

Woodsy, Rich Morel Herbed Butter

No doubt fried in butter—breaded or not—is the most popular way to enjoy the bounty Iowa’s woodlands reluctantly give us in the spring. But if you find yourself with a surplus of morel mushrooms, or not enough for a meal, make the most of them with this tasty morel mushroom butter.

Top a grilled venison steak or fish fillet with a pat, jazz up spring wild asparagus or fold into pasta. Add some

to the frying pan for the best scrambled eggs and fried potatoes, or simply spread on some good, crusty bread.

MOREL HERBED BUTTER

2 to 3 ounces morel mushrooms or more if desired, finely minced
1 sprig thyme
1 garlic clove, minced
1 stick unsalted butter
Tiny pinch cayenne pepper
Salt and black pepper to taste

Melt butter over medium heat with garlic. Add mushrooms, salt and both peppers and cook until mushrooms are tender, about three to five minutes. Remove from heat, pour mixture into a bowl and refrigerate until it stiffens a little. Spoon onto parchment paper and press into a roll. Wrap in plastic wrap and foil and freeze or refrigerate until needed.



Big Flavor Trout In Small Town Kalona

Map the drive to Tuscan Moon Grill on Fifth and you would think you were headed to the Big City, because your GPS says to take a right on the “turnpike.”

But this is the Orval Yoder Turnpike, and it takes you to quaint little Kalona, population 2,500 or so, tucked just off Interstate 80 in eastern Iowa. You will need the GPS, though, because you will take more curves and make more turns than a NASCAR driver in the 20-miles from the main Iowa artery.

But the drive is worth it, if not for the final leg scenery alone, for the food, where owners Warren and Paula Miller make every effort to provide an upscale dining experience in an old town atmosphere. Serving 120 to 130 people almost every Friday and Saturday night—many from as far as 60 miles away—the Millers have been approached by realtors wanting them to branch out, like Cedar Rapids, whose residents routinely make the 73-mile round trip.

Eat at Tuscan Moon and it's clear you are dining in an iconic 110-year-old-plus converted hotel. Feel the undulations in the rustic hardwood floor. Walk the wood stairs, feel the original brick wall, touch the detailed window frames—all showing their own level of wear. Look hard enough to glimpse basement lights shining through tiny cracks in the floor's seams.

Dine downstairs seated with up to 55 other diners, or upstairs where another 30 get a birds-eye view of downtown Kalona. Or ask for the private room for special occasions. Check out the extensive wine list, currently at more than 160 options, from classic whites and reds to ports and dessert wines. (Ironically, the Millers' marriage—and the restaurant itself—were born from a bottle of wine. Make sure to ask for the story when you stop in).



Billed as an Italian steakhouse, the warm atmosphere inside the rustic Tuscan Moon Grill on Fifth is reminiscent of a romantic dinner in Italy. Warm lighting inside the converted hotel and Kalona mainstreet lights peeking through the windows provide mood lighting. Check out weekly rib and burger specials, and stop in on Fridays where chef Andrew Kirchner features a seafood special. Grab a steak—the house favorite—and sit on the streetside patio as Amish and Mennonite buggies and their “engines” plod by. Lunch hours are 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. Dinner hours are 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Live music every weekend. Call 319-656-3315 for reservations.

GRILLED TROUT WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH AND BACON

- 1 trout fillet with skins
- 1 butternut squash
- 2 strips cooked bacon, chopped
- 1 head cauliflower
- 1 handful spinach
- 1/2 cup sour cream

Peel squash and dice flesh. Cut cauliflower into florets. Roast the cauliflower and half the squash with a little vegetable oil and salt at 400° for about 10 minutes or until edges start to brown. Boil the other half of the squash until tender. Pour out water until squash is half-covered, add sour cream and puree. Lightly oil and salt fish and grill skin-side down for about eight minutes until the meat is still a little rare. In a pan, reheat roasted vegetables. Add bacon, remove from heat and add spinach.

