

Midwestern Cuisine

MIDWESTERNERS do things their own way, and when it comes to food, the region is flooded with deliciousness—deliciousness that much of the country hasn't heard about: the Maxwell Street polish, cheese curds, loose-meat sandwiches, or lefse. This wide variety of foods can be credited to the Midwest's hugely-diverse immigration history and climate. Also, sometimes, when it's that cold for that long, you might invent new dishes just to pass the time.



Objective:



Summarize midwestern cuisine and its influences, common food ingredients, and classic cuisine.

Key Terms:



cheese curds	hotdish	molecular gastronomy
Chicago-style hot dog	hungarian goulash	pierogi
Cincinnati chili	Kansas City barbecue	rennet
Coney Island hot dog	lefse	slinger
curd	loose-meat sandwich	St. Louis-style pizza
deep-dish pizza	lutefisk	toasted ravioli
fish boil	Maxwell Street polish	Wisconsin supper club
gooey butter cake	midwestern cuisine	

Midwest Regional Cuisine

MIDWEST CUISINE INFLUENCES

Midwestern cuisine is the regional fare of the Great Lakes and the northern plains region of the United States.

History

Sometimes called the “Breadbasket of America,” it draws its most significant culinary roots from the cuisines of Central, Northern, and Eastern Europe. This area is influenced by regionally and locally grown foods and cultural diversity. The Midwest is home to many regional specialties and some of the most iconic foods of the United States. Though most midwestern food is not fancy cuisine, many of these dishes are symbols of Americana: hot dogs, fruit pies, pizza, chili, ice cream, and hotdishes—not fancy, but very, very good-tasting foods.



FIGURE 1. The Midwest is often called the “Breadbasket of America” due to the corn, soybeans, and wheat grown in the region. However, the Midwest is also home to vast fields of sunflowers that produce seeds, oil, and birdseed.

Location

The United States Midwest consists of the states in the center of the country and east of the Rocky Mountains. The area has contributed a great deal to American cooking, while supporting varied populations and their culinary influences. The region is a mix of rich agricultural areas and industrial cities. Migration from the American east and immigration from the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia have made their mark on both rural and urban areas. Later, waves of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe to the Midwest have also influenced the culture and the cuisine. The area’s land mass is vast, and the food is varied and rich. Virtually anywhere in the Midwest, you can feast on classic American cuisine or regional specialties. Each state in this region contributes different food offerings.

- ◆ Illinois [corn, soybeans, morel mushrooms, Chicago-style pizza, and the horseshoe sandwich (famous in Springfield, IL)]
- ◆ Indiana (sugar cream pie, persimmon pudding, pork tenderloin sandwiches, and beef and noodles)
- ◆ Iowa (pork, loose-meat sandwiches, and Dutch letters)
- ◆ Kansas (alcoholic beverages and barbecue)
- ◆ Michigan (asparagus, apples, blueberries, cherries, Michigan chicken salad, fruit salsas, wine, beer, pasties, and fudge)
- ◆ Minnesota (lefse, lutefisk, walleye, wild rice, and hotdish)
- ◆ Missouri (barbecue, sweet tea, toasted ravioli, gooey butter cake, the slinger, “throwed” rolls, and St. Louis-style pizza)
- ◆ Nebraska (corn and beef)

- ◆ North Dakota (bison, krumkake, rosettes, kuchen, juneberry pie, fleisschkuechle, and knoephla)
- ◆ Ohio (buckeyes, Cincinnati chili, and sauerkraut balls)
- ◆ Wisconsin (“America’s Dairyland,” cheese, ice cream, cranberries, fish boils, kringle, beer, supper clubs)

