

THE CONNOISSEUR UP NORTH

Back roads dining: A Leaf-peeper's guide

Soon the landscape will be in full color and the leaf-peepers will supplant the fudgies. Autumn, after all, is the perfect season for poking around the countryside in search of wine-tasting, antiques or new hiking trails through Technicolor forests.

The best autumn tours always end with a quiet dinner somewhere on a secluded back road far from the city lights. There are tons of choices, of course, and everyone has favorites. Let us tell you about some of ours.

This time of year when we go adventuring around Petoskey or the Straits, the day's end often finds us homing in on the Douglas Lake Bar and Steakhouse. The locals simply call it "The DLB," and if you want seclusion, it's your place.

The DLB is so far off the main highway you have to look up to see out, but don't be fooled: It is a food-lover's delight, with a serious menu of regional specialties and a well-rounded wine and beer list. As you'd expect from the name, steaks rule (we're very fond of the steak au poivre), but the menu is well balanced and varied and moderately priced.

Situated on a picturesque little northwoods lake, this classic, pine-paneled roadhouse with its big stone fireplace is a grand place to linger over dinner after an autumn outing. The DLB is about three miles along on Douglas Lake Rd., which runs east from U.S. 31 opposite Pellston Airport.

If your outing takes you to northern Leelanau, we'd urge a stop afterwards at Fischer's Happy Hour, on the east side of M-22 between Leland and Northport. You'll find outrageously good burgers, whitefish and fried chicken in a rustic roadhouse atmosphere that is blessed with some of the most efficiently expert service in the North.

A perennial favorite leaf-peeping route in northern Lower Michigan is M-119, the

famous "Tunnel of Trees" leading north along Lake Michigan from Harbor Springs. Two interesting dinner possibilities are convenient to the end of that tour, both of them smack in the middle of nowhere. One is the Crow's Nest on State Road, not far from where the Tunnel of Trees ends at Cross Village. It's a local institution, casual and popular because of a moderately priced menu of steaks, perch, whitefish, ribs and pizza. The other choice, somewhat pricier, is a place called The Fish, several miles farther south where State crosses Stutsmanville Road. The menu leans heavily toward what the name suggests, but there's always something for the pasta-and-meat crowd as well.

Another of our favorite autumn adventuring areas is the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore country and adjacent Benzie coastline. The hiking is superb, and the first autumn storms always wash up a fresh supply of Petoskey stones and interesting flotsam. At the end of the day there's a broad choice of secluded little places to go for dinner, not least of which is Funistrada in Burdickville on the south side of Big Glen Lake. "Funistrada" means "off the beaten path," but this place gets so busy in summer that we prefer going there when the leaves turn. The owners, Tom and Holly Reay, offer an imaginative and interesting menu which, while clearly Italian, isn't awash in cliché cuisine. Among our favorites, there are veal piccata and chicken Marsala, although we have particularly fond memories of a very earthy, autumnal dish of Portabella ravioli sauced with creamed corn and squash. You'll find Funistrada on MacFarlane Rd., three and a half miles east of the causeway dividing Big from Little Glen.

Another fine and cliché-free



BY SHERRI AND
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DECAMP

Local columnists

Italian restaurant that we count among our favorites is Monte Bianco, John and Mary Kelly's fine roadhouse on the north side of Boyne City Road about 10 miles east of Charlevoix. It sort of sneaks up on you, so keep your eyes peeled. It's a grand spot to wind down after a day of back-riding in Boyne Country or the Jordan Valley.

If you fancy French accents, David Beier offers regional dishes with a rural French accent at his cozy Walloon Lake Inn overlooking the lake about 100 yards off M-75 in tiny Walloon Lake Village.

We think some of the best autumn hiking around is on the network of trails in the park at the end of the Old Mission Peninsula, and our favorite dinner stop in those parts is the Old Mission Tavern. Granted, it's right on the main highway, Center Road (M-37), but it's so far out of town that we'll declare it back-roads dining anyway. It's another of those classic Michigan country roadhouses with outstanding food (tip: order fish, no matter how it's prepared). As a bonus, proprietor Verna Bartnick is a sculptor and the restaurant includes a charming garden and gallery where numerous local artists exhibit their work.

DATA SUMMARY: CROW'S NEST, 4601 N. State Rd., Cross



Record-Eagle/Meegan Reid

Chef Scott Schornak with roasted Dungeness crab at The Fish restaurant north of Harbor Springs. It's one of many off-the-beaten-path eateries that make convenient stops while fall color touring.

Village; 526-6011. THE FISH, 2983 State Rd., Harbor Springs; 526-3969. DOUGLAS LAKE BAR, 7314 Douglas Lake Rd., Pellston; 539-8588. FUNISTRADA, 4566 MacFarlane Rd., Burdickville; 334-3900. FISCHER'S HAPPY HOUR TAVERN, 7144 N. Manitou Trail West, Northport; 386-9923. MONTE BIANCO, 2911 Charlevoix-Boyne City Rd., Boyne City; 582-3341. WALLOON LAKE

INN, 4178 W. Walloon Lake Dr., Walloon Lake Village; 535-2999. OLD MISSION TAVERN, 17015 Center Rd., Old Mission; 223-7280.

Sherri and Graydon DeCamp are authors of "The Connoisseur Up North," a best-selling restaurant guide and cookbook. Previous columns can be viewed by visiting their Web site, www.bayshorebooks.com.