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# Finger (Lakes) Food

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

THE woman at the [ice cream](#) stand in [Seneca Falls](#), N.Y., was such a pro. She loaded my cone with drifts of frozen custard, made change and gave me directions to a barbecued chicken stand all without a blink.

“You go over the bridge, take a right and head out of town. It’s by the Mennonite market,” she said, handing over a chocolate swirl. “The lady with the chicken is right there on your left.”

In a hunt for the iconic foods of central New York, I learned that a lot of the directions are like that.

“Stop at the first gas station or market and ask if Bob’s Barbecue is still around,” advised a contributor to the Chowhound Web site. A hotel clerk was even more vague when I needed help finding a fish fry restaurant.

“Just drive until you see the lake,” she said.

For someone like me, nothing could have been more freeing. Although people who need a precise travel plan might go hungry using my approach, I discovered that winding through central New York armed with a few strong culinary guideposts and a willingness to risk lunch on vague directions was a great way to spend a weekend.

My focus was an area roughly bounded by the [Ithaca-Syracuse-Rochester](#) triangle, with the [Finger Lakes](#) making up the juicy center. In addition to securing a couple of motel reservations and finding a good map, I had to find out what to call the region.

“It depends on who you talk to,” said Michael Welch, a chef and publisher of the new Edible Finger Lakes magazine, one of about four dozen regional Edible magazines around the country. “A lot of people consider Syracuse an anchor of the Finger Lakes, but Syracuse people will call it central New York. If you live in Ithaca, you probably call it the Finger Lakes.”

Zoe Becker, a Finger Lakes native and Mr. Welch's wife, edits *Edible Finger Lakes*, which put out its first issue this spring. They both think central New York is having a golden culinary moment, with an abundance of home cooks and restaurant chefs who know how to coax the best from the local cheese, produce and fish. "It's just a really great place to eat right now," Mr. Welch said

Some culinary enthusiasts might decide to treat a visit here like a trip to a mini-[Napa Valley](#), searching for a good bottle among the 100 or so [wineries](#) and sampling the efforts of culinary school graduates at fancy lakeside restaurants.

Conversely, the truly possessed road food purist might push farther east to [Buffalo](#), the hypocenter of the deep-fried, spicy chicken wing, or swing over to Rochester for a garbage plate (a heap of diner foods, varying by availability and whim) or a pale but spicy sausage called a white hot.

I fell into neither of those categories. I wanted a lazy tour that centered on discovering the food people who move from the region crave. I wanted dishes that would sustain me through days devoted to outdoor recreation followed by late-sunset summer evenings.

I wanted [Cornell](#) chicken.

At roadside stands, firefighter fund-raisers and a handful of restaurants, Cornell chicken — also known as Baker's chicken — reigns supreme. Robert Baker, an animal science professor, brought the recipe with him when he joined the Cornell University faculty in 1957 on a mission to promote chicken consumption. Mr. Baker invented the process for the frozen chicken nugget, which would not become popular for a few more decades. His marinade for barbecued chicken was a more immediate hit.

After a good, long dunk in cider vinegar, oil and poultry seasoning bound together with an egg, half chickens are laid out on screens set over cinderblock barbecue pits filled with hot charcoal briquettes. The result is a bronze-skinned, salty [bird](#) that, in the versions I tried, ranged from succulent to as dry as a firefighter's boot.

Although Mr. Baker died in 2006, his family still runs Baker's Chicken Shack at the [New York State](#) Fair in Syracuse — this year's fair began Thursday and runs through Labor Day, if you want to drop by.

I found Cornell chicken in many of the pocket towns near Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, and on the way back to New York, I grabbed one more example at Jim's BBQ in Candor, a town tucked alongside Route 96, a sleepy little country highway. For \$4.50 and a little extra for a cream soda, you can dig into a foam box filled with a half a chicken cooked over a huge, permanent cinderblock pit built out behind a little trailer.

Wherever you get your chicken, the odds are you'll have the opportunity to order salt potatoes on the side. If you do, take advantage. The salt potato is a humble way to eat a little of the region's history, which is built in large part on the salt marshes around Syracuse. Salt potatoes are nothing more than small potatoes boiled in an extra salty brine and served in a pool of melted butter (pass on the margarine-drenched versions).

Of course, fans of the barbecue at Dinosaur, a restaurant downtown that has since branched out to Rochester and Harlem, insist it is Syracuse's real culinary legacy. A visitor should never argue barbecue with the locals, so I won't. But I can say the salt potatoes at Dinosaur were the best example I had all weekend.

They weren't the first, however. Those came at Sharkey's in Binghamton, which travelers from [New York City](#) will most likely pass through on their way north.

For reasons of geography, the bar's spiedie sandwich was at the top of my food list. I figured if marijuana is the gateway drug, the spiedie is the gateway food to central New York.

