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Historic, Ethnic, Modern & Delicious: Dining in Kansas

2015, Kansas...No longer is dining an afterthought when travelers choose a destination. More and more these days, independent restaurants and specialty food establishments are the *destination*. Kansas dining, more than 150 years in the making, is making it easy to find the perfect culinary experience.

On West Main in Council Grove, the Hays House is famous as the oldest continuously operated restaurant west of the Mississippi River. Town founder Seth Hays, a grandson of Daniel Boone, opened the Hays House in 1857. Over the years, the Hays House has been a gathering place for church services, court trials, bawdy theatricals and political speeches. Among its early patrons were George A. Custer and Jesse James. Today it is the home of fantastic fare. Patrons will be rewarded nicely for ordering the marinated brisket, Beulah's Ham, the crispy chicken fried in cast-iron skillets, or the fresh peach pie topped with real cream.

Also in Hays, not much has changed at Al's Chickenette, a locally famous chicken café, since it opened in 1949. The location, a one-story building and retro neon sign blinking out front have all stayed the same. But it's what's inside that counts: crispy chicken fried in cast-iron skillets and served with mashed potatoes and homemade gravy. Diners in the no-frills eatery sit in booths and at tables ringed by a collection of ceramic chickens. If you're in a hurry, grab takeout.

In Wilson, the Czech Capital of Kansas, culinary travelers should consider stopping at Made From Scratch, which offers some of the best chicken fried steak, as well as homemade bierocks, pies, jam, jellies, breakfast rolls and sandwiches. The site of political gatherings, Chamber of Commerce breakfasts and various meetings, Al's Bar & Grill serves up famous French fries, BBQ ribs, broasted chicken, and traditional grilled favorites.

In Lenexa (near Kansas City) you should seek Renee Kelly's Harvest, a farm to table restaurant serving local fare in a historic castle, owned by Renee Kelly. Chef Kelly is passionate about supporting local farmers who grow food with sustainable practices. The menu changes often and reflects the seasons of Kansas City.

Breakfast in the college town of Lawrence is known best for Wheatfields and Great Harvest Bakery's. The Free State Brewery makes the best handcrafted beer in the Midwest, and Downtown, Teller's offers delicious Italian fare in what was once an historic bank building.

In Newton, The Breadbasket attracts droves of diners who line up for the Friday and Saturday night buffets with zwieback and verenika. Many are descendants of the German Mennonites who settled there more than a century ago in Newton. Zwieback (a double-decked roll) and verenika (noodle dough stuffed with seasoned, dry-curd cottage cheese) were staples back when homesteaders were trying to tame the Kansas prairie. Weekdays, the lunchtime crowd chooses among soups, sandwiches and a salad bar. Everyone saves room for pie and other desserts baked fresh daily.

Regularly voted the best hamburger joint in northeastern Kansas, BoBo's Drive In in Topeka is a curbside classic, serving burgers, shakes and memories since 1948. Car hops hustle out with an endless procession of hand-breaded onion rings, cheeseburgers, shakes and homemade apple pie. Coney dogs come topped with thick chili.

By the time the waitress finishes loading your table with platters at the Brookville Hotel in Abilene, there's not much table surface left. Served by smiling women in starched blue uniforms and white aprons, the feast includes heaping bowls of cream-style corn, silky mashed potatoes, coleslaw and warm biscuits with butter and preserves. The centerpiece, of course, is the Brookville's famous crisp, juicy pan-fried chicken. Family-style chicken dinners have been the starring – and only – menu item for 90 of the 135 years since the restaurant opened its doors in tiny Brookville. In 2001, the Brookville Hotel relocated to a new building 40 miles east along I-70 in Abilene. But the food hasn't changed a bit!

Jim's Steak House in Pittsburg serves a beefy menu highlighting sirloin tips at this classic steak house 120 miles south of Kansas City. Served with grilled onions and mushrooms, the one-inch sirloin bites are everyone's favorite; in fact, 27,000 orders are served each year! Filets finish a close second. Hand-cut french fries or homemade onion rings round out most orders. Owner Leroy Castagno, whose dad, Jim, started the business in 1938, dry-ages his beef and cuts steaks daily.

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