

## COOKING CONQUESTS



CHEF RANDY SMITH

## Spring for morels and soft shell crab

Spring is the season for soft shell crab and morel mushrooms. These are special foods because they're in season only for a few short weeks in May and early June.

### Soft shell crabs

In the United States, the blue crab is the species most commonly eaten in its soft-shell state.

These crabs are caught along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, and in the spring, they shed their hard shell. The hard shell will grow back in about a month, which is why the season for this delicacy is so brief.

Always sold whole, soft shell crabs are noted for their sweet meat. It is important to remember that all live crabs should be used on the day they're purchased. Refrigerate them until just before cooking.

### Morels

Morel mushrooms are similar to truffles, and can be found in Michigan for about two weeks in May. The morel is recognized by its honey-combed, cone shape cap, with colors ranging from rich tan to very dark brown. The flavor is described as smoky, earthy and nutty. The darker the coloration, the stronger the flavor.

Imported canned morels can be purchased year-round at gourmet food stores, as can dried morels, which have an even more intense, smoky flavor.

When selecting morel mushrooms look for those with a firm yet spongy texture.

### SAUTÉ CORN MEAL CRUSTED SOFT SHELL CRAB W/ HERB BUTTER

- Serves 4
- 8 large soft shell crabs
  - Canola oil for browning crabs
  - Breading
    - 1 cup cornmeal
    - 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
    - 1 tablespoon Cajun spice
    - 1/2 teaspoon salt
  - Breading wash
    - 1/4 cup all purpose flour
    - 1 egg
    - 1/2 cup milk
  - Herb butter sauce
    - 1/2 pound soft butter
    - 1 finely chopped shallot
    - 1/2 teaspoon garlic
    - 1/4 cup finely chopped herbs (any combination of basil, thyme, chervil, dill, oregano, parsley, and chives)
    - 1 tablespoon lemon juice
    - 1/8 teaspoon white pepper
    - 1/2 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
  - Salt to taste

To make breading: Combine cornmeal, flour, Cajun spice and salt in a bowl. Set aside.

To make breading wash: Combine egg and milk in a separate bowl. Set aside with flour.

To make herb butter sauce: Cut softened butter into 1-inch cubes. Place in mixing bowl with shallots and garlic.

Whip until light and fluffy. Add herbs and remaining ingredients. Salt to taste. Set aside, but do not refrigerate.

To prepare crabs: Clean crabs by removing tail, lift side of shell and remove lungs, then with scissors, remove the face. Place crab into reserved flour then remove and place into egg and milk mixture. Finish by placing crabs in corn meal breading. Lightly press all sides of crab into cornmeal. Remove and place on tray. Repeat for all crabs.

Place large sauté pan over medium heat, add canola oil. Add crabs and sauté 2 minutes or until golden.

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## LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Cheers for Beer
- Recipe to share



Michigan goodies: Debbie Carpenter, manager of Michigania, is surrounded by a bounty of Michigan-made food products.

# Michigan: Great Lakes, cherries and more

BY RENÉE SKOGLUND  
STAFF WRITER

Pump up those taste buds and get ready for a gastronomic celebration of Michigan Week beginning May 16.

These days, Michigan food products are so much more than Traverse City cherries and Mackinac Island fudge. They're pastas and primavera sauces, jams and jellies, salsas and syrups, tangy cheeses and wonderful mustards like Mrs. Dog's Disappearing Mustard.

But still, cherries rule, even in hamburgers. "Plevalena," a delightful marriage of tart cherries and beef, was patented by Ray Pieva of Cedar, Mich., in 1995. Known as the "cherry burger," the frozen patties are available at most major supermarkets for about \$6 for a 1-pound, 9 1/2 oz. box.

Michigan meat products also include beef jerky. The Northern Michigan Beef Jerky Co. in St. Clair Shores, a Michigan food products specialty store, features 16 kinds of the low-fat, high-protein snack — buffalo, venison, elk, four kinds of turkey and six kinds of beef. It's all cured with Michigan maple syrup and contains no fillers.

Jerky fans love it, said John Cipriani, who owns the store with his wife, Barbara. "It's not the rip-your-teeth-out stuff. This type is nice and soft. We get more women in here than men. This type of jerky, the

women love it."

The store also stocks a variety of Michigan cherry products, Prevalena, Pinconning cheese, and smoked fish. Beef and turkey pasties are freshly delivered by truck from the Standish area.

"They come with gravy, and they're half the size of a pie," said Barbara.

Two items leave the store as fast as they come in, said Barbara: homemade thimbleberry jam from the Upper Peninsula (expensive at \$14.99 but to die for) and Copper Harbor Hot Salsa. "It won first place in a AAA salsa contest. I lived in California eight years, and I had a lot of salsa. This beat them all out."

### Michigan Made

Jane Kuhns, owner of Michigan Made in downtown Plymouth, can hardly keep Benjamin Twigg's pancake mix with dried cherries on the shelf. Paired with Cherry Republic's cherry syrup, it's a hit.

Kuhns stocks several jams and jellies from American Spoon Foods and Rocky Top Farms, but her real prize is the hard-to-find thimbleberry jam with a plain, white label: E. Uman, Allover, Mich. "People from the Keweenaw Peninsula go crazy when

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### Michigan-made food stores

Northern Michigan Beef Jerky Co. Inc. — 27815 Harper, St. Clair Shores, (1/2 block north of 11 Mile on Harper, across from Nino Salvaggio's International Marketplace), (810) 773-3101. Hours: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday and holidays.

Michigan Made, Inc. — 830 W. Ann Arbor Trail, Plymouth, (734) 207-8794. Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Wednesday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Michigania, Inc. — 205 Pierce St., Birmingham — (248) 047-1444 or (800) 443-9284. Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Saturday, closed Sundays.

