



What I ate on my summer vacation

by Henry Verden

Upper Midwesterners, like most people, like to travel, and when we get home, we like to reminisce and tell our family and friends about our trip. But Upper Midwesterners have a slightly different perspective on those travel tales. Most folks talk about what they saw, who they met, or what they did. That's all fine and well; Upper Midwesterners talk about food. Oh, they talk about that other stuff a little, but only as it pertains to food. They talk about what they ate, where they ate, who they ate with, and how the eating was done.

I'm not talking about the hip, globe-trotting urbanites from Madison, Milwaukee, Chicago, or the like.

The people I'm describing are the lifeblood of this region, the small town, rural, roots-to-the-core-of-the-planet folks. People who work hard and for whom a big trip is a rare occurrence. Every detail is committed to memory for future recital and food that didn't come from the local grocery store or

get served in an avocado green or harvest gold casserole is especially worthy of note.

What you have to realize is that travel food stories, like fishing stories, grow in the retelling. Upper Midwesterners don't like to tell a boring story. Boring stories are unpleasant to listen to and Upper Midwesterners don't want to make other people uncomfortable. That 24-ounce steak they had in Houston grows to the size of a minivan by the time they've told the twelfth or thirteenth person. Not only did they grill it on their own, but as the retelling progresses, you'll learn that they had to kill the steer (eventually with their bare hands, of course), cut down the trees for the fire to cook it, and throw, glaze, and fire the dishes they ate it on. No listeners will question the veracity of their story, because that would be rude. If there's one thing Upper Midwesterners don't want to be, it's rude.

Upper Midwesterners are knife and fork people. Traveling to exotic places, Orlando for example, often presents them with the dilemma of having to eat using unconventional means. Handing an Upper Midwesterner chopsticks to

eat with is like handing them a pile of parts and saying "Here, build a B-2 bomber." It's just not going to happen. It makes a good story though. "So, we're in this place where they're servin' this Japanese food called ten pin yaki, or somethin' like that. Anyway, they give us these chopsticks to eat with and we can't make 'em work. Mildred gets fed up and grabs just one of those sticks and starts stabbin' at the food like she's spear fishin'. She shoots a shrimp half way across the room. Hit some guy right between the eyes."

Other exotic cuisines are not likely to be any better. Fried chicken and beef jerky are the only foods that are acceptable to eat with your fingers. Food that's picked up with a piece of some sort of bread is not food any decent person would eat. The only way you'll get an Upper Midwesterner into an Ethiopian, Moroccan, or other Middle Eastern restaurant is if they have a Friday fish fry. Don't even think about sushi — Upper Midwesterners don't eat bait. If, in spite of all that, they go exotic anyway, you can be sure that the resulting story will be an epic tale.

Having to sit through these gastronomic tall tales would be

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almost as exciting as hearing about Aunt Lavinia's angioplasty if Upper Midwesterners weren't such good storytellers. They never let the facts get in the way of a good story. Garrison Keillor said, "Sometimes you have to look reality straight in the eye and deny it." For Upper Midwesterners, "sometimes" is anytime they're talking about a trip. Hey, did I ever tell you about that cockroach the size of a cocker spaniel that was begging from table to table at that restaurant in Manila?