

February/March 2025

W. Our Wisconsin





LET'S HIT THE ROAD!

Putting Pep in Our Step

Come along and revisit an American pioneer plus see the Mighty Mississippi and more on Wisconsin's west coast.

Editor's Note: Longtime readers will recall this regular travelogue that highlights hidden gems in Wisconsin. We're glad to bring it back with empty-nesters Julie and Gary Gilkay as our guides! Join them as they discover Trempealeau, Buffalo and Pepin counties.

By Julie Gilkay, Managing Editor

YOU KNOW it's going to be a good day when pie is involved. And when there's pie in the morning *and* in the afternoon, it's absolutely exceptional, no matter how you slice it.

A road trip to the western part of the state exploring Trempealeau, Buffalo and Pepin counties proved just that. Doubling up on delicious desserts while with my sweetie pie...mmm, mmm and mmm!

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. Let's put this travelogue in drive and get into gear.

Eat Like a Norwegian

From our Fox Cities home, my husband, Gary, and I headed west on U.S. 10 to begin a day of discovery. Before we even backed out of the driveway, I knew exactly where our first stop was going to be: Norske Nook in Osseo.

Growing up in Neillsville, my Norwegian dad was quite familiar with the restaurant and bakery founded by Helen Myhre in 1973. At the start of my freshman

year at UW-Eau Claire, he introduced me to the irresistible desserts after making it a rest stop on our way to school from our home in Fond du Lac.

It was good to be back!

The decision-making, however, hadn't gotten any easier. There were 31 varieties of pies available that day, like chocolate mousse and sour cream raisin meringue—my dad's all-time favorite.

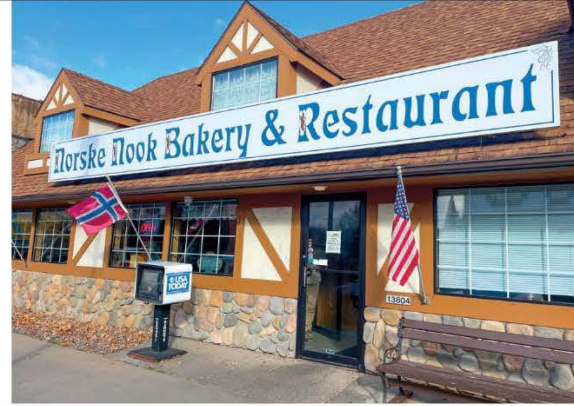
While the ownership has changed, the time-honored recipes and made-from-scratch pies haven't.

More than a half century later, the focus remains on home-cooked meals, traditional lefse and award-winning pies that remind diners of Grandma's cooking.

After loading up on a piece of lingonberry sour cream and apple cranberry served warm—and enjoying every bite—Gary and I were hungry for some activity.

Thankfully, Mirror Lake Park in Mondovi was only 30 minutes away. There, we took a peaceful stroll on the path along the western side of the picturesque lake. Steps away on the eastern side of the lake we came across a solar-powered bench to

PUT A FORK IN IT. Julie Gilkay gets ready to dig into a slice of lingonberry sour cream pie at Norske Nook (top) in Osseo. In Mondovi, a Mirror Lake Park statue stands in honor "of our nation's defenders". Walkers can sit on a solar-powered bench while charging phones.



recharge our batteries and our phones!

Driving west on Highway 37, we headed to Alma (population 732), the county seat of Buffalo County. The 30-minute ride on the winding road provided views of the Buffalo River and made for some exceptional eagle spotting.

Bluffing Our Way

A nod to the quaint city's heritage was all around us. Settled in the 1840s by Swiss woodcutters providing fuel for steamboats, Alma honors its legacy by displaying Swiss flags along Main Street.

At the north end of the city, we climbed the observation platform and watched for any barges traveling the river and passing through Lock & Dam #4.

While it was quiet on the water, save for a few fishing boats, we noticed posters with loads of information. We walked away with this fact: One 15-barge tow has the capacity of 1,050 large tractor trailers.

We also learned Alma is known for its "stair-step streets". The staircases were originally built to connect Main and Second streets with the intention they'd be turned into roads as the community developed. That plan hit a roadblock once it was determined the grade was too steep to construct safe roads.

