



Central Illinois is more than the “Land of Lincoln.” This area is also home to wonderful inns and dining establishments that, if you know where to look, offer warm hospitality and delicious food made from scratch.

In search of places within 30 miles of Decatur and off the beaten path, our small band of travelers hit the road in June: LouAnn Jacobs, Del’s and Giggles proprietor; Ty Hildum, Norfolk & Southern executive; Jerry Atkins, district sales representative for BRI; Kelly Turkhart, social worker for District 61; and Lynn McClure, public relations strategist. Armed with open minds and a sense of adventure, we took scenic routes to Lincoln, Elkhart, and Monticello to experience the excitement of trying something new.

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circuitroadtrip

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MONTGOMERY'S



Logan County: The Blue Triangle

First stop, Lincoln. Located 26 miles northwest of Decatur on Route 121, the scenic route takes you past Warrensburg/Latham and Mt. Pulaski. If you're not in a hurry, take the turnoff north to Chestnut and visit the monument erected in the village common marking the exact geographic center of Illinois.

Our destination was The Blue Dog Inn on Lincoln's historic Sangamon Street. As soon as we walked in the door, the staff welcomed us like one of the family. Established in 1979, the atmosphere in "The Dog" is warm, inviting, and oozes local charm. According to our waitress Dawn, (who also serves as the resident tour guide) the building dates back to the 1850s and still sports its original tin ceiling and wood floors. Walls and shelves are lined with sports memorabilia, photos of the owner's Labrador, Blue, and an extensive collection of glass dogs - the largest any of us had seen...anywhere.

Overhearing our remark that "this must be Cardinal Country," Dawn stated, "You bet it is. The owner is a big, obnoxious Cardinal fan." Dawn also told us that for years, this place has served as the halfway stop on I-55 where friends from St. Louis and Chicago meet to eat.



The menu is as much fun as the company, and lives up to its name with food categories like, "Kibbles & Bits, Doggie Treats, Gravy Train, and From the Water Bowl." You have seventeen choices in "Pick of the Litter," homemade sandwiches ranging from the "Pedigree, Rare Breed, and Heinz 57" to the "Huskie and Polish Dog." The #17 "Bird of Paradise" is Dawn's favorite - a turkey, bacon, cheddar wrap with Thousand Island dressing. Mine, too.

We tried a bit of everything by sampling the French Onion soup, Reuben, homemade fries, and Shrimp Salad, which Kelly said had a very fresh, light taste. Ironically, the schedule for local yoga classes is printed on the back of the beer menu, a point not lost on any of us. But, we tried the desserts anyway fresh, homemade coconut cream pie, apple caramel crisp, and pecan pie - all delicious. After LouAnn finished reciting her own recipe for pecan pie, Jerry said, "Heck, pecan pie is almost a health food."

When Susie (we were on a first name basis with the owner by this time) let us borrow her cell phone to call her husband, Steve, for directions to Elkhart, we knew we had made new friends.

As we left, a bar regular told us he grew up in Elkhart, so we learned a little history about our next stop. Housed for the past six years in a renovated 1870's building in downtown Elkhart, the Blue Moon Pub was previously Blue Monday, a popular French restaurant. And it's easy to find from Lincoln. Just follow Historic Route 66 south for 9 miles and turn left on Governor Oglesby Street.

The first thing we noticed driving into this small village were the attractive renovated buildings and appealing streetscape lining the main street. Joining the Blue Moon Pub, you'll find the Dragonfly Art Studio, Blue Stem Bake Shop, Horsefeathers gift shop, and Wild Hare Café. Under the Prairie Archaeological Museum displays relics of life in the log cabins of the 1800s.

The artistic bent of this village continues inside the Blue Moon Pub, where a ten-foot metal sculpture depicting a crescent moon and stars hangs over the bar. Brick walls, high tin ceilings, and long arched windows complement the softly lit, cozy atmosphere. After settling at the bar, we ordered their specialty, Blue

Moon Ale, served with the ubiquitous orange slice. Striking up a conversation with the bartender and locals seated at the bar, we asked why so many businesses have "Blue" in their names. No one had a clue. But, we did get directions for a shortcut to Decatur - another scenic route to complete our Logan County Triangle back to Mt. Pulaski to catch Route 121.

Leading out of Elkhart, Chapel Road is a tree-lined lane passing under the Gillett Memorial Bridge next to the cemetery where Governor Richard Oglesby is buried. This area is full of the stories of early life on the prairie, and reminded us of the unique history that links our Central Illinois communities.

Montgomery's in Monticello

Normally, a jaunt to Monticello on I-72 east takes just twenty minutes. But, we took the scenic route following Route 48 to Argenta, then IL-32 through Cisco and Old Route 47 past the grain elevator in Amenia. A right turn on County Farm Road takes you past Allerton Park and into Monticello. We were headed to Montgomery's on the Square for a taste of the dining experience offered by new Executive Chef and owner Rhonda Sinkosky.

Rhonda and her husband Tony, an Argenta native and University of Illinois graduate, relocated to Central Illinois in 2005 to realize their dream of restaurant ownership. Trained in Culinary Arts Le Cordon Bleu and Wine Studies in San Francisco, we were curious to discover how Rhonda uses local ingredients in her seasonal menus. We weren't disappointed.

Entering Montgomery's through the bar, we were immediately taken with the cool atmosphere, and the blending of old and new. Brick walls and high tin ceilings melded with the sleek styling of tables and chairs. Smooth jazz played in the background as we settled at the bar. The bar snack - wasabi peas, a crisp, flavorful alternative to peanuts or snack mix - was just a hint of what was to come. The wine list is extensive and features selections from across the globe. We settled on the house special that day, an R. Mondavi Private Selection Zinfandel from Napa, and decided to enjoy dinner at a front window table, which offered views of Monticello's town square.

Fresh linens, a simple floral centerpiece, and comfortable seating welcomed us. Montgomery's offers seasonal menus highlighting fresh ingredients of the region. June's feature was "Spring Fare." We chose Brie with Crostini, a refreshing blend of warmed Brie, gooseberry compote, and fresh berries; Fritto Misto, crispy battered shrimp surrounded by fresh vegetables and a Chipotle cream dipping sauce; and Local Micro Greens, pea pods, toasted pine nuts, and reconstituted cranberries with an apple pulp and cider vinaigrette - a delightful start.

The entrée choices ranged from seafood and pasta to steaks and chicken, but with a new interpretation. The Herbed Halibut is served with lentils and buttered pea pods, pea tendrils, and Mache (a corn salad). The Juniper Brined and Grilled Pork Tenderloin came with peach, spring onion, and bacon mashed red potatoes - a big hit with everyone at the table. The organic chicken breast from Triple "S" Farms was roasted with rosemary and served with a Meyer Lemon Herb Sauce, asparagus, and lightly roasted fingerling potatoes.

We enjoyed a very satisfying meal, relaxed, but attentive service, and a delightful taste of small town hospitality. We also discovered that places off the beaten path are well worth the detour.

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