

4. Madison

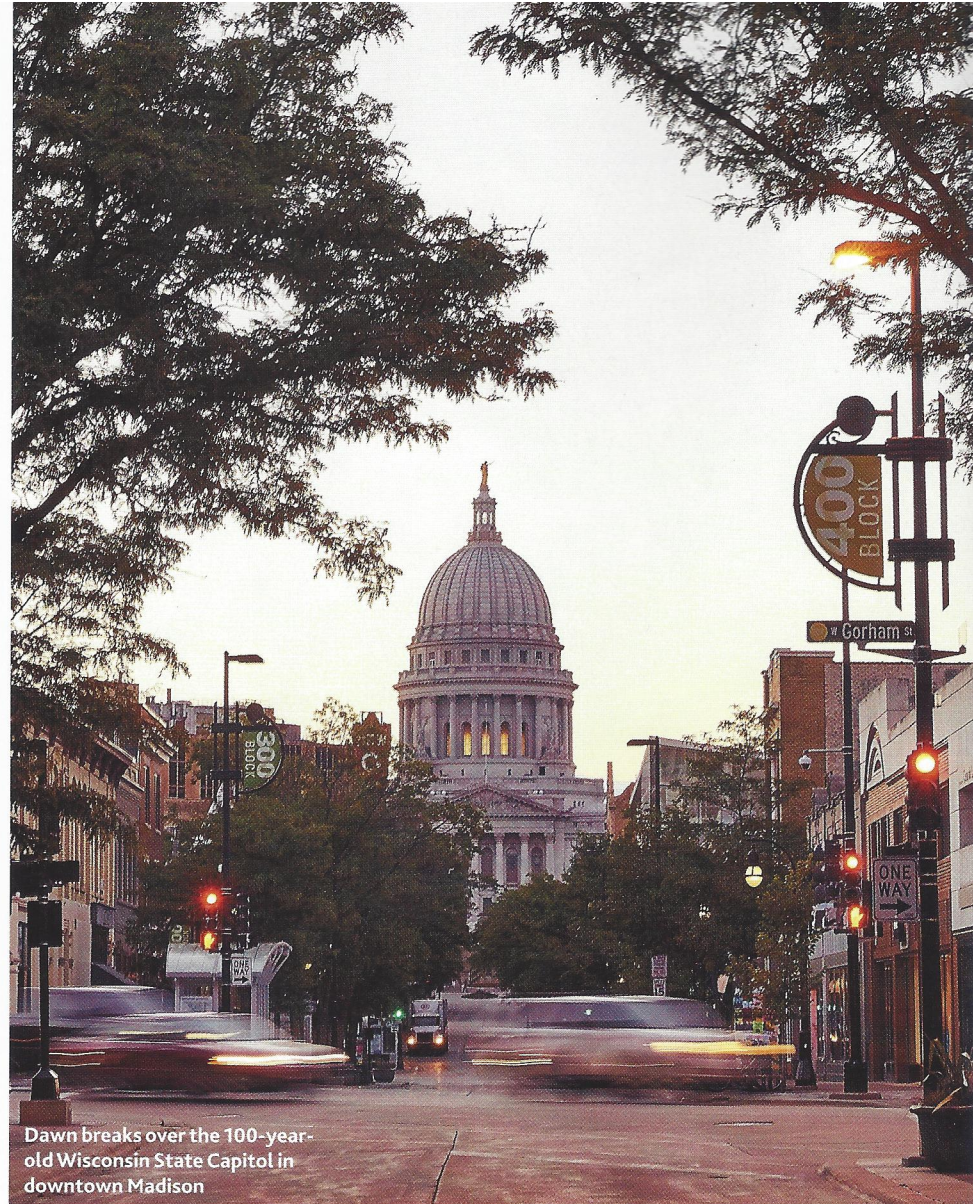
America's dairyland is raising the bar with its artisan produce, from cheese to chocolate – stop by its food-obsessed capital to sample the best

IT'S A QUIET START TO THE DAY in downtown Madison, birds chirruping lazily in the trees around its domed capitol as the occasional car sidles by. At the Fromagination cheese shop a few steps away, there's far more activity: customers pile in, browsing cheese and condiments, and chatting at the counter with owner Ken Monteleone. One regular fancies something new, but is not sure what. 'Want to try the gouda?' asks Ken, dashing to a wheel and carving off a chunk. The counter is stacked with plump roundels of cheese, some dandelion yellow, others mottled and leathery like silver birch bark. Behind the glass are soft, blue-etched slabs speckled with dill and chipotle.

Fromagination is one of a host of artisan retailers in Madison, an arty college town set on a strip of land between two lakes. It is the capital of Wisconsin, a state with rolling hills and rich pastureland that is the dairy heartland of America.

'The perception used to be that Wisconsin didn't do artisan cheese,' says Ken. 'Now, we get people from all over wanting it – it's like going to Napa Valley and loading up on wine.' Hailing from Colorado, Ken opened his shop 10 years ago after he moved to Madison and fell in love with its food culture. While he stocks a curated selection of foreign cheese, he's proud that most of his 100-plus varieties are local. 'We have amazing farms here, passed down through the generations. Some of our cheese-makers are up and down in the pastures daily, and sometimes you can taste the flowers the cows are grazing on. You really understand the thoughtfulness of these producers.'

