

Beloit is a foodie getaway with the state's 2nd largest farmers market

Jennifer Rude Klett, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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WEEKEND GETAWAY



(Photo: Jennifer Rude Klett)

Beloit has become quite the food town.

Just north of the so-called cheddar curtain separating Wisconsin and Illinois, Beloit puts on quite the spread, especially Saturdays when the state's second largest farmers market sets up downtown.

"I love this farmers market," said Beloit resident and vendor Susan Wright of The Wright Way Farm. "Seven to ten thousand people on Saturdays come through the market."

One of more than a hundred vendors at the market held Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., The Wright Way Farm sells certified organic flour and produce that is grown just a few miles outside of town.

Beginning over 40 years ago, the Beloit Farmers Market has experienced phenomenal growth, particularly in the past five years. The award-winning, open-air market is open rain or shine through October downtown along State Street, Grand Avenue and the Mill Street Parking Lot. Plenty of free parking is close by, and it's easy to stroll about and access local storefronts. Not surprisingly, it draws both Wisconsin cheeseheads and Illinois flatlanders. And things really gear up in August when local tomatoes and sweet corn hit the market.

"Our market has been continuously growing through the years," said Crystal Cribbs, market manager for the past decade. This year, portable toilets were added to ease demand for bathrooms.

"We also added a phone-charging station because people are spending a considerable amount of time downtown shopping at the market, local downtown businesses, and hanging out or meeting up with friends or family," she said.

Beloit is an easy drive, a little over an hour from Milwaukee and Madison.

Yes, you may be thinking, Beloit, a food town? When did this happen?

If anyone knows the scoop, it's longtime editor of the Beloit Daily News Bill Barth. The newspaper's coverage and downtown office provide him a prime perspective of Beloit's food revolution.

The metamorphosis has been both dramatic and the result of an orchestrated effort, according to Barth.

“In a relatively brief period of time Beloit has moved from a threatened, decaying place to a state and regional example of what committed private investors, in partnership with the public sector, can achieve,” he said.

Wright said Diane Hendricks, local resident and chairman of Hendricks Commercial Properties, deserves credit for the turnaround.

“She has been important in the revitalization of downtown Beloit,” Wright said.

Barth agreed Hendricks is a key player, but stressed that it’s been a team effort.

“Without a doubt, Beloit has been exceedingly fortunate to be the beneficiary of a generous billionaire’s commitment to the community she loves. Still, it’s important to note the resurgence in Beloit has been fueled by the active participation and investment of a very large cast. One success builds upon others, and creates its own momentum,” he explained.

One of Hendricks’ ventures is Lucy’s #7 Burger Bar, something not to miss.



The popular Mac & Cheese burger with cheddar, bacon and grilled macaroni is the featured burger of the month in August at Lucy’s #7 Burger Bar in Beloit. (Photo: Peer Canvas Photography)

Lucy’s #7 is destination eating. It’s named after local farm girl Lucy Winslow, who became a nurse, singer and pin-up girl during World War II. Later she farmed, cooked and opened a restaurant featuring, not surprisingly, burgers and other American comfort food made with fresh farm ingredients.

Choose from 10 burger options to savor with Wisconsin craft brews, specialty drinks, wine or malts. Barth usually orders the Cheddar, Bacon, BBQ burger for \$10.95. You can’t go wrong with any selection.

Other downtown food favorites?

Barth mentioned The 615 Club for The 615 Ribeye and broiled Walleye.

La Casa Grande, Domenicos Italian Ristorante, Bagels & More, Zen Sushi & Grill, Merrill & Houston's Steak Joint and Bushel & Peck's are a few other hot spots to consider.

Bushel & Peck's exemplifies local farm-to-table eating. It combines an organic farm, restaurant, preservation kitchen and market. Don't confuse it with Peck & Bushel Organic Fruit Company in Erin. Remember, Bushel & Peck's starts with a "B" for Beloit.

For sweets, hit Northwoods Premium Confections for the dark chocolate champagne truffles or a Beloit chocolate bar (with gear design as a nod to Beloit's industrial past); and Flying Pig for a thickly frosted cinnamon roll and shaved ice.



Northwoods Premium Confections owner Scott Lamoreux (left) with employee Mark Preuschl hold Beloit candy bars available in milk or 55% dark chocolate. (Photo: Jennifer Rude Klett)

Plus there's more coming soon, according to Barth. Three new places will include upscale Truk't Street Tacos, Tequila and Whiskey; Blue Collar Coffee; and the Velvet Buffalo Café, focusing on local farmers and artisan vendors.

Fittingly, Beloit's food venues seem to salute its farming and blue-collar heritage. Its downtown embodies the eat-local, shop-local philosophy that creates the authentic local flavor found only in this historic town on the Rock River.

One thing's for sure: After eating your way around downtown Beloit, you won't leave hungry.

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