Rather than taking the hiking trail that starts on Second Street, we opted to drive to the 500-foot river bluffs and Buena Vista Park via County Road E.

There, we took in panoramic views overlooking the Mississippi River and the historic downtown while munching on apples and sandwiches we packed. It's the perfect spot for a picnic and to marvel at the immensity of the majestic river.

On our way out of the park, we discov-



LOOKING GOOD, MINNESOTA. Alma's Buena Vista Park provides spectacular views of the Mississippi River and Wisconsin's neighbor. An American Legion sign pays tribute to downtown Lock & Dam #4. Perched atop the bluffs, Danzinger Vineyards offers 12 varietals and its own notable scenery. Nelson Cheese Factory and Creamery is a tasty stop on the Great River Road.





ered Danzinger Vineyards. With the incredible views it provides from its sipping room and the outdoor patio, I'm so glad we did!

The 18-acre vineyard offers estate-grown wines with catchy names like Mississippi Mist, Bluff Top Breeze and Twilight Delight. Soaking up the stunning scenery while savoring a glass of Sunset Ridge was a sweet surprise!

After our light lunch and wine, we were ready for an afternoon snack...and for round two.

Twice as Nice

From Alma, we hopped on the Wisconsin Great River Road and went north. Traveling 250 miles along the Mississippi and through 33 historic riverside communities, it is Wisconsin's portion of the 10-state Great River Road National Scenic Byway.

After getting sidetracked and making a quick stop at the adorable and wildly popular Nelson Cheese Factory and Creamery, we had come to our destination—charming Stockholm. Steeped in Swedish roots, the village has a population of about 80 and is located on the banks of Lake Pepin.

Lake Pepin, at around 2 miles wide, is the widest navigable portion of the Mighty Mississippi.

At the heart of downtown in a 120-year-old building is the bustling Stockholm Pie & General Store. In June 2024, it was named the No. 1 pie shop in America by *USA Today*.

There was only one way to find out why. A pie flight! I convinced myself it was the right decision because choosing

four options was much easier than picking just one. And with 20-plus varieties available on the weekends, there's a whole lot of temptation.

We enlisted co-owner Alan Nugent's help and landed on apple, cherry, lingonberry lemon and sour cream raisin. With one bite, it was easy to see what the fuss is all about. Alan confides that the secret is in the crust.

"The reader's choice award amplified things," he says. "But it was astonishingly busy before that."

Established in 2008, Stockholm Pie got its start after Alan discovered his older sister Janet Garrison, "Her Pieness", could bake. At a dinner in 2004, Janet served homemade apple dumplings for dessert.

"These are so good, we could sell them," Alan recalls saying.

And so began a journey that would lead Alan, who had just bought the 8,000-

"Choosing four pie options was easier than picking just one..."

square-foot building, to dedicate a 400-square-foot slice of it to the pie endeavor. Within weeks, lines were out the door.

Ultimately, Alan gave up his design business and art gallery, built a food production space upstairs and dedicated the entire building to the pie shop, Wisconsin marketplace and general store.

Every month they hold special events



THEY'RE TOPS. Expect a line when stopping at Stockholm Pie & General Store, co-owned by Alan Nugent (on left in top photo) and Steve Grams. You won't mind when you try offerings like cherry, sour cream raisin, apple and lingonberry lemon. Steamboats once docked in the harbor where Pepin Marina was built.

like pie pairings, flights and classes. On the busiest weekend of the year, which falls during peak color season in October, they'll make 550 pies and serve 700 to 1,000 customers, up from the normal of about 500.

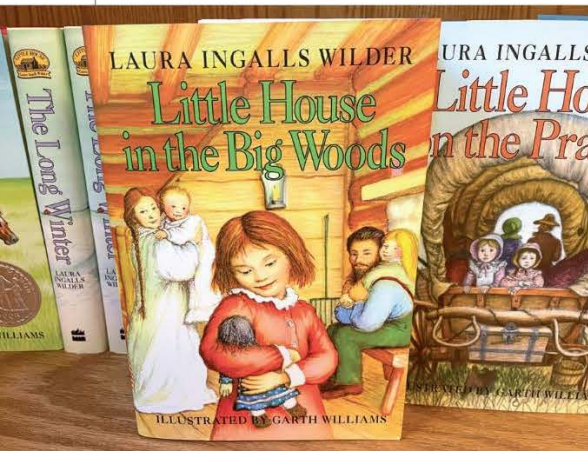
"Pie is one thing everyone loves and nearly no one makes anymore," Alan says.

