

Passion for food

Driftless Depot in Spring Green is a doozy of a deli

By André Darlington

When the Michelin tire company began publishing its famous star-based restaurant guide in 1933, it was to encourage the then-new pleasure of driving to dining destinations. The guide helped — and still does — advise motoring foodies where to go for superb cuisine in the French countryside.

Often, I wish there were such a reliable guide in Wisconsin. It took me years to discover that the Paddock Club in Elkhart Lake is well worth a trek, or that Wild Rice near Bayfield is among the very finest kitchens in the state. How much easier it would be to open a little red book (or an iPhone app) and see that there's a gem of a restaurant just a 15-minute detour away. But until a genuinely selective food app is available, we'll continue to find our restaurants the hard way — by word of mouth, our own research or pure accident.

I first heard of, and sampled, the Driftless Depot's fare at a wedding in the hills outside of Richland Center. The spread represented some of the best celebratory vittles I've had. Lovely food and a glowing reputation for miles around? It was time to drive to Spring Green.

Separated into a small dining room and a grocery, the Driftless Depot is also a coffee shop, gelateria, lunchtime hangout and purveyor of picnic baskets to American Players Theatre pilgrims. It is not just a cafe; it is the Dean & DeLuca of Highway 14, the Eataly of Highway 23.

The grocery side feels like a comfortable, exquisitely curated natural foods bodega.

Items on the shelves are eye-popping even by city standards, and include high quality ponzu (Japanese soy and citrus sauce), truffles in cream, rice and noodles from Asia and Italy, seasonal organic vegetables from neighboring farms, as well as a number of gluten-free items. There are also bulk organic grain bins and locally raised meats.

These are no ordinary meats, as I discovered when I marveled at a locally raised and perfectly cut veal shank for osso buco (an Italian dish of braised cross-cut marrow bone and vegetables). Proprietor Debora Morton explained that she had selected the animal as a baby, visited it as it was raised, and then requested and directed the cut herself from the butcher. This is the kind of meticulous demand for quality that is rare and thrilling to discover.

The passion for food runs deep with the Mortons, who have lived on a farm nearby since 1979. After retiring from the corporate world, Debora and husband, Michael, decided to bring their longtime love of cooking to the public. "The retail side is stocked with things that we ourselves like to cook with," Debora explains. "And we also use it in the food we serve."

Noontimes, the menu consists of sandwiches (\$8); usually there are at least two to choose from. A popular choice is the egg salad, which may be the Platonic ideal of this familiar comfort food. A thick layer of rich farm-egg salad is joined by heirloom tomato slices and Romaine lettuce between two halves of a ciabatta roll. A slightly acidic, herbed vinaigrette provides exactly the right amount of moisture. It's a thoughtful little stroke of



Debora Morton preps vernacular cuisine at its finest.



Driftless Depot

140 S. Winsted St., Spring Green; 608-628-1001; driftlessdepot.com

Food service: Sandwiches daily 11 am-2 pm; trout dinner 5-7 pm Fridays, with reservations required by Thursday noon; baskets and custom dinners should be ordered 24 hours in advance for takeout or 48 hours in advance for dining in the cafe. Store: 7 am-7 pm Mon.-Fri., 7 am-6 pm Sat., 9 am-5 pm Sun.

genius to leave the egg salad itself thick and then use a separate sauce.

A salmon sandwich I tried was also delicious — on the same ciabatta with a mayo sauce, as well as lettuce and tomato. These are filling, luscious and occasionally messy lunch choices, and prove further the Mortons' attention to detail. DRY's cucumber and juniper sodas make for perfect lunchtime pairings. Coffee options here are well prepared, too. If you're craving a decent cappuccino, this is the stop.

On Friday nights, the Mortons serve their trout dinner: A large patio with big, comfortable outdoor tables under wide umbrellas provides an idyllic backdrop to a gourmand-in-the-kitchen tour de force. Jazz plays softly as Michael offers guests wine, and Deborah and her helpers prepare the plates.

On a recent evening, antipasto dishes included a sausage and cheese platter with pickled mushrooms, a local cheese board with olives, a seasonal caprese salad (heirloom tomatoes, mozzarella, fresh basil), and a stunning dish of boiled egg slivers with sardines and bright orange salmon roe.

These were followed by a salad of garden-fresh greens, green beans, cucumber, cherry tomatoes and melon topped with SarVecchio cheese dressed in a light maple vinaigrette.

The trout main arrives as whole trout fillet (head removed) prepared with dill, white wine and capers with sides of delectable marinated zucchini slices and roasted fingerling potatoes. Just the right amount of acid touches the plate to make the trout's delicate flavor come alive.

This is vernacular cuisine (cuisine attached to a place) at its finest, the flavor (except for the roe and olive oil) entirely of Wisconsin fields and waters. And it is expertly presented.

For those who motor over to pick up food for APT, you need to call a day in advance — and you can customize your order. (Dine-in dinners can also be ordered in advance.) There are antipasto dishes for \$11, salmon for \$24, and chicken for \$15. But you will want to explore the market for additional treats yourself. Because browsing this guide-worthy gem is a must. ♦

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