



WORLD SAMPLER:

Around the World in a Dozen Dishes

by Julianne Will
Photos by Neal Bruns

Fort Wayne may be far from any border, but the variety of ethnic cuisine in our city can take your taste buds on a world tour. You say you've never ventured beyond burgers, you like your steak-with-a-side and you're just fine, thank you? Surely you've heard that you are what you eat. Who would want to be known as bland or ordinary?

Perhaps you have some lingering doubts, some uncertainty that holds you back from an epic culinary journey. Be reassured by a few basic pointers:

You are not the only person to try a new dish for the first time. The staff sees people fumble with food or mangle pronunciation every day. Point to what you want and listen to how the server repeats it back. Watch what other diners are doing. Next time you'll feel like a pro.

Venture out at lunch. Prices are cheaper, so you've invested less if you don't like it. You may find a buffet, where you can sample a variety of new things and make notes of your favorite sauces or styles.

Take a traveling companion. Order a "safe" dish and something extreme. You each can taste the wacky new item, but go home full after sharing the standby.

When in Rome, speak as the Romans do. Most servers can understand you, even if you can't understand them. A good restaurant still will make you feel welcome, and its staff will appreciate any efforts to pronounce the names of the dishes.

Finally, remember that you don't have to clean your plate. Unless you're dining with your mom.

We've taken some of the guesswork out of it for you here — a road map for a dozen dining adventures. Pack your bags and prepare to embark on a worldly whirlwind of flavor!

Asakusa



Blond wood booths and a warm neutral décor will make any squeamish diner feel at home. Beyond sushi, there is little discomfort on the menu, either. If you're hesitant but determined, try the sushi appetizer:

two California rolls stuffed with imitation crab salad, plus raw salmon, raw tuna, cooked shrimp and imitation crab topping four bundles of rice. There are any number of *tempura* (battered and deep-fried) or *katsu* (breaded and deep-fried) dishes available for those whose previous adventures were limited to Long John Silver's. The teriyaki salmon accompanied by fat sautéed mushrooms has a mild just-off-the-grill flavor. The *sukiyaki* recommended by the waitress sounds exotic but leaves the taste buds unruffled. Relax, there's nothing to fear here.

6224 Lima Road. (260) 490-6888. Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Dinner 4:30-9 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 4:30-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday.



A sushi platter from Asakusa



A sushi primer

Green *wasabi* paste — only a dab! — is stirred into soy sauce in the rectangular bowl. The sushi roll, left, and the piece of sashimi, right, are dipped in the sauce and then eaten.



Tempura shrimp from Misono

Misono

There is a dynamic energy at Misono. A garden with a trickling fountain sprouts in the center of an open room with lighted columns, square lamps and a large Japanese mural. Such a classy place seems to belong in a bigger city rather than a strip mall. Food presentation is equally upscale; each plate is a miniature work of art. The Misono *chirashi-sushi* is an exquisite, colorful dish of yellow tuna, smoky red tuna, chopped octopus hidden in rosemary, chewy strips of pumpkin soaked in soy sauce, imitation crab strips and crunchy salmon eggs piled around a tiny quail-egg yolk in the center. Yes, it's all raw. Yes, it's delicious — not fishy at all, but firm and fresh. The *una don*, fresh eel over a perfect sticky rice that makes us all look good with chopsticks, is equally mild and flavorful. And you'll never think of seaweed the same once you've tried it shredded, marinated in what tasted like sesame oil and vinegar and wonderfully coated with nutty sesame seeds. Exotic colors, flavors, textures and setting: Grab your passport!

2882 E. Dupont Road (Dupont Place). (260) 416-0011. Lunch 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Dinner 5-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday and 4:30-8:30 p.m. Sunday.

The Mandarin



There's an intimacy of a different sort at The Mandarin in Maplewood Plaza. Instead of drawing closer to your dining partner, you're drawn closer to your fellow diners — physically. Many tables in a small room means little space between chairs, so watch your rice portions. Diners also can hear conversations, the cash register and the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. It seemed as if many were regulars, however, warmly greeted and brought their favorites by energetic servers. Ask your server for some rich and spicy wonton soup and an order of steamed pot stickers, pasta dumplings similar to ravioli filled with ground meat and vegetables. Dip the stickers in the zippy mustard or sweet and sour, depending on your temperature preference. Entrees don't get any milder than the Green Paradise Chicken, with water chestnuts, mini corn, broccoli, mushrooms, onions and peapods in a sauce as lightly flavored as it is white. The crispy duck is much more colorful in taste and presentation. Arranged on a bed of shredded cabbage with pretty radish and tomato flowers, this bird is mouthwateringly moist and contrasts nicely with the sweet hoisin sauce. If your server calls out, as mine did, "You need a box, lady?" you might yell "No."

5978 Stellhorn Road (Maplewood Plaza). (260) 485-9175. Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturday. Dinner 4:30-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 4:30-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday.

Yen Ching

There is little to challenge the wary diner at Yen Ching. You won't find bird's nests, shark fins or snake on the extensive menu. You will find familiar ingredients prepared and presented far better than what you might have had from a can. The moo shu pork (or, if you ask for it, the moo shu chicken) is a mildly spicy, flavorful, crunchy version of a wrap: meat and egg sautéed with cabbage, shredded carrots and onions and rolled in Chinese pancakes (which look and taste a lot like Mexican tortillas). It's served with a thick, sweet plum sauce for dipping — or dribbling over the rice served on the side. The Happy Family sounds fun and tastes great, featuring fat scallops, beef, chicken, shrimp, carrots, broccoli, cabbage and water chestnuts in a creamy brown sauce. The ambiance at Yen Ching is the true delight: Giant curved booths on a riser along one wall look across the dimmed room into a wall lined with mirrors, opening up the quiet, refined space. Feeling daring? Sip on some warm sake, a taste that takes getting used to (or dare to follow your fortune cookie and quit your job/get married/bet your retirement on the lottery).

6410 W. Jefferson Blvd. (Covington Plaza). (260) 436-7788. 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday.

The Saigon



This is a busy little spot midday. Families and professionals fill the round tables and line the lunch counter, a Formica bar reminiscent of an old soda fountain — plus a few ceramic statues, fake flowers and pictures of Jesus. Service is delivered with an efficient smile. They assume you know what you're in for when you order here, though the gentleman at the counter was willing to reveal his favorite (No. 34). Choose chopsticks or a fork, but try one of the traditional Vietnamese noodle soups. More rice noodle than soup, these giant steaming bowls of vegetables, herbs and aromatics come in a variety of tongue-tingling flavors. Other noodle dishes pack a sassy (but not hot) punch. My *hu tieu xao thap cam* (sautéed rice noodles with vegetables, shrimp and beef, No. 34) came with cauliflower, peapods, broccoli, shrimp, sliced beef, onions, mushrooms, some cabbage, two pieces of crabmeat, a bit of pork and the kitchen sink, all lightly coated in a sticky, flavorful sauce. The *ca kho to* (catfish fillet simmered in a clay pot) in its light soy sauce would have been great without so many bones. Café da, Vietnamese coffee with ice, is a bold and creamy finish when stirred with sweetened milk.

2006 S. Calhoun St. (corner of Williams and Calhoun). (260) 456-8550. 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday. Cash only.



From The Saigon: *Pho doc biet*, a noodle soup with beef

Baan Thai



From the exterior, you'd hardly know what a treasure Baan Thai is. Tucked in a strip mall behind dark windows, the restaurant bears an anonymity that makes it feel like a wonderful secret club. Prompt, polite service and soothing music make dining here a tranquil experience. And the food! Coconut milk and peanuts add a complex sweetness to many dishes. Skip the standard sweet-and-sour for the exotic-sounding *gang keaw waan* (green curry in coconut milk with meat, zucchini, peas and basil) and *gang panang* (panang curry in coconut milk with bell pepper and lime leaves). Neither is too spicy, and every bite is a different but harmonious flavor. Likewise for the *pad thai*, thin rice noodles pan-fried with bean sprouts, scallions, eggs and ground peanuts. Like your Thai hot? Start with the wonton soup and escalate from there. Only one word of warning: The *thod mun pla* (fried fish cakes served with cucumber sauce) is nothing like crabcakes with a dill or yogurt sauce. But you're seeking adventure, right? Here it is.

4634 Coldwater Road (The Shoppes). (260) 471-2929. Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Dinner 5-9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 2:30-9:30 p.m. Saturday and noon-8 p.m. Sunday.



From Baan Thai: Clockwise from top left, Curry Puff, Shrimp Pad Thai, Green Curry and Panang Curry.

Chef's Hut



Formerly the Raja, then Square Indique, the restaurant now known as Chef's Hut still is spare and plain. Obviously the management saved the pizzazz for the food. These Indian dishes probably are spiced a bit closer to the real thing (they cleared my sinuses). The chef was very concerned about the temperature, though, visiting our table to assess our opinion. He likely would use a lighter hand if asked. You yearn for the burn? Try the mango *dal* or the cabbage fry — either will set you alight. The cooler *aloo papdi* chat ("little snack") with potatoes, *papdi*, cilantro, onions and chutney tastes a bit like coleslaw when topped with tamarind sauce. For something unusual, try the *dosa*, a crispy Indian crepe with the faint scent of hops, or the *paneer mutter masala*, large, rubbery cubes of cheese in a rich red sauce. More familiar in texture is the chicken *tikka masala*, the sauce still great and the chicken better. Though the server that day was totally unfamiliar with the food, the attentive chef imparted knowledge as well as his plans to add Chinese and even Italian to the menu. Watch for this fiery fusion!

5462 Coldwater Road (Coldwater Plaza). (260) 483-1065. Lunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 5:30-9 p.m. Sunday.



Tandoori chicken from Taj Mahal

Taj Mahal

The rich fragrance of hearty northern and southern Indian cooking perfumes the very door of the Taj Mahal. The interior is Generic Ethnic Restaurant, but the food evokes a far different experience. Don't be scared by the onion chutney served with *pappad* (crisp lentil wafers) when you are seated — it's the spiciest thing you'll eat unless you ask them to turn up the heat. The chicken curry is a no-brainer here, tender chunks of meat swimming in a thick, savory sauce nicely scooped up by a warm slice of *naan* (flat sourdough bread grilled in the tandoori). The chickpeas drenched in a creamy, slightly sweeter ginger and garlic sauce (*chana masala*) have just the right consistency, akin to al dente pasta. Fans of smoked meat will love the *tandoori* chicken, which falls off the bone. (The battered tandoori fish is less appealing.) If you ordered more spice than you can stomach, some *raitha*, a milky, cucumber-flavored yogurt sauce, will cool your taste buds quickly. An even better counterbalance is the *kheer*, a wonderful dessert of rice drowned in sweet milk. There's nothing too tricky here, but the really chicken will dig the chicken *pakora* and a strawberry *lassi*, a.k.a. fried chicken strips and a strawberry yogurt shake.

6410 W. Jefferson Blvd. (Covington Plaza). (260) 432-8993. Includes Indian market next door. Lunch buffet: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Dinner: 3-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 3-10:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday and 3-9 p.m. Sunday. No personal checks.

King Gyros



How many times have you driven by King Gyros on your way to yet another burger joint? Next time, turn in and step up to the counter at "Fort Wayne's best and original since 1990." This may be a fast food diner, but you'll see lamb slow-roasting on vertical spits behind the counter until it's shaved off into a thick, chewy pita for a gyro. Lamb has a slightly more intense flavor than beef, a flavor that generally grows on those who give it a chance. It makes a much more zesty sandwich than beef when topped with tomatoes, onions and a cucumber sauce requiring a thousand napkins. (Can anyone at the drive-through really eat a gyro in the car?) If you think "ewe" when you eat lamb, get the chicken pita combo with fries: more grease and less Greece.

The Greek salad here is a deal, packed with red onions, pepperoncinis, tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, hunks of feta, kalamata olives (watch the pit) and a nice oil/vinegar dressing. And the *spanakopita* (spinach pie) is a meal in itself, creamy spinach and feta between layers of flaky phyllo dough. Better get the baklava, too. What Midwesterner can deny the appeal of flaky dough, this time with sugar? A bit of Greek right down the street.

302 W. Jefferson Blvd. (260) 422-4455. 10 a.m.-3 a.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-4 a.m. Friday, 11 a.m.-4 a.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-midnight Sunday.

The Italian Connection



Those who know noodles can be seen filing into what looks like a small, nondescript house in a neighborhood of like structures. Family pictures on every wall inside do little to dispel the feeling that you're in what used to be someone's parlor. Tables are tucked here and there, occasionally separated by shelves bearing row after row of drained vino bottles. Limited hours, limited seating and limited visibility are no matter, however, when you make noodles like they make noodles. Portions are modest, so start with the antipasto, an assortment of salami, prosciutto, olives, cheese and peppers (some startlingly hot, some not).

Then dig into the soft, warm bread with butter and garlic to shore up the tiny salad. The familiar chicken manicotti is delicious accompanied by a nice cabernet/sangiovese blend, but the star here is the homemade pasta, thick and chewy. The simple linguini with clam in olive oil lets the noodles shine (you hardly taste the clams, for better or worse depending on whether you like clams). Of course, all that sauce requires something sweet. The cannoli serves the purpose – unless you've done South Beach, in which case you might have ricotta flashbacks. Go for the zabaglione, a hyper-sweet cinnamon custard like we wish our mamas made.

2725 Taylor Street. (260) 432-9702. 5-9 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday.

Las Lomas



You can't miss the building: The exterior is painted like a giant Cheeto. Its garishness belies a refined and civilized interior with ceramic tile floor, cushioned chairs, booths hand-painted with cacti and murals, a tin ceiling, stucco walls and lots of warm wood. Even warmer was the hospitality. Our lovely server sat down after the meal to chat, and the manager checked on diners repeatedly. You might feel moved, as I did, to explore the world of possibilities on the oh-so-authentic menu and order a *taco con lengua* ... otherwise known as a cow tongue taco. It's not some clever name. This is cow tongue skinned, boiled, chopped and served on a small corn/flour soft/crispy tortilla with onions and cilantro. Don't think about it, and you'd swear you were eating pot roast with a smoother, tender texture. Can't get past the ick factor? The *sope* is super, a thick cornbread patty topped with *pastor* (marinated pork) or other meat, lettuce, tomato and beans. Or get the *taquitos dorados*, four crispy fried corn tortillas filled with chicken and served with guacamole, sour cream, beans, rice, lettuce and tomato. Or get a plain-old ground beef taco and soak up the rich salsa and delightful atmosphere.

2202 Fairfield Ave. (260) 744-6896. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 10 a.m.-3 a.m. Friday-Saturday



From Las Lomas, clockwise from top left, chimichanga, quesadilla and tingo de camaron

Queenie Mae's



There's no way to be in a sour mood when you head to Queenie Mae's for soul food.

Mac and cheese, dressing, fried chicken wings, sweet potato pie, peach cobbler — it's like trading in a working lunch for Sunday dinner at home. You can cut the smothered pork steak with a fork, then use that same fork to pull apart a pile of sweet and tender rib tips. The black-eyed peas can come off a little earthy-tasting, but the red beans and rice have a surprising smoky flavor perfect with the aforementioned rib tips. I did pass on the pig's feet but tried the chicken liver, which is fine as liver goes. Better is the mashed potatoes and gravy; something — it might be butter, it might be bacon grease

— makes it richer than anything Trump's ever created. Big cornbread pancakes are standing by to soak up anything left on your plate. Ready for dessert? You might only need the yams and a quart jar of iced tea, both saturated with a heavy dose of honey. Colorful paint and paintings, good grooves and a healthy helping of carbs make Queenie Mae's good for the soul.

