

FORK IN THE ROAD

Midwestern ice cream gems

Unique spots evoke a sense of nostalgia

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Chicago Tribune

Nostalgia comes served with a spoon at ice cream parlors and soda fountains that have tamed sweet teeth in the Midwest for a half century or more. Sundaes piled high in a fancy dish and soda jerks send us back to a childhood that was simple and sweet and right around the corner. Vestiges of this past remain in the Midwest, sending ice cream fans into swoons of reminiscence.

Here's where you can find your nostalgia fix.

Zaharakos Ice Cream Parlor and Museum, Columbus, Ind. Locals simply call it "The Greeks" for the three brothers who moved from Greece and opened a candy store in Columbus on Oct. 20, 1900. Just over a decade later, the brothers brought in two soda fountains, a 50-foot back bar, a Tiffany-style lamp and a Welte Orchestration, a self-playing organ that continues to delight customers. When the family's third-generation owner died in 2006, fans feared the end of an era, but a local businessman bought the shop and restored it — the onyx fountain, mahogany woodwork, stained glass and Italian marble counters. He also expanded into the building next door to create a museum with a restored 1870s orchestration, antique syrup dispensers and marble soda fountains.

Not only does Zaharakos offer a full range of sundaes, sodas, malts, shakes and floats (its Big Z has five scoops and three toppings), it serves breakfast, lunch and early dinner. Menu favorites include the Zaharakos Gorn Sandwich (a spiced sloppy Joe) and Hometown Tenderloin made with Indiana's beloved breaded pork. Candy and trinkets are sold in its Country Store. www.zaharakos.com, 812-378-1900

Lagomarcino's, Moline, Ill., and Davenport, Iowa.

Luigia Lagomarcino gave her husband, Angelo a good scolding after he paid a peddler \$25 for a hot fudge recipe shortly after the cash-strapped Italian immigrants opened their confectionary in 1908 in Moline. Angelo has been redeemed. The hot fudge proved wildly popular and remains a staple, served in little pitchers alongside homemade vanilla ice cream in hot fudge sundaes. It's also the key ingredient in the Mississippi Marvel, which sports a river of sauce flowing over mocha fudge ice cream. Chocolate shares the billing with strawberry topping in the Quad Cities Special, a riverboat of banana and two servings of ice cream with a paddle wheel made of cookies.

Along with shakes and sodas and fountain drinks such as the Lago, a soda created by the Lagomarcinos' son Charlie in the 1930s, customers come in for signature homemade chocolates displayed in antique candy cases. If you're hungry for lunch, choose from a menu of sandwiches and salads. Now a fourth-generation enterprise, Lagomarcino's boasts a James Beard America's Classics Award. You'll find cozy wooden booths, a hexagon terrazzo floor and a stamped metal ceiling in the downtown Moline store. In 1997, the family opened a second store across the Mississippi River in Davenport in a circa 1915 building and brought in a 1940s soda fountain and 1880s walnut back bar. www.lagomarcinos.com, 309-764-1814



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/PHOTOS FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Old-fashioned Green River soda is featured at Lagomarcino's in Davenport, Iowa, an offshoot of the original in Moline, Ill., across the Mississippi River.



House-made sauces are a big selling point for sundaes at Fountain on Locust in St. Louis.

Moline, 563-324-6137 Davenport

Birdsall's Ice Cream, Mason City, Iowa. It lacks marble counters and a wooden bar and tables, but this modest ice cream parlor has remained a northern Iowa institution since 1931, when Addison and Esther Birdsall opened it on one of the main drags in town. A steady stream of pickup trucks, family sedans and minivans pulls into the lot, and out pop customers eager for a taste of homemade ice cream that's 12 percent butterfat.

