

## The Taste 50: It's back

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It's time, once again, to shine the spotlight on fifty nifty people, places, products and ideas that reinforce why Minnesota is the place for those who love to eat.



A brand of bipartisan leadership that all beer-loving voters can embrace. Pre-made pie crust that passes as homemade. A cooking oil pressed from Minnesota-grown sunflowers. The dining-out word of the moment (one hint: It's Japanese). Minnesota's triple crown of award-winning chefs. Two don't-miss downtown street foods. The host gift that all cabin visitors should tuck into their overnight bag next to the mosquito repellent. A bacon of the gods, and swoon-worthy soft-serve ice cream. The dapper designer behind some of the Twin Cities' best-looking restaurants. Tasty summertime sweat equity. The reigning biscuit queen of south Minneapolis, if not the state. Our sixth-annual countdown to Minnesota deliciousness (with, yes, a few nods to Wisconsin and Iowa) kicks off:

### On a roll

Considering chef Josh Thoma's long odds -- 7th and Marquette is roughly 1,400 miles from the New England shore, and he and his crew are laboring inside a cramped truck -- a person might not think that **Smack Shack's lobster rolls** were anything special. Boy, would they be wrong. Sweet, juicy lobster -- and plenty of it -- is gently tossed with a winning combination of English cucumbers, a lemon-kissed aioli and tarragon, then spooned inside toasted, buttered milk bread. No wonder there's always a line.

### Looking good

When local roaster Peace Coffee decided to open a coffee shop, the company approached the project with the same winning quirkiness that has made their coffee bean business such a success. Local artists and craftsmen -- plus plenty of volunteer elbow grease -- turned **Peace Coffee Shop at Wonderland Park** into a Dwell magazine-worthy (not to mention environmentally friendly) setting for sipping a similarly beautifully made espresso.

### Cones not required

Sure, Pizzeria Lola fans wax poetic for chef/owner Ann Kim's thin-crust, wood-fired pizzas. But they're also rightly fanatical about her exceptional **soft-serve ice cream** -- its dense richness comes from a gelato base -- particularly when it becomes a grown-up's sundae, splashed with fruity olive oil and sprinkled with twinkling sea salt.

### Bottled sin

Vanilla ice cream -- and, frankly, anything else -- is utterly transformed with a few sinful spoonfuls of River Chocolate Company's **hot fudge sauce**, an intense blend of butter, cream and Belgian chocolate and cocoa.

### **Kitchen humor**

Food products with "punny" names generally deserve a short shelf life. Hopefully that's not the case for **Crapola!**, an unusually delicious cranberry-apple, five-grain granola, produced one small batch at a time by farmers Andrea and Brian Strom in Ely, Minn.

### **Best. Cheap. Tacos. Ever.**

Well, maybe not *ever*, but for \$2.50 a pop, it's tough to think of another fast food-er that offers freshness, quality and variety as well as newcomer **Rusty Taco**. If it's not a chain in the making, it should be.

### **Passing for homemade**

Summer fruits mean summer pies, and **Turtle Bread Co.** makes it easy for the pie crust-phobic by selling a pre-made, all-butter dough that rolls out like a dream and bakes into tender, flaky gorgeousness. Now if only they made a lard version.

### **Passing for homemade, Part 2**

Thank Joe and Courtney Norgaard, also known as **Local Roots Fine Foods**, for making a chicken noodle soup that tastes better than anything Mom ever made. The secret ingredient: delicious chickens, raised at Callister Farm, a sixth-generation operation in West Concord, Minn. The Norgaards' chicken-wild rice soup is also a game-changer.

### **Liquid gold**

On their Pierz, Minn., farm, Tom and Jenni Smude are making a Minnesota-made cooking oil, and a superior one at that. After switching out soybeans for 500 acres of drought-tolerant sunflowers, the entrepreneurial couple imported German-made equipment and began producing their cold-pressed, filtered, hand-bottled product. Their gamble has been a win-win situation. Not only have the Smudes created a fragrant, amber-tinted sunflower oil, but their process also turns byproducts into feed for the farm's 400 head of Black Angus cattle. On the market for just over a year, **Smude's Natural Sunflower Oil** is catching on with chefs and cooks across the state, including chef Marshall Paulsen of the Birchwood Cafe in Minneapolis, who has been going through "a ton" of it since he discovered it last fall, using it for sautéing as well as embellishing the restaurant's popular granola. At home, he mixes it with lemon juice and splashes it on greens, or blends it with butter when preparing eggs. "It has a complex flavor, and it tastes a little more nutty when it's cooked a little," Paulsen said. "The bottom line is that it tastes great. I met the guy, and I liked him. That goes a long way."

