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HOME & AWAY

Tasty Travels

Travelers enjoy a taste of home at small-town restaurants across Ohio.

By Anietra Hamper

Growing up in Ohio, I was always intrigued by a sign along U.S. Highway 23 north of Columbus that read: “Waldo, Ohio—Home of the World Famous Bologna Sandwich.”

Although the sign is long gone, the reputation of that sandwich still stands today.

A recent road trip to uncover some of the state’s best comfort food in small Ohio communities gave me the perfect excuse to pull off that exit and others, too.



G&R Tavern - Fried Bologna Sandwich.
Anietra Hamper

“They are hidden gems of Ohio—mom-and-pop places tucked away in tiny towns filled with Americana charm,” said Mary Cusick, director of Tourism Ohio.

Comfort food is not just about secret ingredients, family recipes or careful preparation. It’s a sense of place. It’s the magical way the taste of something wonderful or nostalgic blends with the warm feeling of welcome.

Famous Fried Bologna

In a town sporting only 338 people and a single flashing red light on Main Street, G&R Tavern is the crown jewel of Waldo.

A “cash only” sign in the window is a precursor to the microcosm of small-town America inside. Diners indulge in coconut cream pie. Old baseball trophies line the walls. The chatter of locals catching up on the day and the distinctive aroma of garlic coming from bologna frying on the grill permeate the restaurant.

Not much has changed since 1962, when George Yake and Roy Klingel opened G&R Tavern. Many visitors travel from out of state just to try the bologna sandwich—hearty, thick-sliced slabs with a savory blend of garlic and spices. It’s so popular that the restaurant goes through 1,100 pounds of bologna—specially made for G&R—every week.

What makes it special? “It’s the blend of the bologna and the way we cook it,” said Mary Blevins, who has co-owned the business with Joy Lewis for the last 30 years. “We fry our bologna on a big cast-iron griddle and brown it on both sides to bring out the flavor. Most people top it with cheese, onion and pickle.”

Hand-breaded fried mushrooms, onion rings and curly fries have their own following. For dessert, most customers ask for two forks to split large slices of pie. Indulging in the chocolate peanut butter pie made it easy to see why G&R sells more than 100 pies every week.



Schmucker's Dining Counter.
Schmucker's

The Secret's in the Sauce

By 10 a.m. daily, the secret Greek-recipe coney sauce is simmering on the burners at Theo's Restaurant in downtown Cambridge. In 1931, Greek immigrants Gust Granitsas and Jim Siatris opened their Coney Island lunch restaurant. It was a 24/7 spot for local workers and travelers on U.S. Highway 40, which runs through Cambridge.

As the smell of the simmering sauce that will complement several hundred coneys wafts through the restaurant, today's owners, Steve and Manny Theodosopoulos,

are busy in the kitchen, working alongside cooks and servers. The brothers have worked in the family business since childhood and credit the restaurant's longevity to a simple philosophy.

“If you give customers good food at a fair price with fast, friendly service, then you will be here a long time,” said Steve.

In addition to coneys, Theo's is also known for pie. Big sellers include coconut cream and custard, but visitors whose timing is right might catch a seasonal favorite—peach pie.

Devotees descend from mid-June through August to get their hands on the sweet treat. The restaurant uses a specific kind of Southern peach, cut fresh and mixed with a made-from-scratch peach glaze.

“There are so many things you’re *supposed* to eat. Every once in a while, you just want to eat something you enjoy and makes you feel good,” said Manny.

With a Name Like Schmucker’s

From the back corner booth of Schmucker’s Restaurant in Toledo, guests get a full view of locals discussing politics over morning coffee, and they can hear the phone ring in a vintage wooden telephone booth. To snag a spot anywhere in the restaurant, visitors should arrive early because the five booths, five tables and 13 bar stools fill up fast.

Comfort food is a passion for co-owners Doug Schmucker and his wife, Patty. The third-generation restaurant offers recipes that Doug’s grandparents, Harvey and Nola Schmucker, served in 1948. The mainstays include stick-to-your-ribs dishes such as Swiss steak, meatloaf, and chicken served with fresh biscuits and gravy.

“Grandpa believed that if you served quality food at a reasonable price and made sure customers were full when they left, they would come back,” said Doug. “Sixty-seven years later, that is still the foundation.”



Andy Hiltibran and Marsha Crabill filling orders.
Anietra Hamper

From the breakfast burritos to the pies, all the food is made fresh. The restaurant’s real charm, though, is the people. Many cooks and servers have been here for 40 years, and several regulars get their daily breakfast cooked without even ordering. The food brings people together, but it is Schmucker’s values that make the experience memorable.

Burger Bliss

As I pull into Crabill’s Hamburger Shop in Urbana, I am certain I have the wrong address. The tiny building appears barely larger than a shed, but the intoxicating smell of hamburgers and onions in the parking lot tells me I am in the right place.

Inside, owners Andy Hiltibran and Marsha Crabill are busy serving a stream of customers. Crabill’s is so popular the wait can be up to 45 minutes on Saturdays. Most people get their burgers to go because the restaurant accommodates only eight eat-in patrons at a time.

Hiltibran flips dozens of mini-size burgers on the steaming grill using a 1920s spatula, while Crabill takes customer orders and preps to-go bags. “When you go back to your hometown, there are certain places that give you the warm fuzzies,” she said. “This is the first place that people come back to. This is just home.”

Her grandfather, Forest Crabill, started the family business in 1927 by selling nickel hamburgers from a small garage. As word spread, he expanded to the corner of a gas station.

Burgers, still a bargain at 85 cents, come topped with brown mustard, sweet relish and onion. Many customers opt for double dippers, which are two tiny hamburger patties on a bun dipped in grease. The owners say the “comfort” in their comfort food is in the grease and in a burger recipe passed down from generation to generation.

My comfort-food road trip took me hundreds of miles across the Buckeye State, awakening my senses to the joy of pulling off the highway to explore small towns and savor time-honored recipes.

Planning Your Trip

To learn more, visit gandrtavern.com, theosrestaurant.us, schmuckersrestaurant.com and crabillshamburgers.com. For information about Ohio, log on to ohio.org. For trip-planning assistance, contact your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

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