thought a house in Cincinnati cost.

That night, we drove across the bridge into Kentucky to Jeff Ruby's **TROPICANA** (1 Levee Way, Suite 1118; 859-491-8900), an over-the-top steak house in Newport. Our mission was a drink and maybe a glimpse of my doppelgänger. (Unfairly or not, the people at our hotel's front desk, having now realized I wasn't the Jeff Ruby, had begun treating me like everyone else, making me resent the guy.) When we got there at about 10:30, the place was already closed for the evening, which pretty much clinched it: I can't stand Jeff Ruby.

For the trip home, we had read about **MOONSHINE STORE** (6017 E. 300th Rd., Martinsville; 618-569-9200), a legendary Illinois burger place in an old general store near the Indiana border just off Interstate 70—only to learn that it was nowhere close to being on our way. So we swung 136 miles off track, passing cornfields and tractor and llama farms, and followed the signs to a dusty old store in the middle of nowhere.

Your first clue that it's something special: scores of cars parked in front, many with out-of-state plates. The second: you open the door and the burger grease and camaraderie hit you immediately. A mellow mix of farmers, neighbors, and tourists sit on benches and folding chairs happily eating and chatting. The burgers are wonderful and unadulterated—like the kind your grandmother made. We asked Helen Tuttle, who has managed the grill in back for 23 years, what her secret was. "I think it's the atmosphere," she said, adding that Chicagoans make the four-hour drive down in one day. Then, with a big Midwestern smile, she went back to flipping a line of burgers. ■