### **Road trip**

Madison, Wis., soaks up all the foodie love, but for road-tripping Minnesotans, there's another nearby state capital that's worth a weekend graze: **Des Moines**. The city boasts a vibrant Saturday a.m. farmers market, an impressive array of restaurants (don't miss Lucca, Proof and Baru 66, for starters) and a bakery/cafe (La Mie) that's tailor-made for lazy mornings with the paper and tourist strategy sessions. Plus, it's a half-hour closer than Madison, a straight shot down I-35.

### **Really good orning**

Talk about a breakfast of champions: A chewy **poppyseed bagel** from Common Roots Cafe, dressed with a thick swipe of **quark** produced by the 19-year-old Amish cheesemaker at Milton Creamery in Milton, Iowa. The cow's milk cheese has a tangy, slightly sour bite, and texture-wise it falls in between cream cheese and ricotta. "It's lighter and fluffier than a Philly-style cream cheese, and naturally lower in fat," said Vicki Potts, owner of Grassroots Gourmet in Minneapolis. "I like to tell people that it's cheesecake without the sugar." Potts heartily endorses the bagel-and-quark idea, but does it one better, finishing it with smoked trout. "It's our Heartlander version of lox and a schmear," she said with a laugh.

### **Looking ahead**

There are always new restaurants on the horizon, and this summer's bumper crop of attention-getting entries is especially promising. **Gather** is the D'Amico & Partners foray into the high-profile Walker Art Center space previously occupied by 20.21 (opening June 2). **Mill Valley Kitchen** is aiming to make nutrition-minded cooking sexy (opening June 7). **Rosa Mexicano**, a glitzy New York City import, is going to light up Hennepin Avenue at 6th Street in the City Center complex (opening late summer). Then there's **Wise Acre Eatery**, where Tangletown Gardens owners Dean Engelmann and Scott Endres will channel animals and vegetables from their Plato, Minn., farm to feed chef Beth Fisher's vivid culinary imagination (opening today).

### **Cheap-and-chic**

Trend-conscious tabletop bargain hunters, let the calendar-circling begin: Minnesota's first **CB2**, Crate & Barrel's stylish lower-priced sibling, is set to open in Uptown Minneapolis in November.

### **Work has its rewards**

Maybe it's the satisfying knowledge of a job well done, because berries picked fresh at a farm taste noticeably better than the ones purchased at the supermarket. For a list of local **U-pick strawberry farms**, go to [startribune.com/tabletalk](http://startribune.com/tabletalk).

### **Kitchen keeper**

Cookbooks fly out of favor at an alarming speed, but 2008's "**The Splendid Table's How to Eat Supper**," written by Minnesotans Lynne Rossetto Kasper and Sally Swift, has genuine staying power, with recipes that compel time-pressed cooks to return often. The radio duo's next print effort, "The Splendid Table's How to Eat Weekends," is geared toward more leisurely cooking pursuits and debuts in September. We can't wait.

## **We solemnly swear**

Here's a pledge worth keeping, until at least Labor Day: More **waffles!** Test-drive our can't-miss recipe for yeast-raised waffles at [startribune.com/taste](http://startribune.com/taste). Oh, and no self-respecting waffle is complete without a drizzle of Minnesota-made maple syrup. Our top-shelf pour: **Wild Country Maple**, meticulously produced from a sugar bush near Lutsen, Minn.

## **Dinner theater**

Here's a restaurant design trend that hopefully won't grow stale: the **kitchen counter**. A front row seat at Tilia (pictured), Travail Kitchen and Amusements, Bar La Grassa and Uptown Cafeteria provides a more absorbing view into cooking than a Food Network marathon.

## **Biscuit blessing**

Bless you, **Solveig Tofte**, baker/co-owner of Sun Street Breads, for singlehandedly demonstrating the life-changing glory that is a well-made buttermilk biscuit. Bring on the pork sausage gravy.

