P2JW277000-4-D00700-1--------XA

Drifters Welcome

Wisconsin's Driftless Area attracts dreamers. That means you'll find bold architecture—and trip-worthy cheese.

By Jacqueline Kehoe

ON BRISK fall mornings, the view from just outside Frank Lloyd Wright's bedroom is superb: The architect designed Taliesin, his visionary home, to frame the high hills of Wisconsin's Driftless Area, so named because ancient glacial "drift" never covered this land like it did elsewhere in the region. Across the 100 or so miles west of Madison, bluffs still soar, valleys still plunge and the air still holds more birdsong than bustle.

"Wright was drawn to the Driftless because of his ancestors, but also because of the wild beauty of this place," said Carrie Rodamaker, Taliesin's executive director. The architect used the land as a resource in multiple ways, Rodamaker tells me, from inspiration to construction, harnessing materials like sand, limestone and oak.

Traveling to Taliesin—a Unesco World Heritage site open to day-trippers as well as overnight visitors attending seasonal workshops—feels like visiting the middle of nowhere. But there's much more to this region than one architectural masterpiece. Wright's creative, rule-breaking spirit seeps deep into the area's soul and soil, attracting artists, chefs, cheesemakers and more. In Wisconsin, one of four states in the geological region, "the Driftless" has become a cultural term that means off-grid, avant-garde and artisanal. Fall in this corner of Wisconsin is the ideal time to chase fine art and architecture, finer cheese and the last of the region's farm fare before the cold sets in. Just don't expect more than the occasional bar or two of cellphone signal.

Only 6 miles from Taliesin, another wonder peeks out of the hills: the House on the Rock. If the former whispers architectural wisdom in your ear, the latter shouts, "Watch this." The 1940s fever dream of eccentric architect Alex Jordan, the house is open to the public, though first-timers be warned: Walkways lead to a three-story whale made of concrete and an indoor carousel surrounded by hundreds of mannequin angels and animatronic puppets. It's like Taliesin on Ayahuasca. Both approaches embody the Driftless psyche.

Seven more miles down the road, also in the town of Spring Green, you'll find American Players Theatre, one of the most renowned outdoor classical theaters in the nation. Few fall experiences around the country can beat a picnic and a Shakespeare play under the stars, but fear not if you find outdoor tickets sold out: The intimate, indoor theater is lovely, too.

For a shoppable artistic fix, stop at Wilson Creek Pottery, a Driftless mainstay. The tiny team has been handcrafting some of the state's most beautiful ceramic goods for the past 50 years.

From top: A balcony at Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's former home; a spread of dishes at Driftless Café.

One of the region's most celebrated autumn events comes from Uplands Cheese, the makers of Pleasant Ridge Reserve, the most-awarded cheese in American history. Uplands's autumnal and only slightly less prestigious sibling Rush Creek Reserve is a decadent, soft cheese wrapped in spruce bark that drops only in October and November. Online orders typically sell out fast, but you can test your luck at various purveyors in the area, like the Spring Green General Store.

LYNDON FRENCH FOR WSJ; UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON'S GEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SURVEY (MAP)

SAY CHEESE Two residents of Wisconsin's Driftless Area, where some of the country's most awarded cheese is made.

"The tight hills mean that farms can't get very big, and so neither have most of the cheesemakers," said Andy Hatch, Uplands's owner and cheesemaker. "We've had to focus on being unique instead of big. Luckily, we have interesting terroir to make that possible." The Driftless Area accounts for the majority of small-producer Wisconsin cheese. Beyond Uplands, don't miss Hook's Cheese Company and its 20-year cheddar, available for only the fourth time ever this fall, and retailing for $209 per pound.

The Driftless's many organic farms feed the area's rapidly growing restaurant scene, with Driftless Café leading the charge from Viroqua, in Vernon County. Just east of the Mississippi River, the county has the second-highest concentration of organic farms of any U.S. county, says Luke Zahm, the James Beard-nominated chef and the cafe's co-owner. The region "embraces intentional inefficiency," he explained, opting for smaller yields and working by hand. "I've always felt a little bit punk rock, and knowing where your food is coming from—that's an act of rebellion."

For rebellious acts of the hoppy variety, head to New Glarus Brewing Company, famous for the cult-favorite Spotted Cow. For years, owners Deb and Dan Carey were told their only-in-Wisconsin production model would never work at scale. Today, the employee-owned craft brewery nears the nation's top 10 by sales volume. For a quintessential way to wrap up a Driftless trip, grab a Spotted Cow and explore the grounds, built to resemble cathedral ruins. Your eye, though, will soon be drawn away from the structures and to the hills rolling in every direction. Frank Lloyd Wright would surely approve.

Fall in the Driftless is the time to chase fine art, finer cheese and the last farm fare before winter.

THE LOWDOWN / A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE DRIFTLESS

The Cheese Wedge Cabin, an Airbnb in the Driftless Area.

Getting There Amtrak's new Borealis route runs daily between Chicago and Minneapolis, stopping in La Crosse, Wis., an easy gateway to the region. Otherwise, fly into Madison's Dane County Regional Airport (MSN), or drive around three hours from Chicago or Minneapolis.

Eating There At Driftless Café in Viroqua, daily menus showcase whatever local farmers bring in. Next door, Noble Rind plates up the most stunning cheese boards. Reunion in Spring Green offers elevated, locally driven barbecue, and, in the town of Paoli, Seven Acre Dairy Company's autumn dinner series showcases Driftless fare reimagined by chefs from across the nation.

Staying There If you want to base yourself out of the region's hub, La Crosse, a good option is the Charmant Hotel, a former candy factory, which combines comfy digs with sensational cocktails on the Mississippi River. Farther from civilization, Anaway Place features modern, woodsy cabins straight out of Martha Stewart's dreams. The most committed cheese-lovers can opt for the state's most recognizable Airbnb, a bright yellow A-frame cabin that resembles a wedge of Swiss.