

ROUTES

Midwestern Charm

An Ohio road trip leads to some of the country's best Eastern European fare—and more

BY JANE AND MICHAEL STERN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD COLEMAN

WE LOVE DRIVING AROUND Northeast Ohio. Sure, there are prettier places on the planet, but a road trip from the shores of Lake Erie around Cleveland south to Rubber City (a.k.a. Akron) and Canton is, in our opinion, one of the finest a food lover can take in all of America. Here's why: having spent the past 30 years seeking out great meals across the country for our *Roadfood* books, we've watched way too many local traditions and ethnic enclaves slip away. Not in this part of Ohio, though, where the spectacularly good cooking reflects many of the local inhabitants' Central and Eastern European roots.

A century ago, 75 percent of Cleveland's residents were either foreign-born or first-generation Americans; the city boasted the largest urban Slovak population outside of Slovakia and the largest community of Hungarians outside of Budapest. Nowadays, Cleveland is more mixed, and that has worked to the local food culture's advantage. On our most recent trip to the area, in May, we encountered not only fabulous old-world specialties, like homemade smoked meats and Serbian-style fried chicken, but also stand-out soul food, an unforgettable Midwestern church supper, and the best ice cream sundae this side of Iowa.

It's a feat to get out of Cleveland with any appetite at all if you spend time grazing around the city's sprawling, century-old West Side Market, where temptations include the Westside Market Cafe's fried fresh walleye sandwich and Reilly Irish Bakery's triple-chocolate, six-pint Guinness Stout cake, not to mention a plethora of fresh produce, stone-hearth breads, and German kuchen (fruit- and

cheese-filled pastries). Another challenge to leaving Cleveland hungry is the Polish Boy, a local soul food sandwich comprising a hot dog bun piled high with kielbasa, french fries, and coleslaw and slathered with a spicy barbecue sauce. (Try the version at Hot Sauce Williams on Carnegie Avenue.) Then there's the luscious *dobos torta*, eight layers of sponge cake and chocolate buttercream covered in caramel, at Balaton Restaurant.

We could have happily spent another few days eating our way through C-town, but the rest of our tasty route beckoned. Just south of Cleveland, in the city of Parma, we discovered a stretch of stores known as Ukrainian Village; it looks like any broad, well-kept Midwestern street until you spot the traditional pastries in the window at Perla Homemade Delights. Perla's sweet cabbage pierogi are legendary, but for those of us demanding instant, sugary gratification, a couple of tables provide space to eat a lovely lady lock (cream-filled puff pastry horn) or sweet nut rolls. Just up the block, we stopped into State Meats butcher shop, where customers line up for the kishka (blood sausage), garlic bologna, and hams that are smoked in the back. We made ourselves a dashboard feast with proprietor George Salo's smokeys (thin, chewy, garlic-packed salami sticks) and vividly spiced hot kielbasa sandwiches stuffed with homemade sauerkraut.

For a sit-down meal that showcases Parma's old-world character, there's no better place than the Little Polish Diner—assuming you can find a place to sit down. With seats for 22, six of them counter stools, the "Little" in its name is no lie. Neither is the "Polish." "Our food is just like mom used to make," the menu advises. We try not to be



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too resentful for having grown up with moms whose cooking couldn't hold a candle to the special combination plate, which is crowded with a crisp breaded pork chop, stuffed cabbage glistening with sweet-tart tomato sauce, a big serving of *bigos* (pork and sauerkraut stew), and mashed potatoes.

Instead of following Interstate 77 south toward Akron, we took Olde Route 8, also known as the Akron–Cleveland Road, and found another Polish gem, Babushka's Kitchen, where the slogan is "Revive your memories and reunite your family." For those of us just passing through, Babushka's can be hugely frustrating. There are so many good things to eat that even a party of four in which each person orders something different will miss out on house specialties. Do you start with *czernina* soup, that magical sweet-and-sour brew made with duck blood, prunes, and handmade dumplings? Or chicken soup with long, pillowy egg noodles? (See page 33 for a recipe.) Or stuffed cabbage soup? Or tomato dumpling soup? Of course you must have pierogi, but these are so large that two make a meal. Do you have them filled with potato and cheddar? Roasted sauerkraut? Sweet, dry cottage cheese? Among Babushka's special dinners, we highly recommend the Warsaw, a heap of heartrendingly tender roast pork mixed with grilled onions, sauerkraut, and gravy, all sandwiched between two

Top row, from left: Balaton's *dobos torta*; a waiter at Cathedral Buffet; stuffed cabbage at Babushka's Kitchen. Second row: Cathedral's buffet; watermelon at West Side Market; Little Polish Diner. Third row: Taggarts; Barberton chicken, fries, and hot sauce at Belgrade Gardens; a manager at Hot Sauce Williams. Fourth row: George Salo with kielbasa at State Meats; at West Side Market; chicken noodle soup (see page 33 for a recipe) at Babushka's Kitchen.

broad potato pancakes with a crown of sour cream. For dessert: fragile, buttery, fruit-filled pastries called *kolaczki*.

