

VOICE COLUMN – Culinary quests

By Josh Albrecht

}Food and restaurant offerings help to draw visitors

The history of Rockford is steeped in artisans and craftsmen who created an illustrious manufacturing-focused downtown that grew to be one of the largest cities in Illinois. That culture of creation has evolved over the years, and today the downtown is transforming into an entertainment hub that has culinary craftsmen plying their trade along the banks of the Rock River.

Of course, our culinary masters are not limited to just downtown Rockford. The entire region is bulging with plenty of great foodie options to quench your thirst and your appetite. And this is a good thing as recent industry reports show that travelers are putting more and more emphasis on what and where they eat while traveling.

A whopping 88 percent of travelers say that food and restaurants are a defining part of the brand for destinations they consider. And, nearly 33 percent of money spent while traveling will be on food. Taking that one step further, according to the American Culinary Travel Report, 50 percent of travelers want a unique dining experience as well. None of this is surprising as the amount of food and travel related television shows continues to rise.

In promoting the Rockford region, the RACVB loves to highlight our unique dining options. We often showcase our three local breweries -- Carlyle Brewing Co., Pig Minds Brewing Co. and Prairie Street Brewing Company -- as fantastic places to try beers that you can only get here. Or, when you are thinking of a warmer drink, our coffee shops offer varied and flavorful options that are truly Real. Original. Rockford drinks.

Many of us might take for granted some of the long standing restaurants like Lino's or the Stockholm Inn that have pleased generations of Rockfordians, so you might be surprised to hear that when we host guests from around the world, they are always excited by these traditional restaurants that offer a taste of our Rockford culture.

There is art in a well-crafted meal. RACVB talked with several of our popular and successful local chefs in our visitors guide as we wanted to see the Rockford culinary scene through their eyes. Chefs like Al Castrogiovanni of Alchemy and Giovanni's, Paul Sletton of Abreo and Social and Josef Schwaiger of Josef Steakhouse & Oyster Bar, all shared their stories on what influenced their dishes. Each one gave unique insight from their own experiences but each also praised the level of culinary craftsmanship in Rockford. Small neighborhood restaurants like Zammuto's or Dandy Donuts get praise right alongside more upscale restaurants like Octane or GreenFire.

So, what do you recommend for travelers? What restaurants help to define our region to you? Is it our local fast food giant Beef-A-Roo? Is it your favorite pizza joint (Capri or Pino's on Main) that gets the cheese and toppings just right? What about farm to table favorites like Abreo or The Wild Rhubarb?

Any way you slice it, food is king and Rockford has a bounty to please any palette. Discover your new favorite restaurant at www.gorockford.com/restaurants/