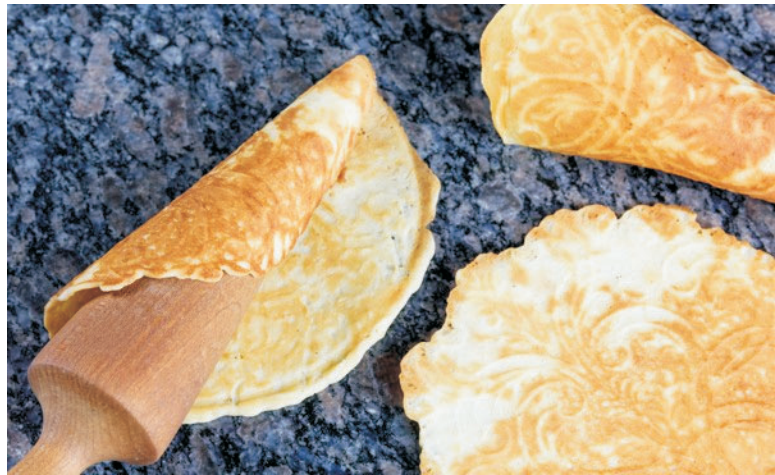


FIGURE 2. In North Dakota these Scandinavian cookies are staples: krumkake (imprinted waffle cookies) and rosettes (molded, deep-fried pastry). Both cookies are crispy and “melt in your mouth.”

German Influence

In the early 1700’s, German immigrants arrived, bringing beer, sauerkraut, and sausages with them. They also introduced the tradition of serving meals family style—meat platters, relish trays, hearty soups, vegetables, baskets of rolls, and pies all set on the table at the same time and passed to each guest.

British Influence

In the late 1700’s, British immigrants arrived, bringing pasties (meat pies), bread puddings, and roasted meats with potatoes.

Other Influences

Scandinavian immigrants introduced the Midwest to lefse (potato bread) and meatballs. Hungarian immigrants brought goulash, and other cultures brought pastas and their native cheeses.

Geography

The Midwest is known for its plains (long stretches of grassland), but there are other topographical and climate attributes worth mentioning.

Topography

The Midwest is not only made up of flatlands, but many states have natural and artificial lakes, mountains, and streams. (For example, Minnesota claims more than 10,000 lakes.) Far from the oceans, midwesterners traditionally ate little seafood. Instead, they relied on local freshwater fish, such as perch and trout, supplemented with canned or cured tuna, salmon, and herring.

Modern air shipping of ocean seafood has been increasing the midwesterners’ taste for ocean fish. Today, flights into all major midwestern cities bring fresh seafood from all over the world.

Climate

The Midwest has four distinct seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. Based on the season and the state, the climate is constantly changing. In the northern areas, springs are mild, with temperatures of about 70°F. Summers there are warm, averaging 80°F, while fall temperatures are cooler at 40°F to 50°F. In general, the northern winters are snowy and cold with average temperatures of about 10°F. The climate is affected by the area's location in the region and its vicinity in relation to the Great Lakes: Areas near the lakes are cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Lake-effect snow is moist, with enormous flakes.

The climate and terrain of the Midwest are perfect for cultivating crops. Although their regional title is the “Breadbasket of America,” individually, Kansas is called the “Wheat State,” Iowa is the “Corn State,” and Nebraska is the “Cornhusker State.”

Michigan produces much of the country's asparagus—a vegetable crop whose sprouts are widespread in the spring season. Western and Northern Michigan's climates allow for growing apples, blueberries, and cherries. The northwestern portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula accounts for approximately 75 percent of the United State's tart cherry crops.

Midwestern states also produce most of the country's wild rice.



FIGURE 3. The northwestern portion of Michigan's Lower Peninsula accounts for approximately 75 percent of the United State's tart cherry crops. What are the main recipe differences between tart cherries and sweeter varieties, such as Ranier and black cherries?

Culture

As with most of American regional fare, immigrant groups that settled in the Midwest heavily influenced the cuisine. In the northern portion of the Midwest, the predominant number of immigrants were northern European.

German

Wisconsin, Missouri, Kansas, Ohio, and Illinois were destinations for many German immigrants. Pork sausage and potatoes are common menu items. Beer is also a Midwest experience influenced by German settlers.