Not all the good things to eat in these parts are Mitteleuropean; if you stop at Cathedral Buffet in Cuyahoga Falls, the fare is steadfastly Middle American. For all of \$7, we helped ourselves to an awe-inspiring multi-

room buffet, where the cheerfully named "Talk-of-the-Town" salad bar is arrayed with not only the usual lettuce and fixings but also a shimmering many-hued Jell-O mold, butterscotch pudding, and chocolate ambrosia with cream-filled cookie pieces. Turkey Tetrazzini, roasted chicken, and fruit cocktail cake (with canned fruit cocktail baked inside) are home ec masterpieces. Most customers come seeking lunch but also religious inspiration at the Ernest Angley Ministries across the parking lot, for which the buffet is a 1,000-seat mess hall. On our way out, we stepped into the eatery's basement and paid a dollar to see the Life of Christ as depicted in Barbie doll-scale dioramas.

South of Cuyahoga Falls, in Akron, there are two regional specialties that are not to be missed: deep-fried sauerkraut balls and Barberton chicken. The former, tiny tangles of moist sauerkraut and pork, deep-fried to a crisp, you can find everywhere from local restaurants to supermarket deli cases. The latter is a fried chicken dinner (named after the Akron suburb where it was invented) that's always served with an addictive spicy tomato-chile-rice dish called either "hot rice" or, confusingly, "hot sauce." Fried in lard, Barberton chicken is distinguished by the savory flavor of its crisp, bread crumb-coated crust; it also differs from other versions of fried chicken in that the pieces include not only wings, breasts, drumsticks, and thighs but also the seldom-used backs. Legend has it that the dish was created by the original owners of the Barberton restaurant Belgrade Gardens, based on a recipe from their native Serbia, during the Great Depression; the use of the back allowed one bird to yield more pieces, and it also offered more surface area for that wonderful crunchy coating. Requisite side dishes include coleslaw, french fries, and always a bowl of the famous hot rice, recipes for which have been batted around in local newspaper food columns for decades. Belgrade Gardens and other local restaurants like White House Chicken, DeVore's Hopocan Gardens, and Milich's Village Inn all have devotees who swear their place's chicken and hot rice are the best. (We're not taking sides.)

Barberton is also home to Al's Corner

Restaurant, which serves an impressive workman's lunch on disposable plates. Mild Slovene sausage and pepper-garlic Hungarian sausage come from the owner's own butcher counter at Al's Quality Market, a half-block away. For a side dish, the only reason not to order Al's mashed potatoes topped with a paprika-spiced gravy would be to concentrate on the *haluski*, a butter-rich combination of chewy little *spaetzle* (dumplings) and braised cabbage.

As reporters devoted to the whole truth, we would be negligent not to tell you about the hot fudge sundaes on the other side of Akron, in Canton, at a 1920s-era restaurant and ice cream parlor called Taggarts. Thin, silky house-made chocolate syrup is blended with vanilla ice cream to create a swirly duet that is just sweet enough. What's more, as you spoon into the tulip glass, you'll dislodge a cascade of pecans. It's the nuts that assure this sundae's place in the pantheon; they are salty and roasted to an ecstatic crunch. We couldn't imagine a better way to end our movable feast through the region. 

CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP

SERVES 8-10

The recipe for this hearty soup (pictured on page 31) comes from Babushka's Kitchen.

- 2 cups flour, sifted, plus more
- 1/2 tsp. kosher salt, plus more to taste
- 2 eggs, plus 1 yolk
- 8 cups chicken stock
- 2 tsp. dried sage
- 1 1/2 tsp. dried thyme
- 1 1/2 tsp. fennel seeds
- 5 whole black peppercorns

- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 ribs celery, cut into 2" pieces
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into 2" pieces
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 dried bay leaf
- 1 3 1/2-lb. chicken, cut into 8 pieces
- 2 tbsp. minced flat-leaf parsley
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 Make the noodles: Combine flour and salt in a bowl. Make a well in center; add eggs, yolk, and 1 tbsp. water. Using a fork, mix flour into eggs to form a dough. Transfer dough to a lightly floured surface; knead until smooth, 5-6 minutes. Divide dough into 4 portions and cover with plastic wrap; set aside.

2 In a large pot, combine stock, sage, thyme, fennel, peppercorns, garlic, celery, carrots, onions, bay leaf, chicken, and 2 cups water. Bring to a boil; reduce to medium-low. Simmer, skimming off fat, for 1 hour.

3 Put chicken on a plate. Strain soup through a fine strainer into a large pot; place celery and carrots in a bowl. Discard remaining solids. Remove and discard chicken skin and bones. Chop chicken, celery, and carrots into bite-size pieces; transfer to soup.

4 Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Working with one dough portion at a time, lightly flour and roll out to 1/16" thickness. Cut dough into 1/4"-wide noodles; transfer to floured baking sheet. Repeat with remaining dough. Shake excess flour off noodles; boil until tender, 8-10 minutes. Drain noodles; transfer to soup. Stir in parsley; season with salt and pepper. 

THE PANTRY, page 115: *Information on visiting the restaurants and markets of Northeast Ohio.*