Chippermint, pecan and raspberry chocolate truffle rank among the most popular flavors, but nothing beats peach. Made only when the fruit is in season (best guess: middle to late July), customers drive miles for a cone or sundae topped with fresh peach slices. At 400 gallons per season, "it's a big summer draw," said store manager Mark Repp, who began working at Birdsall's when he was in high school in the late 1960s. He still hires the local teenage talent and estimates some 600 youths have scooped Birdsall's since it began. www.facebook.com/pages/Birdsall

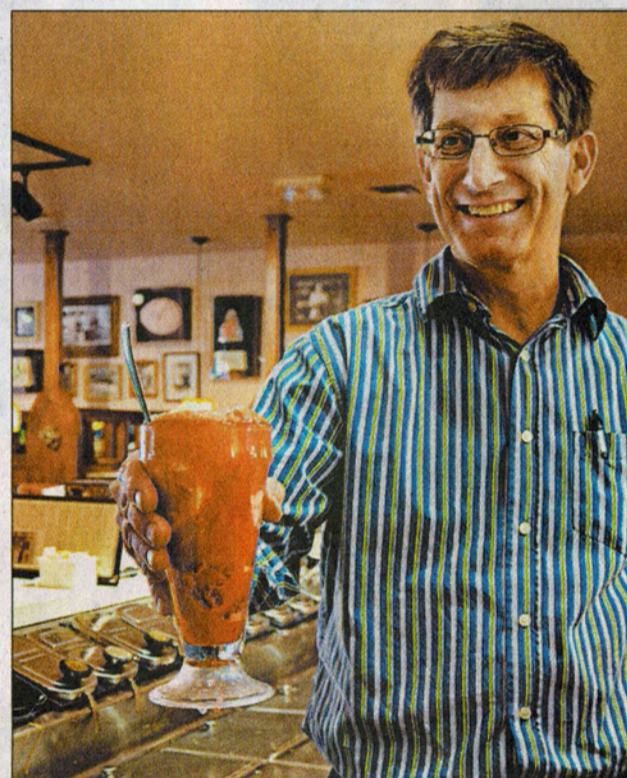


Fans of old-time ice cream parlors strike gold at the Lagomarcino's in downtown Moline. It opened in 1908.

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The Fountain on Locust, St. Louis, Mo. You can enjoy ice cream the usual way, or you can drink it in a martini at this restaurant on Locust Street's Historic

Automotive Row in Midtown. Housed in a 1916 building that once served as a showroom for Stutz Bearcat and Stutz Blackhawk automobiles, its hand-painted art deco interior puts fans of old-fashioned ice cream parlors in an



Tom Lagomarcino Jr. keeps the family business going in Davenport. The second spot opened in 1997.



Ellie Lehmann carries on the tradition of high school students scooping ice cream at Birdsall's in Mason City, Iowa.

appropriate retro mood. Sit in the booths on the west side, and you can tune in to a radio comedy serial with a new episode every two minutes.

House-made sauces are served over ice cream made in Wisconsin, and if you can't decide among its menu of ice cream concoctions, order the Sundae Gambler and let the soda jerk whip up a surprise for you (no refunds). Those who want just a taste can order the world's smallest ice cream cone (95 cents) or the world's smallest hot fudge sundae (\$1.99) served in a dish the size of a shot glass. Patrons over age 21 can choose from a menu of 27 signature ice cream martinis. A favorite, the Orange Dreamsicle, blends vanilla vodka, triple sec, orange sherbet and vanilla ice cream. www.fountainonlocust.com, 314-535-7800

Wilson's Restaurant & Ice Cream Parlor, Ephraim, Wis. With its old-fashioned soda fountain and

juke box playing toe-tapping tunes, Wilson's has been a Door County classic since 1906, the year Oscar and Mattie Wilson moved "up north" from Milwaukee and opened a store selling candy and their homemade ice cream. It also home brews its own root beer served in frosted mugs and in floats. A favorite ice cream specialty, the Cherry Berry Delight, layers vanilla ice cream with Door County cherry, blueberry and strawberry toppings, and its Wilson's Banquet is a belly buster with five flavors of ice cream, three toppings, whipped cream, cherries and pecans.

Kids love the Clown Sundae with chocolate chip eyes, cherry nose and cone hat. After a burger, hot dog or other sandwich, you can order a slice of Door County cherry pie, a la mode if you wish. www.wilsonsicream.com, 920-854-2041

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.