

Illinois food tour a fast feast

By **Monica Eng**
TRIBUNE REPORTER

I was out of the city for less than 24 hours.

But in that time I was able to taste wines at a vineyard, tour an organic herb farm, hang out with a shiitake mushroom grower, buy a batch of steaks that came from grass-fed cattle, take cooking lessons from a professional chef, enjoy a home-cooked dinner, sleep in a charming Victorian Inn, chow on a homemade breakfast with the best raspberry coffee cake of my life and snag a cold gallon of raw milk from a farmer who'd squeezed it out of his cow that morning.

It was part of a culinary farm tour of Northwest Illinois, organized by Learn Great Foods, an outfit based in Mt. Carroll. A friend recommended these tours as quick getaways for urban foodies, and he was right.

Adding on a few of our own little culinary detours allowed us to

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pack a lot of farm and foodie culture into 24 hours without ever feeling rushed.

We started planning the trip two weeks before by booking an herb tour online at www.learngreatfoods.com. The price for the tour was \$95, and it included a visit to an eco-minded vineyard, a chocolate tasting, a tour

of an organic herb farm and dinner. Through the Internet we also found the three-room Prairie Path Guest House in Mt. Carroll with rooms at \$89 a night.

My boyfriend and I arrive in Freeport (home of the "Little Wrigley Field" replica) well before the 3 p.m. meeting time on a Friday afternoon and decide to search out some raw milk. In Illinois, one of the only legal ways you can buy the unpasteurized and unhomogenized elixir is to show up at the farm with a container and fill it up yourself. With our BlackBerry, we find Steve Holesinger (on www.realmilk.com), who tells us he's got a few extra gallons and is only about

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Tribune photo by Monica Eng

At the Prairie Path Guest House, breakfast—including cream cheese coffee cake—is as good as dessert.

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20 miles away, near Nora in Joe Daviess County.

If we drive really fast, we can score the milk and still meet the group at the first stop on the tour. After missing our turnoff a few times, we finally make it to the sleepy little Holesinger Farm, where Steve produces honey, milk, eggs, tomatoes, peppers, corn and pumpkins.

The young, lanky farmer originally from Rockford also owns one pretty Brown Swiss cow named Sultana. This bovine beauty is grass fed and raised with no growth hormones. She eyeballs us as we pull into the driveway and shake Steve's hand. In the cooling area—just a room with a fridge and a freezer—we get down to business. Steve has the Illinois raw-milk regulations posted on his fridge, and we follow them to the letter by dispensing the creamy stuff into our own clean glass jar. (Since we forgot to pick one up on the road, we bought one from him for \$5.) We pay Steve another \$5 for the gallon of milk, slip it into our cooler and bid the farmer, his chickens and Sultana adieu. The milk tastes like ice cream without the sugar, and I swear I feel terrific after drinking it.

It seems weird to be doing so much driving on this ostensibly eco-minded farm trip, but, as we cut speedily through the hilly country roads to Cedarville, we vow to bring more people next time. There we find the rest of our group—nine of us in all—waiting at the Famous Fossil winery. We introduce ourselves to the tour guide (personal chef Donna DuVall), and other couples from Iowa and other parts of Northwestern Illinois.

We slap on name tags and listen to Pam and Ken Rosmann tell us their story about moving from organic farming in Iowa to start an eco-friendly vineyard in these mineral hills. The "green" winery and tasting room are just-built, and the vines are so young that this year will yield their first real harvest.

Still, the Rossmans tell an interesting tale of diving into biodynamic (like organic but synced by the moon) winemaking late in life and pour a couple of wines they made at a Northern Illinois research vineyard using local grapes. This summer and fall they will extend their offerings to vineyard tours, wine tastings and even sales, pending state licenses.

Next we caravan into Stockton 21 miles away, where wife and husband Jeanie McKewan and Michael Stever transformed an old greenhouse, some land and a mobile home a few years ago into an organic herb and flower farm. McKewan guides us around her garden and greenhouse full of cheerful blooms and fragrant herbs.