- ◆ Leinenkugel's: Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin
- ◆ Berghoff: Chicago, Illinois and Monroe, Wisconsin
- ◆ Anheuser-Busch: St. Louis, Missouri

- ◆ Schlitz, Pabst, Blatz, and MillerCoors: Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- ◆ Goose Island: Chicago, Illinois
- ◆ Bell's: Kalamazoo, Michigan

Greek

In the Rust Belt (Illinois, Michigan and Ohio were part of this region), many Greek newcomers became restaurateurs and imparted a strong Mediterranean influence to the region's cuisine.

Native American

Native peoples' influences are evident in the numerous uses of corn and wild rice in regional cuisine. For example, corn and rice are some of the largest crops grown in the Midwest. They are often used as side dishes and incorporated in many hotdish casseroles.

Scandinavian

Strong Scandinavian influences appear across Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin in iconic dishes, such as lefse and lutefisk. Lefse and lutefisk are very common in Christmas and New Year's Day meals.

Religious and Holiday Celebrations

Christian religions are dominant in the Midwest: Christmas and Easter are the main religious holidays. These holidays are generally observed in the same way as the rest of the United States—families gather to celebrate, visit, and eat. Served family style, Christmas and New Year's Day menus often include a main course of roasted ham or turkey accompanied by a variety of vegetables (potatoes, carrots, green beans, or corn).

Midwesterners celebrate many non-religious holidays and festivals, including Thanksgiving (the commemoration of the feast between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans in 1621). Midwesterners, as most Americans, celebrate Thanksgiving with a spread of turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, green bean casserole, rolls, and a variety of pies (pumpkin, pecan, and apple).



FIGURE 4. Midwesterners value holidays where they gather around food, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter.

Mealtime Customs

Generally, midwesterners and Americans eat three meals a day plus snacks. Breakfast may be hearty (with bacon, sausage, eggs, toast or biscuits, grits or oatmeal, and coffee), or it could be as simple as a doughnut or cinnamon roll with coffee.

Lunch is usually a light meal: a sandwich, a salad, a bowl of soup, or a hamburger and french fries picked up from a fast food restaurant. Many students buy lunch at the school cafeteria, or they carry a brown-bag lunch brought from home. Often, barbecued pork sandwiches, chicken nuggets, and hamburgers are found on school cafeteria menus, while a sandwich, potato chips, and fruit are brought from home.

Dinner is the main meal of the day—usually the time when family members gather to eat and talk about their day. Large family dinners are traditionally cooked on Sundays. Dinner (or supper) usually consists of meat (beef, chicken, ham, or pork chops), one or two vegetables (corn, green beans, or carrots), and a starch (potatoes, rice, or noodles). Baked beans are also very common dinner fare. Dinner is often eaten at home, but may also be eaten at a “sit-down” restaurant.

Cuisine

A surge of immigration, beginning around the time of the Civil War, brought Europeans to the region—especially from Germany, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Eastern Europe (Poland and Hungary). This wave of immigrants brought the adaptation of many regional dishes to the newcomers’ own tastes, infusing them with traditions from their homelands. The fusion of cultures has created many midwestern specialties that represent the people and the lifestyle of the region.

Hotdish

Hotdish is a casserole; an all-in-one meal invented for its convenience and ability to quickly feed a large group of people. It is a classic midwestern staple and a significant piece of American culture. Hotdish is closely associated with Minnesota, and it normally consists of a starch (potatoes, pasta, rice) combined with meat, vegetables, and a liquid to bind the ingredients together. Hotdish is then baked in a casserole dish and served hot (making it a hearty meal during the cold midwestern winter). Examples of hotdishes include:

- ◆ Hash brown casserole
- ◆ Chicken and wild rice
- ◆ Shepard’s pie

Loose-Meat Sandwich

A **loose-meat sandwich** is cooked, crumbled ground beef (mixed with sautéed onions, mustard, sugar, salt and pepper) served with pickles on a burger bun. The loose-meat sandwich is a close cousin to the sloppy joe, a version in which the meat is cooked in tomato sauce

or ketchup, making for an even messier meal. Maid-Rite is an Iowa-based restaurant whose name is synonymous with loose-meat sandwiches.

Pierogi

Pierogi is a Polish dumpling (similar to a ravioli or a pot sticker) that is usually filled with potato, sauerkraut, ground meat, and cheese. The dumplings are boiled and then baked or fried, and they are served with butter or sour cream. Dessert pierogies are filled with various fruits. Polish cooks and chefs brought this meal to the Midwest, where they are a popular treat today.



FIGURE 5. Maid-Rite is a well-known loose-meat sandwich chain from Iowa. Loose-meat sandwiches are also known as a loose hamburger or a tavern sandwich. It's a close cousin to the sloppy joe.

Hungarian Goulash

Hungarian goulash is a stew (of beef or veal with vegetables) that is seasoned with paprika and other spices. A Midwest version often contains macaroni, tomato sauce, and some vegetables, like corn, peppers, or beans. It is sometimes baked in a casserole and topped with cheddar cheese. This dish is especially popular in Cleveland, Ohio.



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: Midwestern Dining

The Midwest is home to many headquarters of the fast-food industry: McDonald's in Oak Brook, Illinois; Hardee's in St. Louis, Missouri; Culver's in Sauk City, Wisconsin; Steak n' Shake in Indianapolis, Indiana (founded in Normal, Illinois); Wendy's in Dublin, Ohio; Pizza Hut, founded in Wichita, Kansas; White Castle in Columbus, Ohio; Little Caesars in Detroit, Michigan; and Domino's Pizza in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Visit one of these restaurant chains' social media websites on Facebook or Twitter and leave a food review for one of the menu items.



Did you love that item? If so, let the company know! Would you recommend any changes to improve their menu? Corporate loves to hear feedback from their customers!

Lefse and Lutefisk

Lefse and lutefisk are two dishes that originated in Norway. Scandinavian settlers in Minnesota (and other upper-Midwest states) brought these dishes with them. Both dishes are now staples in midwestern cuisine.

Lefse is a mashed-potato-based dough, similar to a pancake or a tortilla, that is baked on a griddle. It is served as a side to many Scandinavian dishes. Lefse is rolled up with savory (such as meatballs) or sweet fillings, and it is especially popular during the Christmas season. Sweetened lefse is heated and rolled with melted butter, sugar, and/or cinnamon. It is also served as a side, with coffee or at dinner.

Lutefisk is dried cod that is soaked and cured in a water and lye solution (and then simmered).

Lutefisk is served hot with salt and pepper, melted butter, and a side of lefse. It is a traditional Norwegian dish that became popular with Minnesotans. Madison, Minnesota, has claimed the title of the “Lutefisk Capital of the World.” The state consumes more lutefisk per capita than any part of the nation. Lutefisk is eaten during cold winters. It is a common Christmas dish for Americans of Norwegian descent.



FIGURE 6. Lefse is especially popular during the Christmas season in the Midwest. Sweetened lefse is heated and rolled with melted butter, sugar, and/or cinnamon. It is also served as a side, with coffee or at dinner.

FOOD INGREDIENTS AND CUISINE

The Midwest’s regional fare is considered simple and hearty. Dairy products (such as milk or cheese) and eggs are common ingredients. Popular main dishes include roasts, stews, and numerous dishes made from trout and whitefish. Rice is used in many side dishes and desserts, and wheat bread or cornbread accompany many meals. Many midwestern foods are based on the season. In summer months, picnic foods are enjoyed. The harsh winter season once forced cooks to find preservation methods for their food: smoking, pickling, and canning.

Spices and Herbs

Traditionally, midwestern cooks use a “light hand” with seasonings. However, Latin American and Asian immigrants have helped broaden the taste buds of midwesterners. Preferred spices and herbs include sage, dill, caraway, mustard, and parsley. Hot, bold, and spicy flavors are common in hard sausages, sausage patties, and barbecue sauces.

Dairy

As “America’s Dairyland,” Wisconsin is home to numerous cheesemakers and frozen-custard stands. Wisconsin cheesemaking is very diverse, ranging from artisans who handcraft cheeses from the milk of their own dairy herds to large “stainless steel” factories. When making cheese, milk is pasteurized and cooked until the whey (liquid) separates from the curd. A **Curd** is the solid bit of coagulated protein created by acidifying milk with rennet. The curd is placed in a mold and pressed to release more moisture, and this creates a wheel (or block) of cheese. [NOTE: **Rennet** is a complex of enzymes produced in the stomachs of ruminant animals—used to curdle milk.]

Any fresh curd that doesn’t make it into the mold is a cheese curd. **Cheese curds** are freshly-coagulated, cut cheese pieces (usually two to three inches). They have a mild, slightly rubbery texture, possess a somewhat salty taste, and make a squeaky sound when eaten.

Cheese curds are a common addition to many meals, and can be eaten as a cold snack or as a batter-fried appetizer. Deep-fried cheese curds are often served with ranch dressing.



FIGURE 7. Cheese curds are a common addition to many meals, and can be eaten as a cold snack or as a batter-fried appetizer. Deep-fried cheese curds are often served with a ranch dressing.

Urban Centers

Major Midwest urban areas feature distinctive cuisines that are very different from the region’s rural areas. Some larger cities—Chicago, Kansas City, and Minneapolis-St. Paul—are home to world-class restaurants.

Barberton, Ohio

Barberton is located in the greater Akron area. It is a small industrial city with a strong central and eastern European heritage. It is the home of “Barberton Chicken,” created by Siberian immigrants. This dish is comprised of chicken that is deep fried in lard and accompanied by sides of hot rice, coleslaw, and french fries.

Chicago, Illinois

Not only is Chicago the home of the National Restaurant Association, but Chicago’s rich ethnic neighborhoods support a vibrant restaurant scene with numerous local specialties. The **Maxwell Street polish** is a grilled or fried length of Polish sausage served on a bun and topped with grilled onions and yellow mustard, with the option of pickled, green sport peppers.

The **Chicago-style hot dog** is a high-quality (often Kosher) frankfurter that is topped with yellow mustard, chopped white onions, bright-green sweet pickle relish, a dill pickle spear, tomato slices or wedges, pickled sport peppers, and a dash of celery salt. Due to the many toppings, the fully assembled Chicago-style hot dog is said to have been “dragged through the garden.”

Chicago-style pizza refers to several different styles of pizza developed in the city and suburbs. The most famous of these is deep-dish pizza. **Deep-dish pizza** is a pizza made by creating a thick layer of dough that is formed into a bowl within a high-sided pan—topped with meat, vegetables, and cheese. Then, an additional layer of dough is placed on top and pressed to the sides of the bottom crust (also called stuffed deep-dish).

Chicago is the Midwest’s center of molecular gastronomy. **Molecular gastronomy** is a blend of physics and chemistry that transforms the tastes and textures of food. It is a style of cuisine in which chefs explore culinary possibilities by combining tools from the science lab with ingredients from the food industry.

Cincinnati, Ohio

Cincinnati, called the “Queen City,” is home to its famous Cincinnati chili. **Cincinnati chili** is a Greek-inspired meat sauce served over spaghetti or hot dogs. Unlike chili con carne, Cincinnati chili is never served or eaten by itself; instead, it is eaten in “ways.”

- ◆ Two-way: Chili with spaghetti.
- ◆ Three-way: Cheddar cheese is added.
- ◆ Four-way: Chopped raw onion is added.
- ◆ Five-way: Kidney beans are added.
- ◆ Coney: These “ways” can also be found on a Cincinnati cheese Coney dog, a regional variation of a Coney Island hot dog.

Detroit, Michigan

Detroit specialties include Coney Island hot dogs, not to be confused with a regular chili dog. A **Coney Island hot dog** is a frankfurter served with ground beef sauce, chopped onions, and mustard.



FIGURE 8. Due to its many toppings, the fully assembled Chicago-style hot dog is said to have been “dragged through the garden.”

St. Louis, Missouri

St. Louis' local cuisine includes an abundant variety of beef, pork, and chicken dishes (often roasted or grilled). The city also has a variety of desserts, including rich cakes, stollens, fruit pies, doughnuts, and cookies. A few local specialties are included below.

- ◆ **Goosey butter cake** is a rich, soft-centered coffeecake.
- ◆ **Toasted ravioli** is stuffed ravioli, breaded and fried.
- ◆ **St. Louis-style pizza** is a crisp, thin-crust pie made with provolone cheese (instead of traditional mozzarella).
- ◆ A **slinger** is a late-night-diner specialty dish of eggs, hash browns, and hamburger that is topped with chili, cheese, and onion.

Wisconsin, Statewide

In Wisconsin, a **fish boil** is a mix of chunked Lake Michigan (or Lake Superior) whitefish, red potatoes, and small onions that is boiled outside in a large stockpot (preferably cast iron) filled with heavily-salted water. The ingredients are added in a particular order and cooked for a specific amount of time before each addition. When the fish and vegetables are cooked, the boiler (the cook) adds kerosene to the fire to increase the heat. The dish is done when the fish oils rise to the top and the mixture “boils over.” A serving consists of ladling melted butter over a chunk of fish and a few potatoes and onions. Next, the dish is garnished with lemon wedges and possibly a side of fresh coleslaw. Fish boils are a tradition in areas of Wisconsin that include large populations of Scandinavian descendants.

A **Wisconsin Supper Club** is generally a moderately-priced, independently-owned restaurant located in “a pretty spot on the edge of town.” In the 1920's Prohibition Era, roadhouses materialized where gangsters stopped on moonshine runs. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, liquor licenses were first granted to establishments that served food and were outside of city limits, thus giving birth to the supper club.

Kansas City, Kansas

The Kansas City metropolitan area is renowned for barbecue. **Kansas City barbecue** is a specific, regional style of barbecuing meat. The slab of meat is smoked slowly over a variety of firewood and then covered with a thick tomato- and molasses-based sauce. There are more than 100 barbecue restaurants in the metropolitan area, and it is home to several large, well-attended barbecue cooking contests. Kansas City barbecue sauce is tomato-based, contains sweet, spicy, and tangy flavor profiles, and is an integral part of the city's barbecue experience.

Summary:



When it's not meat and potatoes, it's...well, still meat and potatoes, except it's disguised as casserole, soup, or meatloaf. Meals in the Midwest are a hearty mix of German, Greek, Polish, British, and Scandinavian cuisines. They are heavy on the

cream and light on the spices. Dairy products (such as milk and cheese) and eggs are common ingredients in midwestern cooking. Entrée staples include roasts, stews, and dishes made from trout and whitefish. Rice is used in many side dishes and desserts. Typically, wheat bread and cornbread accompany meals. With the Midwest being the home of the potluck dinner, you can be sure that you'll always find a place to pull up a chair.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Describe the role the Midwest's geography plays in midwestern cuisine.
2. Why is the Midwest considered "the Breadbasket of America"?
3. List five staple dishes of midwestern cuisine.
4. List five classic sandwiches of the Midwest.
5. Describe the influence Chicago has on midwestern cuisine.

Expanding Your Knowledge:



The Midwest is home to a variety of styles of pizza, from Chicago's deep dish and stuffed pizza, to the super thin crust of a St. Louis-style pizza. Although the Midwest introduced a variety of pizza styles, the United States, as a whole, "does pizza" in so many different ways. Research six different pizza styles from across the country. Compare and contrast the various styles. Note the ingredients used, the crust, the sauce, the uniqueness of each style, and the region in which it is most popular. Begin your research using the "Web Links" videos below. Then, access the article "21 Things You've Definitely Eaten If You Grew Up In The Midwest" <https://www.thrillist.com/eat/nation/best-midwestern-foods-tenderloin-coneys-chislic-custard-and-more>.

Web Links:



History of Pizza in Eight Slices!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxUaTQ2_CsM

Six Must-Try Pizza Styles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X81MNX7dbrM>

60 Seconds: Pizza Styles Across America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzVfu1bV1AE>