

DAILY @ NEWS

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AS FEATURED

Mighty Minneapolis

Where to have a hot time in the ultra-cool Twin City

Mary Tyler Moore put Minneapolis on the map, but these days people are tossing their hats in the air over the vibrant food scene. The land of hot dish (casseroles), pop (soda) and Jell-O has had a culinary makeover. Even for those who are phobic about the cold, visiting the Twin Cities in winter has its advantages. For one thing, there are no mosquitoes (some people call it the state bird). For another, by staying downtown, it's easy to chart a shopping and eating course via a network of heated skyways. Stepping outside is often avoidable.

The newly refurbished Radisson Plaza Hotel, for example, connects to prominent department stores such as Saks and Marshall Field's, which offer extended hours during the holiday season. Adjacent to the hotel is **FireLake**, a stylish restaurant with a theatrical open kitchen and wood-burning oven. Updated Midwestern cuisine is the star, featuring flame-kissed meats and full-flavored heartland specialties such as alder-smoked salmon, soup swimming with Minnesota mushrooms, leeks and wild rice, and crispy, **corn-crust**ed walleye. After feasting at **FireLake**, I was grateful that my ultra-comfortable room and box-baffle feather bed were just an elevator ride away.

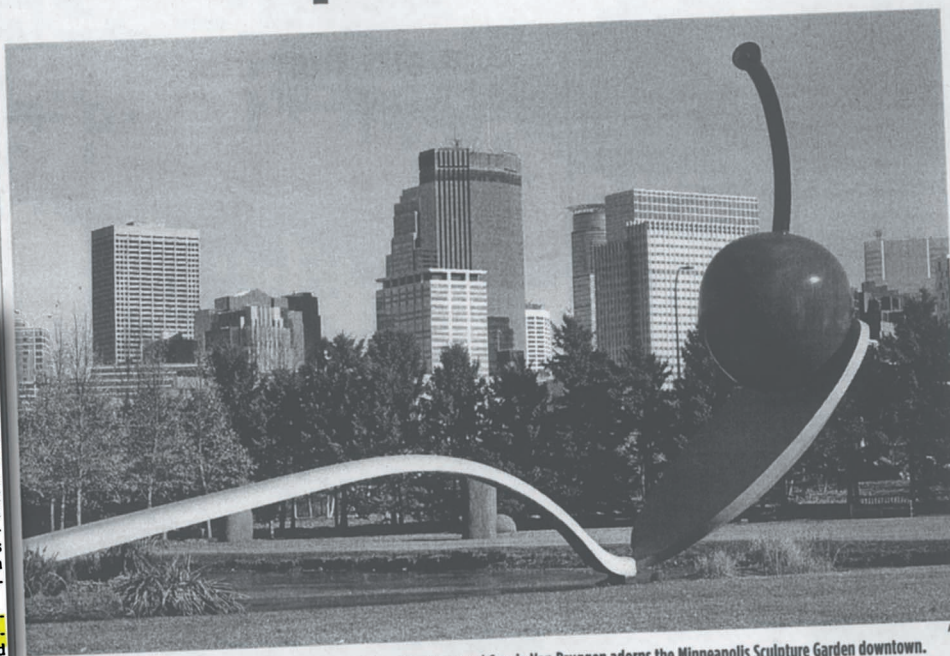
Walleye pike, a mild, firm, freshwater fish, is ubiquitous in Minnesota. **FireLake** serves walleye hash with poached eggs and hollandaise sauce at breakfast.

So does Hell's Kitchen, a funky downtown spot advertising "damn good food" and displaying hell-themed Gary Larson cartoons. The cafe was worth a short trek outdoors, and its walleye hash and poached eggs were enough to carry me for the day.

Not that that stopped me from eating lunch. From the Radisson, a skyway led us to Ike's, a retro spot everyone I talked to in town seems to like. I did, too, especially its well-executed cocktails and Angus beef burgers with aged Wisconsin cheddar. Sammy Davis Jr. was on the stereo, walls were trimmed with diverse epigrams by Albert Einstein and Dan Quayle, and warm chocolate-chip cookies arrived with the check.

Another day at lunch, I tasted an even better burger at Vincent, a soaring, lovely French-Mediterranean restaurant, opened by Vincent Françoise, a Le Bernardin alum. His signature burger is constructed of ground beef, braised short ribs and smoked gouda. Vincent's inspired salads, sandwiches and pasta are very reasonably priced for the quality, making it the most exciting place for lunch in town.

Downtown Minneapolis is fairly compact, and my husband and I, seasoned New Yorkers with sensible shoes, warm layers and a lot of food to work off, walked a mile or so to the modern Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden that adjoins it. Famous for a giant spoon balancing a cherry, the vast garden also holds sculptures by Alexander Calder, Richard Serra and Frank Gehry.



OPEN WIDE This famous spoon-and-cherry sculpture by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van Bruggen adorns the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden downtown.

For families with young children, Minneapolis' Nicollet Mall is a street of enchantment every night at 6:30, when the Holidazzle Parade marches through downtown. Half a million people come every year to watch the festively lit floats, 250 costumed characters from fairy tales, marching bands and celebrity grand marshals — anyone from the touring cast of "Mamma Mia!" to the Minnesota Twins. The parade takes place Wednesdays-Saturdays through Dec. 28, except for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It lasts for 30 minutes, a short time to

bear winter temperatures hovering anywhere from 40 degrees on down.

The adult music scene is centered on Le Meridien, the city's newest hotel, where Cher, Prince, Sheryl Crow and Lisa Marie Presley have been spotted grooving or staying. The sparkling, 21-story, 255-room edifice is down the street from the Orpheum and across from the Target Center (both concert venues), which explains all the musicians. Le Meridien's chic, sophisticated restaurant, Cosmos, serves global cuisine. The bar is full of attractive Nordic types swilling cocktails, giving evidence to the claim that Minnesota is the nation's largest producer of blonds.

Le Meridien bills itself as the chain's first "Art + Tech" hotel in the world, and we tested its claims for two nights. There's a fashionable, otherworldly feel in the low-lit public spaces, with striking single-tree veneer walls. In the airy guest rooms,

the art includes backlit photos and glass-etched headboards. Tech is represented by plasma screen TVs and the ability to take a shower that feels like a rainstorm pattering from different heights. It was full of thoughtful, functional touches, and I loved staying there so much I hated to leave, even for dinner.

But it was worth braving the cold because nearby we found another beautiful crowd inhabiting the dark, alluring Solera, a new Gaudi-esque tapas bar. Along with an impressive list of Spanish wines and sherries is an extensive menu of delicious tidbits like chorizo-stuffed dates with smoked bacon and goat-cheese fritters with honey.

Minneapolis, a multicultural Mississippi River city, was built on food production,

the riverbanks formerly dominated by tall, timeworn flourmills. The ruins of one of the mills houses the new Mill City Museum, where exhibits tell the story of how an abundance of grain, hard-working immigrants, innovative technology and the river's power fueled the area's growth. In December, displays include elaborate gingerbread houses, contests and holiday songs. There's enough good cheer in this city to make you forget the cold. ♦

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IF YOU GO

WHERE TO EAT:

FireLake 31 S. Seventh St., (612) 216-3473

Hell's Kitchen 89 S. 10th St., (612) 332-4700

Vincent 1100 Nicollet Mall, (612) 630-1189

Ike's Food & Cocktails 50 S. Sixth St., (612) 746-4537

Cosmos Le Meridien, fourth floor, 601 First Ave. N., (612) 312-1168

Solera 900 Hennepin Ave., (612) 338-0062

WHERE TO STAY:

Radisson Plaza Hotel 35 S. Seventh St., (612) 339-4900. Rates start at \$99.

Le Meridien 601 First Ave. N., 1-800-543-4300. Rates start at \$189.



IN TUNE Soak up the atmosphere at Le Meridien, a 21-story hotel noted for its music scene.