Barrel of Fun

With our bellies full, we once again set out on the Wisconsin Great River Road—south this time—to Pepin to check out the marina. It was late in the day and windy, so we had the place to ourselves to watch the setting sun.

By now we were ready for dinner, so we walked over to the Pickle Factory. Built on the shores of Lake Pepin in the

IT'S DILL-ICIOUS! The Pickle Factory restaurant sits on the shores of Lake Pepin, and its outdoor seating has waterfront views. It got its start in the 1900s as Pepin Pickling Company.



PIONEER DAYS. Laura Ingalls Wilder was born in Pepin. Her book *Little House in the Big Woods* details her time in Wisconsin. A replica log cabin offers self-guided tours. Below: Museum manager Carey Worthy stands in front of a quilt that belonged to the author.

early 1900s, the Pepin Pickling Company produced several varieties of pickles and sauerkraut until the operation moved to Minnesota. Changes of ownership and ventures followed. It's now a restaurant and music venue with a basement bar and two-level outdoor patio.

Wanting to relish the restaurant's history, I picked the Pickle Factory Signature Flatbread featuring a three-cheese blend, dill spread, pickles and Canadian bacon with a side of fried pickle spears, of course. There's also pickle beer!

Settling In

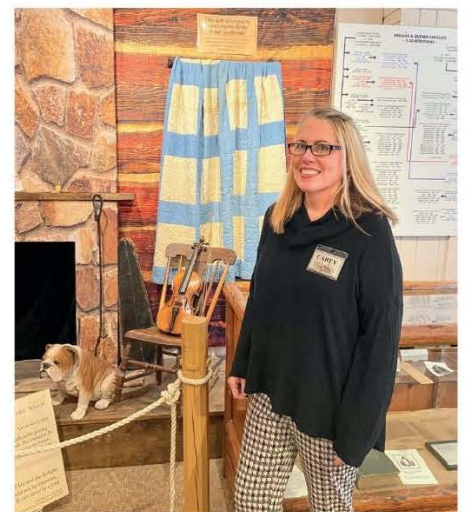
No trip to Pepin, the birthplace of Laura Ingalls Wilder, is complete without a visit to the museum devoted to the American

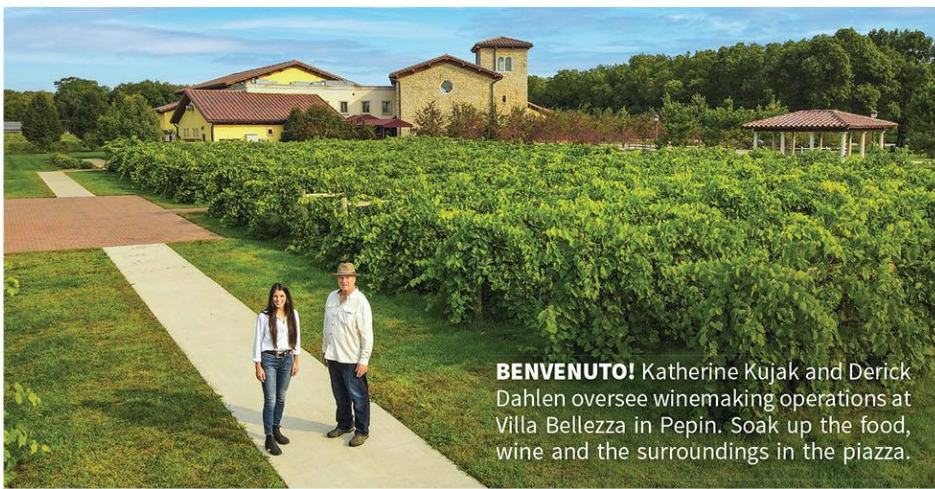
pioneer and author. In fact, it was the reason for our trip and how we started our second day on Wisconsin's west coast.

