

MIDWESTERN EVOLUTION

AMERICAN CUISINE MAY BE AS DIVERSE AS ITS ETHNIC MAKE-UP, BUT OUTSIDE THE STATES THE LINGERING PERCEPTION IS OF UNSOPHISTICATED DISHES AND OVERSIZED PORTIONS. GISELLE WHITEAKER HEADS TO THE NATION'S BREADBASKET TO SEE WHAT'S COOKING.



| ABOVE Cindy's Rooftop Restaurant, Chicago.

Hamburgers may well be America's favourite food, but what is perhaps less known is that some of the staple dishes on high-end restaurants across the world are American additions. What would we do without eggs Benedict, oysters Rockefeller, and the Waldorf salad?

While there are still plenty of places offering low-cost lashings of food, I'm heading to the Midwest - Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota - traditionally known for its unpretentious, hearty, locally-grown cuisine. The "breadbasket of America", with its agricultural bounty, seems the perfect place to see what's cooking.

Chicago, America's third-largest city, has long been recognised as a gourmet dining epicentre, so it's a fine place to start. At GT Prime, seasonal, local produce is not only on the meat-centric menu, but also on the walls. The incredible photographs taken by Jeff Kauck look like still-life paintings, whetting the appetite for simply seasoned, delicious fare. And if you're keen to sample the local game, bison, venison and rabbit are all on the menu.

Cindy's Rooftop Restaurant at the top of the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel is another eatery representing evolving American food preferences. This light-filled observatory boasts spectacular views over the city, as well as a menu that rethinks American favourites - the New England favourite, the lobster roll, is reinvented with lemon-tabasco remoulade, peas shoots, and old bay chips. More international-style fare is also on offer, like duck confit with lavender honey, lentils, cipollini aigre-doux, pickled mustard seeds, orange and watercress.

It's also worth heading to the North Loop area, even if it's just to dine. Revival Food Hall, which opened last year, sets the standard here, with an all-local dining concept spotlighting the best of Chicago's food scene. The 24,000 sq.ft. marketplace is within a beautifully restored, 1907 Daniel Burnham - designed building and while you'll find hamburgers here, there's also Hawaiian poke, Tokyo-style ramen, charcuterie and artisan gelato, to name a few. Chicago's food scene is rocking, but how about small-town America? Galena, on the western edge of Illinois, is home to less than 3,500 people, yet I discover it's packed with good food, perhaps due to its popularity as a tourism hotspot. Log Cabin Steakhouse may not be the most creatively named restaurant, but the wet-aged prime

steaks here are superb. Ask for "Greek Style" and the steak comes drenched in a mouth-watering sauce with a subtle hint of garlic and herbs. Just down the road, Fried Green Tomatoes is another winner, but here the fresh seafood narrowly takes the lead over the beef, with dishes like lobster ravioli, crab cake salad, and cedar-planked walleye hitting the mark. For day dining, Otto's Place over the river is the pick. Making the most of fresh produce, the food here is hearty, country-style fare although the portions head towards the overly generous side.

I also test out small-town fare in Wisconsin Dells, another popular tourism spot. Here, Del Bar, once a six-table roadhouse, serves up to 500 covers a night. What's the draw? It's all about the food - although the architecture is interesting too - with a little bit of everything, all done well. My pick is the seared sea scallops with a Moscato reduction that is so more-ish you'll find yourself consuming every last drop with the crusty bread provided.

My final meals are in Minneapolis, which has less than a fifth of Chicago's population, but all of its foodie flair. Whether dining at Cedar and Stone at the JW Marriott, Mall of America, which prides itself on local provenance, or newcomer Tullibee at the Hewing Hotel, inspired by the bounty of Minnesota's lakes and woods, the cuisine is on par with the top restaurants in London.

The humble hamburger will always have its place in the American diet, but the nation's tastes are changing. Local produce and cooking styles are being creatively combined, portions pared down, and more natural flavours allowed to shine: food evolution in progress.

For more information on the restaurants mentioned see:

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| www.gtprimerestaurant.com | www.ottosplace.com |
| www.cindysrooftop.com | www.del-bar.com |
| www.revivalfoodhall.com | www.marriott.com |
| www.logcabinhalena.com | www.hewinghotel.com |
| www.friedgreen.com | |



TOP Ducks smoking at Tullibee at the Hewing Hotel, Minneapolis.
 ABOVE Crispy fish tacos at Revival Food Hall, Chicago.



For fabulous American food in the UK try:

Christopher's Covent Garden, London
 Christopher's Covent Garden is a timeless martini bar and American restaurant. Maryland crab cake, served with Arugula, red pepper mayo and tomato jam.
www.christophersgrill.com

The Astor Grill, Berkshire
 The Astor Grill at Cliveden House focuses on classic American and British dishes. The Astor Burger includes smoked raclette and house relish, served with spiced carrot slaw and fries.
www.clivedenhouse.co.uk

Absurd Bird, Bath
 Absurd Bird has moved its southern flavours into Bath and Exeter. Absurd Bird's Dirty Buns marry fried chicken, pickled cucumber, pickled onion and sriracha mayo to superb effect.
www.absurdbird.com