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# WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

## A Day Trip Tasting the Traditions of Central Iowa

BY RIKI SALTZMAN

Central Iowa is a mecca for Iowa's local food traditions, starting with the sweets of Pella and ending with the savories of Grinnell. In between is a treasure trove of chocolates, cheese, syrup and other surprises.

Start the day in Pella, home of one of Iowa's two Dutch-American communities (the other is in Orange City, north of Sioux City) and an architectural tribute to the Dutch vernacular style. For a walking breakfast, grab some coffee at Smokey Row or walk over to Franklin Street to sample a variety of Dutch pastries like almond-paste filled letters, almond butter cake, white walnut bars (the white refers to the white raisins), at **Jaarsma** or **Vander Ploeg Bakery** (neighboring bakeries Pella's town square). Both bakeries use recipes brought over from Holland several generations ago and are the only places to get Dutch letters outside of Holland. Jaarsma's has been continuously run by the same family since its founding at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the 100-year-old Vander Ploeg's current owners purchased the bakery from its second owners (who still work for the bakery).

If something less sweet beckons, try a *saucijzenbroodje*—a puff pastry filled with sausage made at **Ulrich Meat Market**, situated between the two bakeries. At Ulrich's, operated continuously since 1902, pick up some home-made bologna or dried beef (both made using recipes that John Ulrich, the meat market's founder, brought with him from Holland in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), a variety of sausages, hams, and more. Ulrich's sausages use prime beef and no fillers; the hams, sausages, and chops are smoked on the premises in 100-year-old ovens that burn only local hickory wood—not sawdust

Next stop: **Maasdam Sorghum Mill** in Lynnville where sweet sorghum cane is grown, harvested, and processed to become a dark, rich, fragrant syrup full of anti-oxidants and vitamins. It tastes wonderful in cookies and cakes, on biscuits or pancakes, and in a variety of other dishes.

In 1945, Maasdam installed a sorghum cane fueled steam engine to power the mill. You'll get to see the path the sorghum cane travels from

field to mill, and how it is transformed into that wonderful syrup. The family has a sorghum cookbook for sale as well as jars of syrup and lollipops. And after you leave, you'll never use molasses again!

After leaving the Maasdam farm, head north and west to Newton for some wine and cheese tasting at Maytag Cheese and then at Jasper Winery.

**Maytag Dairy Farms** is one of the best deals around for loading up with an internationally acclaimed blue cheese, made from milk from nearby dairy farms. Ask for samples of Maytag blue as well as some of the other cheeses at the counter where recipes and cheese serving paraphernalia are available. Blue cheese on a cracker drizzled with local honey is an unforgettable tasty sweet-savory snack.

At the **Jasper Winery**, on the other side of town, is a converted old woodworking building that was renovated into a family-run winery in 2003 with sparkling new stainless steel tanks and oak barrels. Mason Groben, son of owners Jean and Paul Groben, makes several red and white wines from grapes that can be grown in Iowa. Some are from their ten-acre vineyard, while others are purchased from other Iowa growers. All the grapes used to make the winery's stellar 2005 Chancellor, a dry red, did come from the winery's nearby Cherry Creek Vineyard.

Jasper Winery offers cheeses, crackers and sausage to purchase and enjoy in the tasting room. Try Back Road with some Maytag baby Swiss or drink the Behind the Shed Red with a side of Maytag blue—or pair it with some of the dark chocolate from nearby Lillie Mae Chocolates in Marshalltown.

**Lillie Mae Chocolates** first opened in 1939 under the proprietorship of Gorge Demopolus, who named the shop for his daughter, Lillie Mae. Today, former owner and chocolate maker Georgia Dates and current owner, Amy Snyder, offer up their hand-filled and hand-dipped creams, nut-filled, and caramel creations. But the best treat at Lillie Mae's is the turtle (aka "tor-tush") made with homemade caramel filling (featuring local Picket Fence



Restaurante Aztecas' Maria Guerrero

Photos by Riki Saltzman

Creamery's thick yellow cream) mixed with nuts and then hand-dipped in thick milk or dark chocolate. In the fall, try one of the shop's yummy caramel apples—locally-grown Hine Gardener Jonathans whose tart flavor contrasts with that smooth, sweet, creamy coating.