### Michigan food products

Arvey Bakery — 12301 Farmington Road, Livonia, (734) 522-1100. Hours: 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday-Friday; 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday.

American Spoon Foods, Petoskey — To place an order, call (888) 735-6700. For customer service, call (800) 222-5886. Visit the Web site, www.spoon.com for product information and recipes.

Ray Pieva's Products, Inc. — 9101 South Lake Shore Drive, Cedar — (616) 228-5000. e-mail pievas@gll.com. Visit the Web site www.pievas.com for product information and recipes.

### Oldies but goodies

Viasic Foods — started as a dairy company in 1915 and moved into the pickle business after the Depression. In 1942, they produced their first pickle product, Viasic Polish Pickles. Today, Viasic makes 120 products, including 80 different kinds of pickles.

Better Made Potato Chips — founded in 1930, remains at same Detroit location on Gratiot near I-94. Besides chips, the company makes a variety of popcorn and cheese curls. "When you're driving down the freeway at about 6:05 p.m., you can smell the chips," said Chris Mocer, company vice president.

Alexander & Horning — a family-owned sausage-making company since 1945, continues to produce hot dogs, bologna, knockwurst and hams at the corner of Gratiot and Harper in Detroit. An upscale product, Alexander & Horning can be found in many independent markets. "We still smoke sausage with our same smoke houses," said company president Bernie Polen.

Awrey Bakeries — opened its first small store on Tieren Ave. in Detroit in 1910. However, Grandma Fletcher Awrey was baking breads and fried cakes long before then. Today, Awrey ships all over the United States and makes cakes for all the Baskin Robbins stores.

The company is now located on Farmington Road in Livonia. Their "Long John" coffee cake remains a customer favorite, said Betty Jean Awrey, president.

Morley Candy — started as a ice cream parlor on Gratiot and Fisher in Detroit in 1919. It soon became a candy business after Mrs. Morley's handmade chocolate treats developed a loyal following. The company, now located in Clinton Township, remains in the 100 family types of chocolate, including sports celebrity bars, like the Kris Draper and the Darren McCarty. It also makes Sanders candies and ice-cream toppings in the original Sanders vats.

Melody Farms-Stroh's Ice Cream — combines the traditions of two families in producing ice cream. Melody Farms, founded in 1950, purchased Stroh's in February of this year. They continue to produce Stroh's ice cream in the Detroit-based company's original vats. Those vats date back to the Depression era of 1919, when Stroh's decided to use their vats to produce ice cream rather than closing down their brewery.

Vernors Ginger Ale — would never have become a beloved Detroit beverage if it wasn't for the Civil War. Before he was called off to the war, James Vernor, a Detroit pharmacist, stored his secret soda pop mixture in an oak cask. In his pharmacy. When he returned four years later, the aging process had transformed the brew into a zippy, zesty ginger ale.

Vernors is no longer the Detroit river-front business that drew locals and tourists alike in the 1940s. It has changed hands many times since the Vernors family first sold it in 1966. Today, the brand continues under the ownership of Cadbury Schweppes.



## Italy's wines showcase mountain majesty

Alto Adige is located in northeast Italy. It borders Switzerland on the northwest and Austria to the north, in the foothill region of the Alps known as the Dolomites. Also called the Sudtiroi, this is a mountain-lovers and wine-lovers paradise. Steep hillside vineyards are contrasted against majestic snow-covered mountain heights. The wines are vibrant and filled with compelling flavors.

Wine is the heart of the Alto Adige.

Elena Walch wines, from Tramin in the Alto Adige, are new to the Michigan market. Recently, we met with Werner Walch who shares ownership of the vineyards and winery with his wife Elena.

### An Italian secret

Wine has been produced on these lands since 1869 when Werner's great-grandfather first began cultivating the steep hillsides to plant grapes. For over 125 years, these wines were an Italian secret, known only as exports to Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

Over the last decade-and-a-half, Italy has been swept by a non-traditional grape varietal revolution. Alto Adige was no exception. In the early years, the local grape schiava made a popular, easy-drinking, light red wine. Today, with the introduction of classic grape varieties such as chardonnay, pinot grigio, gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon, regions like the Alto Adige have put on a new face.

That's about the time Elena Walch came into the business. A former architect, she left her career behind to become a very active woman in the wine world. She used her skills to decorate Castel Ringberg, a property of the Walch family built in 1620. This year, Gambiero Rosso, the leading Italian wine guide, ranked Elena Walch Estates among the best with one wine elevated to the most prestigious and highest award "The Bichieri" translated as three glasses.

In the Alto Adige, cool nights, not

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### Wine Picks

- Pick of the Pack: 1997 King Estate Reserve Pinot Gris \$18 — knockout wonderful
- Alternatives to Merlot. Most merlots under \$20 are whippy wines. There are exceptions, such as 1997 Echeon Merlot \$14.50, but in general, for under \$20, you can get alternative reds with lots more flavor. Try: 1998 Rosemont Grenache-Siraz \$8; 1997 Alexander Valley Vineyard Syrah \$17; and Montevina Terra d'Oro Sangiovese \$16.
- With price of chardonnay creeping up, we tried a number under \$20 and the following came out on top: 1997 Monteria Chardonnay \$8 (really good for this price); 1998 Clos du Bois Sonoma County Chardonnay \$14; 1997 Hogue Chardonnay \$14; 1997 Jekel Gravelstone Chardonnay \$15 and 1997 Simi Chardonnay \$19 (tastes like an over \$20 wine).



Family tradition: Werner and Elena Walch of Elena Walch Winery in front of artisan-carved wine casks at their Castel Ringberg estate in the Alto Adige, Italy.