As a youngster, I was enthralled with the *Little House* book series and the *Little House on the Prairie* TV show, which debuted 50 years ago in September 1974. I still have the prairie bonnet my mom bought for me, which I wore when I dressed up as Laura for Halloween one year.

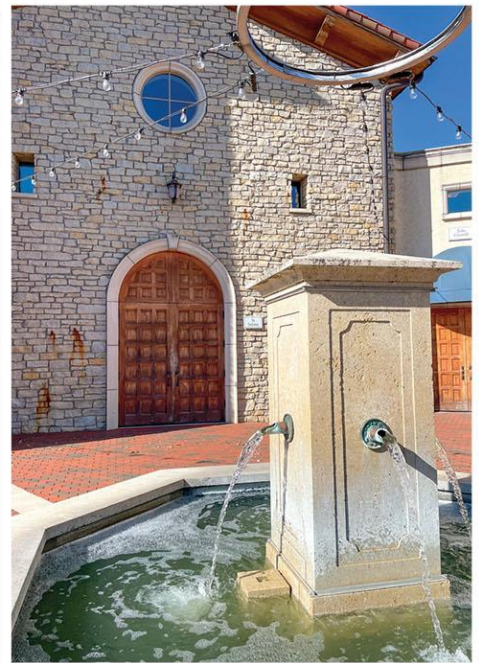
Born in 1867, Wilder lived in Pepin for the first 2 years of her life before moving by covered wagon to Kansas. Her family returned to her birthplace and lived there from 1871 to 1874.

Wilder's first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, was published in 1932 and





BENVENUTO! Katherine Kujak and Derick Dahlen oversee winemaking operations at Villa Bellezza in Pepin. Soak up the food, wine and the surroundings in the piazza.



depicts her time in Wisconsin. The replica of the “little gray house made of logs” described by Wilder in the book is 7 miles north of Pepin. It demanded a visit too.

During a self-guided tour, I stepped inside and could picture Pa playing his fiddle as the fireplace glowed on a frigid winter night while Laura and her sisters, Mary and Carrie, drifted off to sleep.

While the wayside log cabin is open year-round, the museum and gift shop are open seasonally May through October and average about 2,000 visitors a month from all over.

“We’ve had guests from all 50 states and 37 countries from Argentina to Taiwan,” Carey Worthy, museum manager, told us.

Decades and generations later, Wilder and her experiences shared in her books and the TV series still resonate. For Carey, they’re like comfort food, providing sweet reminders of her childhood.

“Even though their life was a hard life, it was a simple life,” she says. “Faith, family

and community helped them persevere.”

The museum hosts Laura Ingalls Wilder Days the second full weekend in September. The family-friendly annual event features traditional craft demonstrations, character contests, reading marathons, spelling bees and music along with food and craft vendors.

In 1996, Pepin became the official starting point of the Laura Ingalls Wilder History Highway, which links Wilder sites across the country. We’ll save that for another time!

Getting a Taste of Italy

After filling our heads with history and getting in touch with a childhood friend, we wanted to fill our bellies, so we drove up the block to the gorgeous Villa Bellezza Winery to put our feet up and chill out for a bit.

We spotted the massive estate on our way into town and knew we’d make it part of our getaway. It’s like stepping into an Italian village, from the fountain to the

architecture of the buildings. It’s an experience...and an escape.

With 30 wines available, the garden vineyard was established in 2012 and features 15 different grapes grown locally on four sites, explains Katherine Kujak, winemaker and managing partner.

“It’s a great region to grow great grapes to make great wines,” she says.

In warm weather, visitors can take advantage of the view by dining or sipping al fresco. The addition of heated porticos and availability of furs make that an option in cooler months as well.

We settled in at a table outside in Piazza Bellezza. With wood-fired pizzas, paninis, salads and pastas, the food offerings were plentiful. We ended the meal with...what else but tiramisu. When in Italy!

Before we dove into dessert, we toasted our time together and new discoveries with a glass of Marquette Reserve, made with grapes grown on the sandy soils above Lake Pepin. Cheers! 🍷

Sideline: A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving.