

Local flavors of the heartland

A love song to the Midwest

By Deborah Madison

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The other night I had dinner at a neighbor's. For the first course, he proudly served melon draped with thin, pink slices of . . .

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

One would guess serrano ham over prosciutto, but this most remarkable ham — which was rich, salty, and very, very good — was not from Spain, but from Iowa. And not all that surprisingly, it turns out. There's no need to say, “Iowa, of all places!”



Dinner in the heartland, from Kurt Friese's new book, 'A Cook's Journey: Slow Food in the Heartland.'

Iowa. Nebraska. Ohio. Illinois. Wisconsin. These and other flyover states that few visit and many dismiss are full of remarkable foods, created by people who tenaciously carve them out of soil and culture, thus adding something good and worthwhile to the region's table.

For the past decade or so, I've made a point of visiting the heartland, and have found it to be as populated with good growers and cooks as any coastal state. There may not be as many, but the quality is there, and the flavors are strictly regional. Just consider the remarkable [La Quercia prosciutto](#) I enjoyed at my friend's dinner. Or rye whiskey, smoked fish, remarkable cheeses, and the delectable [native wild rice](#).

Some of the most memorable restaurant meals I've eaten have been cooked in heartland restaurants, such as [L'Etoile](#) and [Harvest](#) in Madison, [Lucia's](#) in Minneapolis, [Simone Delaty's](#) farmhouse porch near Iowa City, Parker Bosley's now-closed bistro (now [Light Bistro](#)) in Cleveland, and that unforgettable [all-green spring meal](#) from Maharishi University that I described last spring.

Fortunately, you don't have to carve out worthwhile culinary experiences without a guide. [Kurt Friese](#), a [restaurateur](#) (among a few other things) from Iowa City, has written a book, [A Cook's Journey: Slow Food in the Heartland](#), which can make your journey a well-informed one.



Kurt Friese and his wife, Kim.

I think of Kurt's book as a kind of love song to this big center-cut of the United States, for he has long been a champion of those who produce remarkable food, who cook it well, or who work in political arenas to protect farmland and the future of small-scale food production and the less glamorous issues around food security. He has gathered his considerable experience to make a portrait of foods, peoples, and history — in short, the local flavors that issue out from the heart of our country — that we don't want to overlook, or miss.

Kurt is a Slow Food leader and publisher of *Edible Iowa*, so it's not surprising that his view is directed towards those thoughtfully produced foods that can proudly grace any plate. [Slow Food Nation](#), which just occurred in San Francisco, introduced La Quercia, native wild rice, wines, ciders, and other notable foods of the Midwest to thousands of people who came to see and taste the flavors of our country. (I must say the foods at Slow Food Nation were the kind that make

you say, “This is the best prosciutto, fig ice cream, jam, sauerkraut, pizza — fill in the blank — I’ve ever tasted!”)

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Over the past few years, I have received quite a few books that are regional by state, written by residents who perceive their food traditions as not just worthy but exciting and, of course, shareable. *A Cook's Journey* does this in depth. What's so compelling about the food adventurers here — those who choose to learn to produce a high-quality ham, raise a particular breed of animal, maintain a tradition, or cook in an utterly seasonal/local manner in Madison, Wisconsin, or develop a seasonal food co-op in Oklahoma — is what prompts people to take on such goals and what keeps them going, through thick and thin, realizing their dreams. The profiles in this book are as much about the tenacity and vision that it takes to carve out a new culinary territory as the results themselves.

Featured recipe from ‘A Cook’s Journey: Slow Food in the Heartland’

[Apple-Pecan Stuffing](#)

Whether you're planning to jump in your car and drive to Iowa or just stay put and maybe order some products over the Internet, the stories of people who, bit by bit, are changing the landscape of food in our culture are inspiring. All regions have such people, people who aren't content with the status quo, producers who transcend the clichés of place to get to the heart of the matter.

As one of the early slogans of Slow Food Nation pronounced, “Let's do it again like we did back then.” This is old-fashioned food as it should be.

When you read this book, you can't help but wonder what else is out there. It's worth a trip to go see. And taste.

Editor's note: at press time, Kurt's book is not yet in bookstores but is available for [pre-order on Amazon](#).

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