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Summertime . . . and the Eating is Easy!

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

Summer really begins in the North Country on the Fourth of July. It ends on Labor Day. Cruel as that may seem to someone living south of here, most of us have learned to adapt. From the time the last graduate crosses the stage in late June until the dreaded ads for back-to-school specials appear in local papers in mid-August, we abandon winter's routines and get happy. Work ends at four o'clock on Friday, or even at noon. We go to our camp in the woods or to the cottage on the river at every opportunity, maybe for weeks at a time. We welcome far-flung family and friends who would only come to see us in February under duress. Summer is precious to us, so we cram lots of fun things into a few weeks. Some of the special things of summer for me are food treats we can't get any other time of year. I'll share some of my favorites.

Since I can't wait for real summer, by the time the ice goes out of local waters, I'm ready for a "michigan" from Clare & Carl's. That's a decorated hotdog with a finely-ground meat sauce, secret seasonings, and chopped onions on a generous-sized soft bun. Peculiar to the Lake Champlain region in New York, especially Plattsburgh, it's been called a michigan ever since (according to local legend) Eula Otis, a short-order cook from Michigan, introduced her recipe to a local hotdog stand in the 1920s—and the rest, as we say, is history.

As for my destination, it's the oldest and my own favorite of the local stands. Acclaimed food writers Jane and Michael Stern wrote in the October 2006 issue of *Gourmet*: "The original Clare & Carl's is a lakeside drive-in with character to spare, its clapboard walls so old that they appear to have settled deep into the earth. Carhops attend customers in a broad parking lot, and there is a U-shaped counter with padded stools inside. A menu posted above the open kitchen lists michigans first, but signs outside advertise the house specialty as Texas red

hots." Whatever you call them, they are a sure sign of summer for me.

My hunger assuaged for a little while, I may have to wait a few weeks, until Memorial Day weekend, for my first of several stops of the season at Donnelly's Ice Cream on a scenic state road outside Saranac Lake. The parking lot outside the tiny roadside stand offers one of the most breathtaking views of the Adirondack high peaks to be had. Once inside, I'm greeted by a handmade sign declaring, "Please pick a SIZE the flavor has ALREADY been decided for you!" That's because Donnelly's has famously featured only one flavor of soft-serve twist ice cream each day of the week since they first opened next door to the family dairy farm and milk processing plant in 1953. The schedule has been fixed for years. Regulars from town and summer camps know it by heart: Monday is "nut surprise"; Tuesday is raspberry; Wednesday, chocolate; Thursday, "fruit surprise"; and Saturday and Sunday, chocolate again. On hot summer nights, you may have to wait in line for quite a while, but it's always well worth it.

July and August are county fair time in the North Country, giving us plenty of opportunities—from blooming onions to cotton candy—to gorge ourselves on foods that could make our family doc, much less a nutritionist, wince. I'm especially partial to two: Freeman's Old Style Taffy and Frenchy's Fried Dough. Freeman's is the granddaddy of them all. Since 1895, people of Lewis County have made an annual pilgrimage to the small white building on the grounds of their county fair in Lowville to stock up on stick taffy. It's made in several batches daily and in twenty flavors, from banana to watermelon; the local favorite is maple. Jim Freeman and his whole family make, package, and sell the taffy during fair week only, using some of the same equipment their ancestors started out with over a century ago.

Fried dough can go by lots of different names, but Frenchy's at the Franklin County fair in Malone keeps it simple—deep-fried yeast dough sprinkled with a variety of toppings, whatever pleases you. In the middle of the midway for many years, the stand is maintained by the family and friends of Beverly and Terry Quenville, serving up thousands of fairgoers who wait to order granulated sugar, powdered sugar, cinnamon, honey and butter, or their top choice, maple cream. "I love Frenchy's Fried Dough," says Jason Conners, a Malone native who comes back each year for more. He adds, "There's just something tasty about a huge wad of greasy, fatty, sugary dough."

Though we sometimes try to be in denial, colored leaves begin to show up on some trees by mid-August, a gentle reminder to go to the two-centuries-old Burrville Cider Mill near Watertown for some of the first pressing of the year. An added incentive to visit is the cider doughnuts they make by the dozens every day until Thanksgiving. I may take a little time to see the adjacent waterfalls and watch the age-old cider-making process, but the fragrances soon draw me inside. There's no way I can leave without a jug of cider and bag of doughnuts. It's highly likely I won't get out of the driveway without trying some!

As summer's end approaches, and we've dutifully eaten ourselves a little silly, the memories of these things—and a good pile of wood—sustain us until we can head out to a michigan stand again. ▼

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