It's easy to see why this simple \$3.50 sandwich is a popular bar food. Pork cubes (or, in many cases, chicken) take a long bath in vinegar, olive oil and spices and then get threaded onto a skewer for grilling. The juicy result is served hot on a slice of Italian bread.

As I pondered whether pirogi and salt potatoes would be side dish overkill, the waitress explained that the sandwich got its name because the owner needed to find something "speedy" to feed factory workers. As a rule, food origin stories that involve funny twists on spellings are usually not true. In this case, the name most likely comes from the Italian word spiedo, which means spit-roasted.

After looping north from Binghamton to Syracuse on a gorgeous stretch of

Interstate 81, I dropped into the Finger Lakes for another regional classic, the fish fry.

People pull plenty of landlocked salmon, trout and bass from the area lakes, and that is probably why the fish fry became such an enduring way to eat. But most restaurant fish fries rely on East Coast haddock and scrod, which is young haddock or cod, depending on whom you are talking to. One of them is Doug's Fish Fry in [Skaneateles](#) (pronounced skinny-AT-las), a tiny, 125-year-old resort village that sits at the top of the 16-mile-long lake of the same name.

I arrived just after Doug's opened for the day, and the gods of the deep-fat fryer were smiling on me. The peanut oil was clean and hot, the line was short and the fish was fresh. A tender filet with a crunchy fried coat was so big it hung over the edges of a cardboard plate, crowding out the pile of perfect hand-battered onion rings.

After a meal like that, one might understandably crave vegetables. Along the two-lane roads that ribbon around the lakes, farm stands pop up with more regularity than ice cream stands (which is saying a lot in this ice cream-obsessed region). I found good luck driving parts of Highway 414, particularly south near Watkins Glen where the road rises up and elevated views of the lake make you understand why the phrase "picture perfect" was invented.

After the early season berries fade, the stands are filled with a summer's worth of squash, tomatoes and peppers. Always in the late summer there is sweet corn, and lots of it. And later, apples everywhere. For a sweet taste of fresh apple juices and seasonal fruit, it's worth swinging by the Red Jacket Orchards store in Geneva. Nothing could have cooled me off better than that icy jug of Joe's Summer Blend, a mix of lemon and apple juice.

The Ithaca Farmers Market offers a produce slam dunk. On the weekends, macrobiotic eaters mingle with skilled chefs along the covered wooden walkways. Although there are more photographers and candlemakers than a serious foodie might want, the market is a good place to learn about the intricacies of local honey gathering and horse-powered farming techniques.

Of course, such dietary purity deserves a reward, and for many people in the region that means ice cream.

The Cornell Dairy Bar is a short drive from the farmers' market. Inside the classroom-turned-ice cream parlor, students from the food science

department devise caloric ways to use milk from the university herd. Usually, two dozen flavors are available.

The students' ice cream is good, but an even better cone is a short drive north to the quiet little Cayuga Lake Creamery, where the small-batch ice cream is particularly smooth, the coffee is from a local roaster and the directions are simple: Just head toward [Interlaken](#) and drive until you get to the lake.

## MORE INFORMATION

If you'd like to buy fresh local produce, shop at the Ithaca Farmers Market, Saturdays and Sundays at Steamboat Landing, [www.ithacamarket.com/home.php](http://www.ithacamarket.com/home.php) (on Tuesdays, it moves to Dewitt Park). Or find a farm stand: check lists at [www.ilovethefingerlakes.com/basics/agriculture-farmstands-list.htm](http://www.ilovethefingerlakes.com/basics/agriculture-farmstands-list.htm) and at [www.fingerlakes.org/agriculture/agricult\\_farm.htm](http://www.fingerlakes.org/agriculture/agricult_farm.htm).

To sample regional foods at restaurants, some suggestions:

[Cornell](#) chicken: Jim's BBQ, 20 Foundry Street, Candor; (607) 659-4181. Or, on Fridays only, outside Sauder's Market and Store, 2146 River Road, [Seneca Falls](#); (315) 568-2673.

Salt potatoes: Try them with excellent brisket at Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, 246 West Willow Street, [Syracuse](#); (315) 476-4937.

Spiedie sandwiches: Sharkey's Restaurant, 56 Glenwood Avenue, Binghamton; (607) 729-9201.

Fish fry: Doug's Fish Fry, 8 [Jordan](#) Street, [Skaneateles](#); (315) 685-3288.

Local fruit and juice: Red Jacket Orchards Fruit Outlet, 957 Route 5/20 (Canandaigua Road), [Geneva](#); (315) 781-2749.

Locally made [ice cream](#): Cornell Dairy Bar, Stocking Hall, Cornell University, Tower Road at Judd Falls Road, [Ithaca](#); (607) 255-3272. Or the Cayuga Lake Creamery, 8421 Route 89, [Interlaken](#); (607) 532-9492.

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