

Summertime St. Louis: Food Drive. Our restaurant critic's advice on where to go for some great out-of-town chow.

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All right: Your dream

vacation to try all of the Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris ain't gonna happen this summer. Heck, the economy's so horrible, a trip to Paris, Texas, might be out of the question. That doesn't mean you have to settle for dinner at the same ol' St. Louis restaurants whose menus you know by heart. Fill up the car — gas isn't that bad so far this year! — and make a tasty meal the focal point of your "staycation."

You don't have to go far. Edwardsville, Illinois, is less than 30 minutes from downtown St. Louis, but this charming college town surrounded by farmland feels a world away. Here, you can enjoy the cooking of Kevin Willmann, *Riverfront Times'* Best Local Chef 2008, at **Erato on Main** (126 North Main Street; 618-307-3203). Willmann prepares inventive dishes drawn from fresh, local produce; thanks to years spent along the Gulf Coast, he's also one of the area's best seafood cooks.

Just down the street is **Fond** (106 North Main Street; 618-656-9001). Chef Amy Zupanci used to work at St. Louis' Niche, and this new venture features a similar approach, with utmost reverence for individual ingredients. More in the mood for a day trip? Visit on a Saturday morning, when downtown Edwardsville gives way to the bustling **Land of Goshen Community Market**, offering farm-fresh produce and artisan goods. Coffee and a pastry from the sublime **222 Artisan Bakery** (222 North Main Street; 618-659-1122) make for the perfect complement.

Nothing says summer like barbecue, and you can plan a trip around championship 'cue without driving all the way to Memphis or Kansas City. Owner Mike Mills has won the Memphis in May barbecue contest (the "Super Bowl of Swine") three times, and *Bon Appétit* magazine named the ribs at his **17th Street Bar & Grill** the best in the country. You can try them at one of three locations: 1711 West Highway 50 in O'Fallon, Illinois; 2700 17th Street in Marion, Illinois; and the original location, 32 North 17th Street in Murphysboro, Illinois. (Those who know say the

Murphysboro spot is the best.)

If you don't mind a pleasant summer drive, **Dreamland Palace** (3043 State Route 156; 618-939-9922) dishes up authentic German fare, such as sauerbraten marinated for a full week and *hasenpfeffer* (braised rabbit), about an hour outside of St. Louis in Foster Pond, Illinois.

And if you *really* don't mind a drive, not quite two hours east of St. Louis in Effingham, Illinois, is the nationally recognized **Firefly Grill** (1810 Mid America Avenue; 217-342-2002). This gorgeous, eco-friendly spot grows much of its own produce in a garden next to the restaurant and serves up everything from fancy foie gras to wood-grilled pizzas.

Or you can drive two hours west of St. Louis and sample the impressive culinary scene in Columbia. Mizzou grads already know about **Booches** and **Shakespeare's Pizza**, but they are worth a visit even if neither place evokes the beery aroma of nostalgia.

Booches (110 South Ninth Street; 573-874-9519) serves hamburgers. And chili. That's just about it — but it's really all you need. The burgers, grilled behind the bar, are juicy and delicious and priced just right for the college student and the budget tourist. (Cash only, though!) Shakespeare's (225 South Ninth Street; 573-449-2454) is famous for its pizza: Enjoy a pie in this Platonic ideal of a college hangout, and then take some frozen pizzas back home with you.

Columbia might be a college town, but it offers grown-up dining, too. **Sycamore** (800 East Broadway; 573-874-8090) is a gorgeous restaurant — it wouldn't look out of place on our own Washington Avenue. Chef Mike Odette (a 2009 semifinalist in the James Beard Foundation Awards' "Best Chef — Midwest" category) turns out delicious modern bistro fare featuring local ingredients. The housemade gnocchi are exquisite. At the **Wine Cellar & Bistro** (505 Cherry Street; 573-442-7281), Craig Cyr serves wildly inventive food that draws on global traditions. His wife, Sarah, oversees a terrific wine selection.

In the mood for an even more ambitious Missouri dining experience? Visit the state's west coast. The fine-dining scene in Kansas City is blossoming, thanks in part to two relative newcomers. At **Bluestem** (900 Westport Road; 816-561-1101) Colby Garrelts offers a brief but stunning seasonal menu — or splurge and spend \$100 on the twelve-course chef's tasting menu. Just north of Kansas City in Smithville, Missouri, is the acclaimed **Justus Drugstore** (106 West Main Street; 816-532-2300). Chef/owner Jonathan Justus, who has worked in France and San Francisco, is dedicated to local, seasonal cuisine — word is, he won't even serve tomatoes out of season.

Even if you don't drive as far as Kansas City, summer is the perfect time to try a new restaurant: Produce is at its peak, and whether you prefer a good ol' burger or the finest wagyu beef, the sizzle of meat on the grill is one of summer's most welcome sounds. ☺

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