After the garden tour we head to the mobile home that she and chef/husband Stever have turned into a cozy abode. Stever is a microbiologist-turned-chef and instructor. He draws on this scientific foundation for classes he teaches at Kendall College in Chicago, including cheese-making, fermentation and barbecue. He commutes weekly between Stockton and Chicago to teach.

For those in the group who want to cook and talk food, Stever's the highlight of the trip.

We learn to cook foil-wrapped potatoes tossed in kosher salt, olive

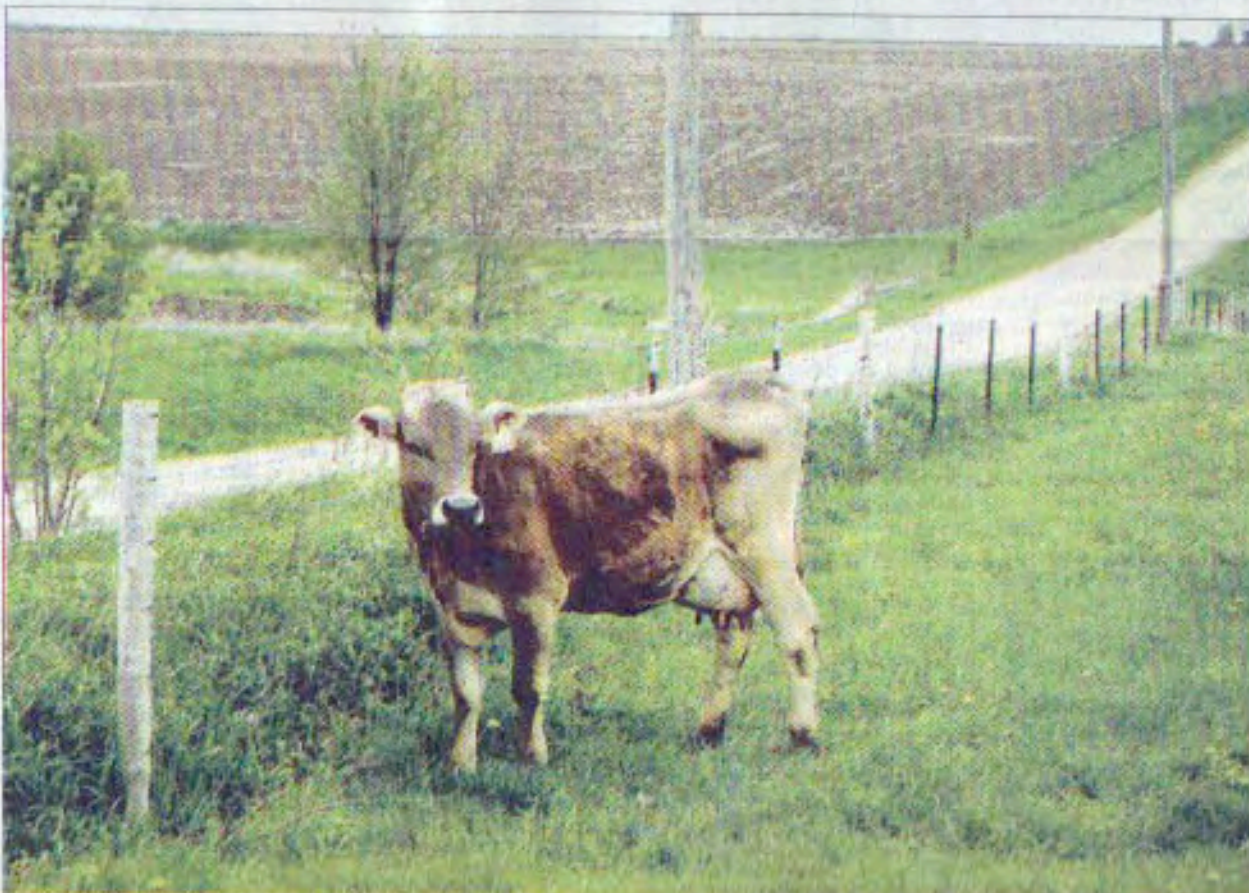


Chef Michael Stever (left) and tour guide Donna DuVall (middle) discuss the evening's meal that finishes off the herb and farm tour.



