

FORK IN THE ROAD

WHAT TO EAT WHEN YOU GET THERE



AMBASSADOR HOTEL

Craft cocktails are part of the allure at Dockum, a speakeasy-style bar tucked away in the basement of the Ambassador Hotel.

Where to eat in Wichita

Dig into these storied spots in Kansas' biggest city

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

WICHITA, Kan. — Maybe you're headed to town for a sports tournament in March, the second annual Chisholm Trail Marathon in spring or the jazz festival April 15-19.

Whatever your reason and whenever you visit, know that the largest city in Kansas has a big variety of bars and restaurants that go well beyond its status as the birthplace of White Castle and Pizza Hut. Here are some places that stand out for their back stories and reputation.

Steaks and a speakeasy

Downtown's swanky Siena Tuscan Steakhouse occupies the home of the former Dockum Drug Store, site of the country's first successful youth-driven lunch-counter sit-in during the civil rights movement. After several black students were denied service, they peacefully continued to occupy counter stools in rotating shifts for three weeks. The year was 1958, two years before a similar incident in Greensboro, North Carolina, often credited as the first such sit-in. The actions of the Wichita students led to the desegregation of all nine local Dockum Drug Stores as well as parent company Rexall drugstores statewide.

Walking to the steakhouse, you might pass Georgia Gerber's "Soda Fountain" sculpture commemorating the incident. Part of Gerber's "Streetscape" series of 21 bronze sculptures, this one is in Chester I. Lewis Reflection Square Park, named for the Wichita lawyer who mentored the students as president of the local chapter of the NAACP.

The old drugstore is long gone. In its place stands the upscale Ambassador Hotel, part of Marriott's boutique Autograph Collection, with Siena occupying the ground floor of the building at 104 S. Broadway St. Zagat named its executive chef, Josh Rathbun, one of Denver's "30 under 30" culinary pros before he returned to his native Wichita. Rathbun has tapped into his early experience working at a butcher shop in his hometown, where he formed relationships with local farmers. At Siena, he capitalizes on those connections to source heritage meats and other fresh ingredients. You'll find beef from Creekstone Farms in Arkansas City in

filets, rib eyes and strip steaks on his menu. Pasta and fish round out the entrees. His five-course tasting menu can be paired with wines or craft beers.

Tucked away in the hotel basement is Dockum, a Prohibition-style speakeasy. Playing up a pharmacy theme, it specializes in house-made bitters, syrups and craft cocktails served in the cozy lounge. Try the Stache, made with orange zest sous-vide gin, pistachio puree, cream, lemon juice, orange soda and egg white or the Original's Original with green chartreuse, blood orange liqueur, egg and torched brown sugar. Your pharmacist — er, bartender — may ignite your drink at your table. Want something less dramatic? Beer and premium wines also are available.

Lofty fare

Wichita goes by the nickname Air Capital of the World thanks to the many general aviation companies operating in these parts since the 1920s. Stearman Field Bar & Grill takes the aviation theme to new, uh, heights from its position overlooking a private airport runway in nearby Benton. Watch takeoffs and landings 20 yards away while you chow down on a flyover Philly cheesesteak, biplane cheeseburger, velocity veggie pizza or other entrees. Sip from a selection of 20 beers on tap, wines and cocktails. Breakfast might be paired with a Queen Mary, Stearman's heavily garnished signature bloody mary.

Feel inspired to take to the skies? With some advance notice, the restaurant will hook you up with Stearman Sky Tours for a ride in the open cockpit of a 1943 Stearman biplane used to train World War II pilots. Board just in front of the restaurant and don an old-fashioned helmet for a short spin over rural Kansas.

Right on 'cue

When cowboys drove cattle along the Chisholm Trail, many who ended their journey in Wichita found their way to the Delano area, where saloons and bordellos offered plenty of liquor, ladies and gambling. Now a historic district of Wichita, this naughty-turned-nice neighborhood has blossomed with 250-plus businesses, including craft breweries, hip coffee shops, boutiques, barbecue joints and fine restaurants.

Delano Barbeque Co., 710 W. Douglas Ave., occupies the former studio of Blackbear Bosin, the Native American artist who created Wichita's iconic "Keeper of the Plains" sculpture. The late



VISIT WICHITA

Once a garage and then an antiques shop, the recently expanded B&C BBQ Pub & Grill serves platters of barbecue in the Old Town neighborhood.



VISIT WICHITA

Biplanes stand ready outside Stearman Field Bar & Grill to take diners on a flight over rural Kansas.



SETH J

The bronze sculpture "Soda Fountain" by Georgia Gerber stands in a park near the former Dockum Drug Store, the site of the civil rights movement's first successful youth-driven lunch-counter sit-in.

Bosin was a founding member of Wichita's Mid-America All-Indian Center, which holds the largest collection of his work. Show your Delano Barbeque Co. receipt for \$2 off admission.

Louisiana-born Cedric Taylor, the pit boss at Delano, lights up the smokers at 4:30 a.m. using slow-burning pecan wood to give meats a delicate yet pungent flavor. Standouts on the menu include a burger mixing smoked beef with brisket and the Chisholm Trail pulled pork sandwich served open faced on Texas toast with shredded cheese and baked beans. All sides are made in

house, including fresh-cut fries, onion rings and jalapeno-cheddar mashed potatoes.

In the city's Old Town District, B&C BBQ Pub & Grill started life in a former garage-turned-gift-and-antiques store at 355 N. Washington St. In 1996, owners Bob and Carol Maurer opened the artsy B&C Creations and a few years later put a barbecue lunch buffet in the back. The buffet became so popular with the lunchtime crowd it overshadowed the store, which closed. Carey Maurer took over after his parents passed and recently updated the property, adding a din-

ner menu and a full-service bar with 14 taps. The store's old glass chandelier still shines over tables in the restaurant that has expanded from 180 to 282 seats with a patio, retractable garage doors and 29 TVs usually tuned to sports. You can hear live music some evenings.

Consider starting with queso dip, perhaps adding brisket, pork, chicken or rib meat, and progress to a build-your-own salad or baked potato bar. Can't decide on a main? Combo platters laden with ribs, chicken, hot links, pulled pork and brisket, plus sides, are a solid bet. And the lunch buffet still is going strong, though you might have to elbow your way into a queue of office workers from nearby businesses.

Taste of France

A strip mall seems an unlikely place for a fine French restaurant, but Georges French Bistro, 4618 E. Central Ave., does a brisk business in the College Hill neighborhood, attracting the who's who of Wichita. Chef and owner George Youssef often makes the rounds, schmoozing with diners. Formerly of Wichita's Nouvelle Cafe and Uptown Bistro, he opened the 72-seat restaurant in 2015 with indoor and outdoor tables, crisp white napery at dinner, an open kitchen and gleaming, brass-accented bar.

Of Lebanese heritage, Youssef got schooled in French cuisine in Quebec, Canada, and specializes in classically prepared bistro dishes served by waitstaff in traditional black vests and ties. At dinner, you might begin with a few oysters or escargot, then choose seafood bouillabaisse, duck a l'orange with sweet potato and carrot puree, or steak frites made with prime strip loin and served with truffle fries. Creekstone Farms supplies premium Black Angus beef and steaks are hand-cut. Four types of sauce ensure you'll find something to your liking. Save room for crepes suzette or a classic creme brulee.

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer.