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Wisconsin can also mean pie

Bakers around the state show that there's more than cheese

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What you do with your time sometimes isn't as important as whom you're with, so even the most simple outing can turn into a memorable excursion. Keep that in mind while lamenting a lack of money for your next getaway.

Consider Dave and Lesley Armstrong, who organize an annual Pie Run for their Mad City Vettes car club in Madison. Their job is to find a place that serves great pie and can accommodate about 50 people. The ride occurs in summer, and it does not need to be a complicated venture: Form a caravan, drive to the pie, eat, yak and go home.

Good weather would help turn this jaunt into a pleasant day away, but more important is the company. Maybe you can use pie as a reason to reunite family, college buddies or former co-workers.

The American Pie Council's annual contests determine who makes the best pie in the nation. Go to piecouncil.org to see enough pie categories to make your stomach swell.

And tracking down the selections could help make any excursion all the more enjoyable. Just let the pie be your guide.

People heading into Wisconsin might want to consider one of the 2008 winners: Lake Geneva Pie Company (150 E. Geneva Square, Lake Geneva, lgpie.com, 262-248-5100) whose blueberry pie and natural (as in no-sugar-added) apple pie were tops in two of the 130-some categories for commercial enterprises. This year's competition commences in late April in Florida.

Women who head to Lake Geneva on April 24-26 also will find workshops, shopping discounts, spa services and a jazz concert. For more about Women's Weekend, consult lakegenevawi.com or 262-723-4611. Registration of \$50 includes a free drink, appetizers, raffles, and fitness and yoga classes. Other activities are \$5 to \$10.

But back to pie. Countless miles on the highways of Wisconsin have given me a gold mine of experience on the subject. So I'll help you chart a course for some of the best.

- Upper Krust Pie Shop, 1300 Memorial Drive, Watertown: Sweet to savory, enough choices to make a full meal. upperkrustpieshop.com, 920-206-9202.
- Burnstad's European Café, 701 E. Clifton St., Tomah: Part of a retail "village" with an unusual European flair. burnstads.com, 888-378-5985.
- Gina's Pies Are Square, 400 Main St., Wilton: A beautiful drive through southwest Wisconsin to a small town where some pie choices are unusual (baking sugar cream, shoofly, oatmeal stout) and slices are served as squares. Call first; business hours are shorter until the weather warms and Elroy-Sparta bike trail business picks up. 608-435-6541.
- Northwoods Brewpub, 3560 Oakwood Mall Drive, Eau Claire: Providing an odd but good combo—beer brewed on the premises and gorgeous pies of Norske Nook (Osseo, Rice Lake, Hayward) fame. northwoodsbrewpub.com, 715-552-0510.
- Norske Nook, 13804 Seventh St., Osseo: Pies routinely win national awards (Butterfinger Pie topped the candy cream category in 2008). Slices are obscenely thick with your choice of berries, filling, meringue or cream. Norwegian lefse, meatball dinners and—for some—lutefisk are other reasons to visit. norskenook.com, 800-294-6665.
- Elegant Farmer, 1545 Main St., Mukwonago: Go during warm weather so you can eat pie outdoors. The interior is an intimate market with many food samples. Known for apple pie baked in a paper bag, which The Wall Street Journal called "the best pie in the world." Not really a restaurant, so bring your own utensils and paper plates to cut and serve what you buy. elegantfarmer.com, 262-363-6771.
- Hubbard Avenue Diner, 7445 Hubbard Ave., Middleton: Excellent, fat pie slices are customary at this Food Fight restaurant, which has room enough for a crowd. For more intimate confines, head to Monty's Blue Plate Diner, 2089 Atwood Ave., Madison. foodfightinc.com, 608-235-7437, 608-244-8505.
- Sweetie Pies, 9106 Hwy. 42, Fish Creek: I haven't indulged here, but Rachael Ray includes the pecan pie on her list of top 10 pies in the U.S. Typically open only Saturday, Sunday and Monday during winter. doorcountypies.com, 877-868-2744.

What else makes Rachael's list? The winner was the sour cream apple walnut, made by Manhattan-based Little Pie Company. Yes, you can order by phone: littlepiecompany.com, 877-872-7437. How much? Ahem—\$65, plus at least \$10 for shipping.