## **Minnesota Wins**

After bestowing the honor of Best Chef: Midwest to, from left, Tim McKee of **La Belle Vie** in 2009, Alex Roberts of **Restaurant Alma** in 2010 and Isaac Becker of **112 Eatery** in 2011, the James Beard Foundation confirmed to the world what Minnesotans have known all along: that the Twin Cities is the epicenter of great cooking in the Midwest.

## **Legislative leadership**

Cheers to **Rep. Jenifer Loon** (R-Eden Prairie), top, and **Sen. Linda Scheid** (DFL-Brooklyn Park) for spearheading a bipartisan effort to nudge a portion of Minnesota's liquor laws into the 21st century. Their bill will allow microbreweries to open a single tap room for on-site, pint-sized sales to beer aficionados. The impetus is a \$20 million downtown Minneapolis project proposed by Omar Ansari, owner of the success story that is Surly Brewing Co. "It's really about an entrepreneur who has a vision and has built a business, and the only thing standing in his way is Minnesota law," Loon said. But the bill will also benefit the state's growing number of craft breweries and provide jobs. "A destination brewery is almost like going to wine country, where you visit the winery, see how the wine is made, maybe have some food," Loon said. "He's tapping into a cool thing. He could build it many other states, including next door in Wisconsin, so why not here?"

## **Grill it**

Coming soon, if you're smart, to a grill near you:

- Pink-fleshed, silver-skinned, **northern Minnesota lake trout**, caught and shipped on the same day and sold at Heartland Restaurant & Farm Direct Market in St. Paul. "It's the closest thing we have to salmon," said chef/co-owner Lenny Russo. "It's so pristine, particularly this time of year, when the water is really

cold and the fish is coming out of a really large lake like Superior or Rainy. It's not farmed, so it tastes like what it ate."

- **Turkey burgers** made using skinless ground thigh meat of naturally raised, free-range birds from the poultry whizzes at Kadejan Inc. in Glenwood, Minn.
- **Purple onions**, fresh from the farmers market.

For grilling recipes from Russo, Travail Kitchen and Amusements chefs/co-owners Mike Brown and James Winberg and HauteDish chef/co-owner Landon Schoenefeld, see recipes at [startribune.com/taste](http://startribune.com/taste).

### **Summer loving**

Finally, a patio that takes advantage of the beauty that is the Mississippi River (and a campy tiki setting, to boot!). Thanks, **Psycho Suzi's**.

### **An impressive carbon footprint**

The appropriately named Future Farm delivers a steady supply of deliciously spicy **Upland cress** and arugula, as well as delicate lettuces and fragrant herbs -- all complete with shelf life-extending root balls -- to Twin Cities shoppers. Here's the cool back story: The greenhouse-raised greens are fertilized by the farm's tilapia production and kept warm by repurposing waste from the farm's 1,100-head herd of dairy cattle. Green, indeed.

### **Mixmasters**

The cocktail will never be the same after former Town Talk Diner bartender Nick Kosevich and business partner and fellow mixologist Ira Koplowitz began bottling their own line of flavor-intense bitters (blackstrap molasses, caramelized orange-coriander, cassia-chamomile) under the **Bittercube** label.

### **Top chef**

Raise your glass to what might be the best fine-dining deal in town: Sanctuary chef **Patrick Atanalian's** spontaneous and utterly imaginative \$35, five-course dinner (served Monday through Thursday), an adventure that rivals Valleyfair's Excalibur roller coaster in the joy-ride department.

### **On board**

At his sunny St. Paul studio, woodcrafter Scott McGlasson devotes most of his considerable energy and talents to furniture making. But the **Woodsport** owner also deftly converts birch and walnut planks into cutting boards that mirror his furniture's aesthetic balancing act of striking beauty and practical functionality. McGlasson started selling his wares at the Mill City Farmers Market three years ago, and was instantly hooked. "I like meeting people, and getting their feedback," he said, sounding an awful lot like a farmer who looks forward to his Saturday morning excursions into the city. "At worst, it's a cool place to hang out for a few hours."

## **Bar none**

In his nose-tickling northeast Minneapolis candy kitchen, Brian McElrath made a stellar reputation for himself as an innovator in the world of fanciful chocolate truffles. Now he's spreading the love to the masses by producing a line of great-tasting (and more proletariat-priced) **chocolate bars** that just might make the B.T. McElrath brand name as familiar as Hershey or Nestlé. Witness the "Prairie Dog," a 3-ounce blend of milk chocolate, toffee, toasted almonds and sea salt that should almost be labeled a controlled substance.