Tribune photos by Monica Eng

Mt. Carroll's Main Street borders the classic town square.



Sultana the Brown Swiss cow hangs out in the field, eyeing visitors who show up at Holesinger Farm to purchase her raw milk.

In the morning we wake to the sound of songbirds and the intoxicating smell of raspberry cream cheese coffeecake.

fresh greens, roasted beets and toasted hazelnuts in a vinaigrette. We grill spice-rubbed cuts of pork that will be sauced with homemade rhubarb or classic barbecue sauce.

On other tours the chef teaches guests how to smoke their own meats that they can take home after class. Sign me up.

Pre-dinner we uncork bottles of wine (it's strictly BYOB), and DuVall breaks out some incredible cheeses from Bleu Mont Dairy in Mt. Horeb, Wis. (part of another LGF tour), including a breathtaking bandaged cheddar.

As the sun sets we're indulging in a splendid meal and warm conversations with a tableful of folks we've just met. Supper ends with chewy chocolate chip cookies and coffee. Guests are encouraged to linger, but our B&B awaits.

After a quick 20-mile drive to Mt.



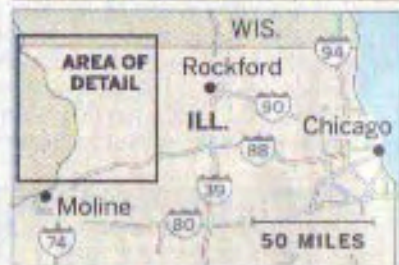
Le Petite Fleur Cafe features grass-fed beef and incredible pies served in a cute, funky dining room.

Stadel into the Prairie Path Guest House, a charming Victorian home built in 1876. We've got the "country room," covered with antiques and hand-stitched quilts.

In the morning we wake to the sound of songbirds and the intoxicating smell of raspberry cream cheese coffeecake. I wander onto the second-floor veranda, where

two mugs. I sip and sway on the porch swing looking over the Prairie Path's 36 acres of wood and fields that provide fruits and vegetables for Fern's lavish brunches.

Before breakfast we head downtown (about five blocks away) to catch the Mt. Carroll Farmers Market. We meet David Seger, an 87-year-old shiitake mushroom



SOURCES: ESRI, TeleAtlas
TRIBUNE GRAPHIC

near Thompson is a stop on another LGF tour.

We score a sack of fresh mushrooms, banana cake and a loaf of wheat bread from a vendor who says she had milled Amish wheat for the bread flour that morning. I'm such a sucker for stories like that.

Back at Prairie Path, we savor into the still warm raspberry coffeecake and enjoy it with asparagus and cheese breakfast casseroles, homemade flax bread and fruit salad.

Before we leave town, Pam Sorg, LGF operations manager and a transplanted Evanstonian, takes us to see the LGF kitchen classroom on the quaintly crumbling former Shimer College grounds. Many tours finish up there with cooking classes and a meal made from local farm products.

Back in town, Sorg leads us to the Clay Pot boutique, where we buy local Geh Day Farms grass-fed beef, part of yet another LGF tour. It costs \$4.99 a pound, about one-fourth of what we've paid for grass-fed beef in Chicago.

We consider sitting down to some of this beef and one of the gorgeous pies at Le Petite Fleur Cafe next door. But we're stuffed and decide to save it for our next visit to this tiny oasis of foodie treasures in Northwest Illinois.

Learn Great Foods offers tours to farms in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa almost every weekend through the fall. Call 815-244-5602 or check www.learngreatfoods.com.