

[TRAVEL](#)

# More than a college town: Explore the food, drink, outdoors in Columbia, Mo.

- By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch
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The 11-acre lake at Stephens Lake Park in Columbia, Mo., is ringed by walking paths.  
Credit: Columbia CVB



**The Missouri River flows along the Katy Trail outside Rocheport, Mo. Bikes and helmets can be rented in town at the Meriwether Café and Bike Shop. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**



**Brews come in a variety of tastes and colors at Flat Branch Pub & Brewing, one of four microbreweries in Columbia, MO. Credit: Columbia CVB**



**Amy Reed, bartender at Les Bourgeois Vineyards' Blufftop Bistro, pours a flight of wine for a thirsty rider fresh off the Katy Trail. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**



**Servers stand ready to pour wine for patrons of the A-Frame Winegarden at Les Bourgeois Vineyards. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**

My steaming bowl of potato corn chowder dispelled the chill on the patio of a café on the Katy Trail. Two women parked their bikes and took the table next to me, pulling off their helmets and fluffing their hair until it caught the afternoon sunlight. They ordered wine, leaned back and began to chat.

So good to be outdoors, so good to lunch with friends, especially after a long pandemic winter.

A getaway to Columbia, Missouri, offers myriad ways to nourish the soul and feed the body outdoors. With 81 city parks and trails, and three nearby state parks, I had plenty of options for biking, hiking or just taking a stroll. And with more than 150 restaurants, cafes, bars and nightspots, many in the downtown district in this college town, my companions and I had no trouble finding a seat outdoors to enjoy warmer weather while we dined.



**The patio of the Blufftop Bistro at Les Bourgeois Vineyards makes a great spot for a glass of wine after a ride on the nearby Katy Trail.**

**Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**

## Bike, beer, wine

My bike ride through Missouri's skinniest state park, and the nation's longest rail-to-trail conversion, began in Rocheport, population 252. The original Katy Trail town is just 15 minutes from downtown Columbia.

After a hot lunch on the patio of Meriwether Café and Bike Shop, I hopped on one of its rental bikes and pedaled along the 240-mile-long trail. I pulled over to take a closer look at the Rocheport depot, one of four restored depots along this former path of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. While admiring the view along the Missouri River, the sound of laughter floating atop limestone bluffs lining the trail caught my attention.

The merry conversation came from happy patrons of **Les Bourgeois Vineyards** where I detoured on my way back to Columbia. The sprawling decks of its A-frame wine garden and the patio of its Blufftop Bistro overlook the river, each a lively perch for a post-ride glass of wine. Or glasses in my case. I ordered a flight of four to sample.

Beer lovers quench their thirst at Columbia's four microbreweries. At the oldest, Flat Branch Pub & Brewing, diners take seats under the trees on the broad patio and order house-made menu items such as its Low Carb Keto Dinner. Brews come from a rotating selection on tap. Will it be Katy Trail Pale Ale? Or the oddly named Oil Change Oatmeal Stout?

## Dick Tracy and a walk in a park

For breakfast, my options included Uprise Bakery with its latent hippie vibe and Ernie's Café and Steakhouse. Both lie within the District, 43 blocks of downtown Columbia bordered by three colleges whose students bring a youthful vitality to its shops, restaurants and bars.



**An old-fashioned diner, Ernie's Café and Steakhouse has outdoor seating as well as cozy counter seating, tables and booths indoors in The District, 43 blocks of downtown Columbia, Mo.**

**Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**

I chose Ernie's. While it has outdoor seating, I couldn't resist peeking inside to admire its retro diner décor and original Dick Tracy drawing, the work of cartoonist Chester Gould who frequented the place when his daughter attended nearby Stephens College in the 1940s. Waffles and omelets reign at breakfast, but diners who come by at lunch swear by Chopped Cow, Gould's favorite.

After some window shopping in the District, I picked up a sandwich at Uprise Bakery for a picnic at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park about five miles south. Eight trails wind through its 2,272 acres showing off karst geological formations, sinkholes, a natural spring and a seven-mile-long cave system. I hiked the half-mile Devil's Icebox Trail to the park's namesake 63-foot rock bridge, using stepping stones to pick my way across rivulets to view the bridge from below.

Still reveling in the warm weather, I continued my pursuit of places to stroll outdoors, this time within Columbia's city limits.

At Stephens Lake Park, 116 gently rolling acres just east of downtown, I walked inner and outer paths ringing an 11-acre lake. Markers identified the species of trees along a 1.7-mile greenway so I made of game of guessing each one. So many varieties; even an arborist might be challenged. When the weather warms a bit more, swimmers will head for the lake, children for the spray park and music lovers for outdoor concerts in the amphitheater.



**Tiny Shelter Gardens, open to the public next to the Shelter Insurance Co., headquarters in Columbia, Mo., makes a quiet place for contemplation.**

**Photo by Katherine Rodeghier**

On the west side of the city, I discovered a little gem of a park next to the Shelter Insurance corporate headquarters. Shelter Gardens packs a lot into its five acres: gazebo, giant sundial, Vietnam Veterans memorial, replica of a one-room schoolhouse and a sensory garden for the visually impaired. All this and plantings of 15,000 annuals and perennials, too.

## Lost in old Mizzou

Someone recommended I check out the Mizzou Botanic Garden on the campus of the University of Missouri. When I stopped to ask directions from a couple of students in shorts and flip-flops — I found it still chilly in jacket and jeans — I got nothing but shrugs and blank stares. Then I asked them to point me to the Columns and their faces lighted up as they gladly showed me the way.



**The University of Missouri campus in Columbia, Mo., encompasses the Mizzou Botanic Garden. A tree-lined walk encircles the Columns, iconic remnants of an academic building destroyed by fire more than a century ago.**

**Credit: Columbia CVB**

**Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau**

What I failed to understand: The entire 1,262-acre campus comprises the botanic garden, a living museum of thousands of plants and trees in 11 thematic and seven special collections. I confined my visit to the Francis Quadrangle anchored by six columns, remnants of an Academic Hall that burned in 1892 and a popular selfie spot for the university's more than 30,000 students. The Quad earns a spot on the National Register of Historic Places not just for the Columns, but for its statue of Thomas Jefferson, the original obelisk tombstone Jefferson designed for himself and for the university's founding in 1839 as the first land grant college in Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase.

My immersion into this university atmosphere prompted me to seek out Shakespeare's Pizza, an iconic student hangout. Though it has three locations, it's the original one in the District that packs in students at tables inside and outdoors on the patio. Over slices of 'za and glasses of beer, they laugh and flirt.

Oh, to be 20 again, especially in the spring.

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### **If you go**

Columbia Convention & Visitors Bureau: 1-573-874-2489; [visitcolumbiamo.com](http://visitcolumbiamo.com)

[https://www.stltoday.com/travel/more-than-a-college-town-explore-the-food-drink-outdoors-in-columbia-mo/article\\_c544d8f0-34fb-5623-976b-8f5ddd6d82ed.html](https://www.stltoday.com/travel/more-than-a-college-town-explore-the-food-drink-outdoors-in-columbia-mo/article_c544d8f0-34fb-5623-976b-8f5ddd6d82ed.html)