After dessert, try lunch at Marshalltown's **Restaurante Aztecas**. Owner and cook Maria Guerrero will serve you a homemade and mild *salsa verde* (made from *tomatillos*) with your chips. Guerrero, who is originally from Puebla, serves a variety of meat dishes as well as fish and seafood in the Veracruz style—just an hour from Puebla. Maria learned to cook from her mother and grandmother and says that some of her most traditional dishes are her homemade white corn tortillas (fresh-made Saturday and Sunday only), *caldo de res* (beef vegetable soup featuring chayote, cilantro, and more), *ensalada de manzana* (a cold, chopped apple, sour cream, and sweetened condensed milk “pudding”), or *tortitas de camarones* (shrimp cakes featured during Lent).

Before departing, stock up on south of the border fare at La Mexicana, a supermarket with a fresh meat counter, with chorio, fresh fish, cheese and more. The store has bins filled with

a variety of fragrant, dried chilies as well as sections for fruits, vegetables, Sonora brand tortillas from Des Moines, a variety of corn tortillas, and more. La Mexicana also carries local *pan dulce* (pastries) and breads.

End the day in Grinnell, home to Grinnell College, and also notable for its lovely Victorian homes and the amazing architectural detail of the Louis Sullivan “jewel box” bank downtown. Walk off some of those tamales and chocolates by visiting Grinnell's Faulconer Gallery, truly one of Iowa's premier art museums in a state that has a surprising number of them.

Finally, dinner is at **The Café Phoenix**. Known for its homemade breads and dishes made with local grass-fed beef and lamb, fresh fish, produce, herbs, and honey, the Phoenix is one of those Iowa treasures. Owner Kamal Hammouda takes great pride in using locally grown, chemical-free lamb, herbs from nearby Mariposa farms, and honey from a beekeeping neighbor. The Phoenix also features vegan meals and is open for lunches and dinners. If you're too tired from your day of central Iowa eating and exploration, you can even spend the night at the Phoenix's Inn, which has three rooms available.

## STOPS ALONG THE WAY IN CENTRAL IOWA

### Jaarsma Bakery

727 Franklin Street  
Pella, Iowa 50219  
641.628.2940  
[www.JaarsmaBakery.com](http://www.JaarsmaBakery.com)

### Vander Ploeg Bakery

711 Franklin Street  
Pella, Iowa 50219  
641.628.2293  
[www.PellaBakery.com](http://www.PellaBakery.com)

### Ulrich Meat Market

715 Franklin Street  
Pella IA 50219  
641.628.2771  
[www.DutchMall.com](http://www.DutchMall.com)

### Maasdam Sorghum Mills

6495 E. 132nd Street S  
Lynnville, Iowa 50153  
641.594.4369  
Mill tours available (fall only)  
with prior arrangements  
[www.MaasdamSorghumMills.Homestead.com](http://www.MaasdamSorghumMills.Homestead.com)

### Maytag Dairy Farms

2282 E 8th St. N  
Newton, Iowa 50208  
641.792.1133  
800.247.2458  
[www.MaytagDairyFarms.com](http://www.MaytagDairyFarms.com)

### Jasper Winery

518 W 3rd Street N  
Newton, Iowa 50208  
641.792.7022  
[www.JasperWinery.com](http://www.JasperWinery.com)

If you're making this trip in August or September, take some time to help out with the harvest and visit Cherry Creek Vineyard (started in 2000). Call Jean to put your name on a grape-pickers call list!

### Lillie Mae Chocolates

23 W Main Street  
Marshalltown, Iowa 50158  
641.752.6041  
800.752.6041  
[www.LillieMaeChocolate.com](http://www.LillieMaeChocolate.com)

### Restaurante Aztecas

911 E State Street  
Marshalltown, Iowa 50158  
641.844.0455

### Café Phoenix

834 Park Street  
Grinnell, Iowa 50112  
641.236.3657  
[www.ThePhoenixCafe.com](http://www.ThePhoenixCafe.com)



Vander Ploeg Bakery always has oven fresh Dutch letters, thanks to Garrett Vander.