## **Tasty square footage**

How the folks at **Surdyk's** manage to pack so much unforgettable food into so little space is a question for the ages. Go for the thrilling cheese selection, stay for the ever-changing array of fresh, affordable and original prepared foods.

## **Wine geek-ery**

Advancing technology is changing the way Minnesota restaurants store and serve wine. Case in point: the house red and white (Francis Ford Coppola's Rossa and Bianco) at **Sopranos Italian Kitchen** in St. Louis Park are pulled, beer-like, off a pair of showy taps and into carafes, using a system in which nitrogen prevents the large stores of wine from oxidizing. "We're selling an inordinate amount of it," said general manager Billy Ellis.

## **Flour power**

Now that it has made the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota's 2011 list of the state's 10 most endangered historic places, all eyes will hopefully fall upon the **Pillsbury "A" Mill** complex. And that's where they belong, smack dab on its centerpiece, a seven-story limestone fortress noteworthy for the gigantic white marble "A" embedded into the facade facing St. Anthony Falls. The building is easily the most enduring symbol of Minneapolis' proud role as the flour milling capital of the world, a title the city held from 1880 to 1930. Proposals for its re-use come and go. The latest: converting the 130-year-old landmark into apartments.

## **Pedal power**

With gas prices hovering near \$4 a gallon, Minneapolitans should thank their civic forefathers for developing one of the nation's most extensive bike path networks, and the Park & Recreation Board for recruiting three casual (and bicycle-friendly) indoor-outdoor dining destinations -- **Sea Salt Eatery** in Minnehaha Park, **Tin Fish** at Lake Calhoun and newcomer **Bread & Pickle** at Lake Harriet -- into some of the city's most widely visited parks. More where they came from, please.

## **Design smarts**

**Jim Smart** has been designing restaurants for 31 years, lending his sharp eye to everything from Dairy Queen franchises in Asia and the Middle East to a quartet of eye-catching Lyn-Lake properties, including

his most recent triumph, the dramatic Heidi's (pictured). "Designing restaurants is as much theater as anything else," said Smart, a former set designer. Smart's design impulse is motivated by challenge. "Anyone can make a place look like a million bucks if you have a million bucks," he said. "But if you've only got \$50,000, you've really got to be creative, and that's what I like best."

### **Food art**

There are many food-related paintings on display in the galleries at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, including Soutine's primal "Carcass of Beef" and Leger's stylized "Le Petit Dejeuner." But nothing tops the happy scene of John Singer Sargent's "**The Birthday Party**." Seeing the 1887 depiction of a celebratory French family inspires cake-baking (and candle-blowing). For a sure-to-please birthday cake recipe, go to [startribune.com/taste](http://startribune.com/taste).

### **Gopher State host gift**

Don't show up at friends' cabins empty-handed. Instead, have this flour-sack souvenir towel (from **Red and White Kitchen Co.**) wrapped, packed and labeled "host gift." What better way to say "Land of 10,000 Lakes" than a colorful, vintage print celebrating the state's centennial?

### **French flair**

Street food is all the rage these days, but it doesn't necessarily have to come out of a truck. Witness the cute, ultra-portable **Meritage crêpe stand**, where sweet and savory get equal billing, and the downtown St. Paul charm-o-meter pops up another peg.

### **Impromptu dinner**

At Crema Cafe, chef/co-owner Ron Siron one-ups the lowly Sloppy Joe, fortifying the traditional ground beef delicacy with pork and heaping his secret concoction -- which he modestly calls a **Sloppy Ron** -- into a buttered and toasted bun. It's a bargain at \$7.95, and a guilty pleasure.

### **Grillmaster**

Repeat after us: Row-bah-tah. At the instantly popular Masu, chef Tim McKee is making superb use of the Japanese charcoal-fired grill known as **robata**, using its intense heat to burnish heaps of flavor into sardines, scallops, bacon-wrapped tofu, eggplant and other treats. A word of advice: Make a reservation.

### **Oink, oink**

Here's how irresistible the **bacon** is in the new deli case at Corner Table: One hickory-smoked whiff is enough to turn a lifelong vegan into a pork freak. This is one unapologetically fatty bacon. "No one is ever going to use adjectives like 'lean' with my bacon" said chef/owner Scott Pampuch, sounding as if he may have missed his true calling as a butcher.

**END**