Queenie Mae's Soul Food, 1714 E. Pontiac St. 745-0418. Breakfast, lunch and dinner: Closed Monday, 6 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 6 a.m.-7 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Lunch buffet 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m.



Comfort food from Queenies. Clockwise from bottom: Chicken wings, corn, black-eyed peas with okra; Catfish, fried okra and green beans; Smothered pork, macaroni & cheese and greens; Rib tips, yams and green beans.

Panadarias and taquerias

The heaven-scent *panadaria* on Wells Street, Indiana Mexican Bakery, is pure *pan dulce* pleasure. At the top of the steep stairs you'll open the door to fragrant warmth and friendly greetings in a tiny shop where bakery trays are stacked high and wide for the browsing. Grab a tray and tongs to try such treats as *conchas* or *besos*, each described to us by a man rightfully enthused about his sweet breads. Decisions, decisions! All the while, others are kneading and stretching the delicious dough behind the counter. Each item was a mere 40 or 50 cents, and he threw in a soft *torta* loaf to go. A dozen might not be enough!

You'll find more fresh *pan dulce* at Los Lagos, the Mexican grocery at Fairfield and Creighton avenues. You can first have lunch, however, at the quick-service counter in back where they serve up *menudo*, *lengua*, *pastor*, *pollo* and other traditional tacos. Such *taquerias* are common in Mexican groceries, much like the coffee bars in new supermarkets. George's International Grocery at Taylor Street and Broadway has rows of tables sporting Greek vases where diners can watch passersby as they wait on their tacos *con churizo*, *cilantro y cebolla* or a giant *quesadilla* with chicken, lettuce, tomato, thick avocado wedges and a thin layer of sharp cheese. Still craving authentic? Centro Americano on West Jefferson Boulevard serves its *chili rellenos* (stuffed green peppers) fried and wraps its simple, traditional corn tamale in a husk tied up like a little present (be sure to unwrap before you eat).

Indiana Mexican Bakery

1421 N. Wells St., Fort Wayne
(260) 424-8570

Los Lagos

417 W. Creighton Ave.
(260) 744-2039

George's International Grocery

2021 Broadway
(260) 420-5565

Centro Americano

313-315 W. Jefferson Blvd.
(260) 420-2844

Continue the adventure

This list of world cuisine restaurants was updated just before press time.

Pan-Asian

Kaysan's, 7102 S. Anthony Blvd., 447-5197

Chinese

China Buffet, 5968 W. Jefferson Blvd., 459-0738

China Express, 1003 W. Coliseum Blvd., 484-4990

China House Restaurant, 3119 E. State Blvd., 408-8888

China Palace, 5810 Bluffton Road, 747-0370

China Wok, 5441 S. Anthony Blvd., 447-6102

Chung King Express, 3101 N. Anthony Blvd., 471-1288

Double Dragon Restaurant, 117 W. Wayne St., 422-6426

Golden China Restaurant, 1738 W. Washington Center Road, 489-6725

Golden Dragon Restaurant, 6193 W. Jefferson Blvd., 459-1488

Great Wall Buffet, 3824 W. Jefferson Blvd., 432-8258

Hainan House, 1820 Bluffton Road, 747-3936

Imperial Gate, 322 E. Pettit Ave., 745-8398

House of Hunan, 5626 Coldwater Road, 482-9402

Jade Restaurant, 6736 E. State Blvd., 749-0423

Lon Sen Chinese Buffet, 1583 W. Dupont Road, 490-7462

May Sen Chinese Buffet, 10520 Maysville Road, 492-7887

Memories of China, 1535 N. Coliseum Blvd., 426-1118

New China Buffet, 4122 Northrop St., 483-1238