This care over provenance runs deep in Madison, which was at the vanguard of the farm-to-table movement and has a strong farmers' market tradition. It's particularly evident in the city's once-industrial east side, which in the past 20 years has been transformed into a blossoming restaurant quarter. On Madison Eats tours, guide Jenina Mella delivers a moveable feast at some of the areas's best spots: like Alchemy, which serves sandwiches of soft Madison-made sourdough and sweet potato slices with a kick of jalapeño jam; and the neon-lit Tex



Dawn breaks over the 100-year-old Wisconsin State Capitol in downtown Madison

Tubb's Taco Palace, whose tangy salsas are made in-house. At Chocolaterian, owner Leanne Cordisco knows the name of each cow whose milk is used in her creations: shiny chocolates, gooey cakes and 'ugly cookies' with cocoa nibs and oozing toffee.

The city's craft-beer scene is also on the rise – drawing, like its dairy farmers, on deep-rooted traditions. Many Wisconsinites have German or Czech ancestry, and before Prohibition, Wisconsin was a top brewing state – now a wave of newcomers is putting it back on the map. Helping them is local outfit Hop Head Tours, which runs cycle trips to the likes of Next Door Brewing Company, whose small-batch beer plays with flavours like lavender and peach blossom, to gluten-free brewery Alt Brew, and to Ale Asylum, where Hathaway Dilba and her colleagues use just four ingredients in homage to the 1516 German Beer Purity Law and are trialling barrel-aged varieties. Innovation, it seems, is in Madison's blood. 'It's a very sustainable, collective, curious town – people want to be the first to try everything', says Hathaway, a Los Angeles native who's lived in Madison for 25 years. 'We have the most exciting restaurant scene here out of anywhere I've been in my life.'

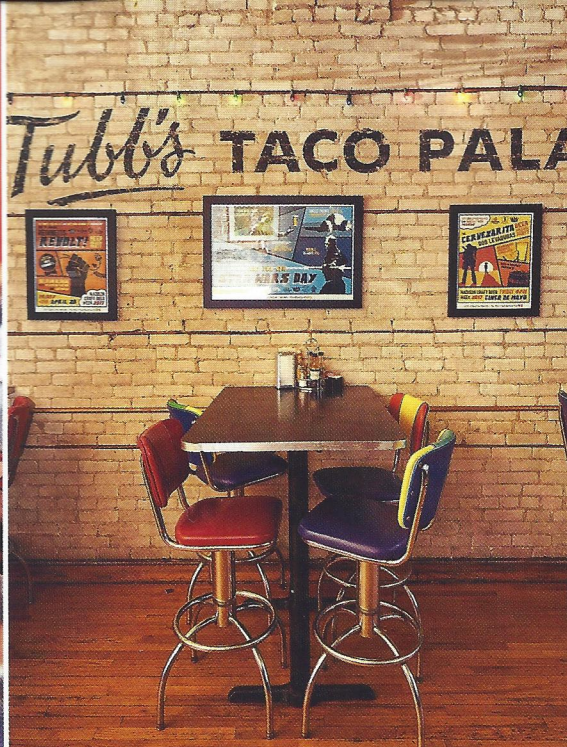
Drive southeast for around 150 miles to reach the Midwest's greatest metropolis, Chicago. ➡

Essentials



➡ A stroll from the capitol, **Graduate Madison** riffs on the city's college and lake culture in quirky spaces decked out with retro phones, vintage posters and even light fixtures inside canoes. There's also a café and a rooftop restaurant (from £125; graduatemadison.com).

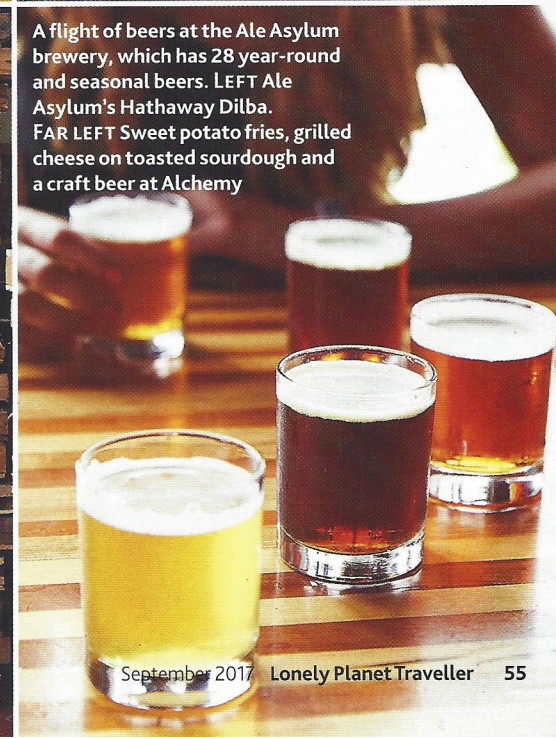
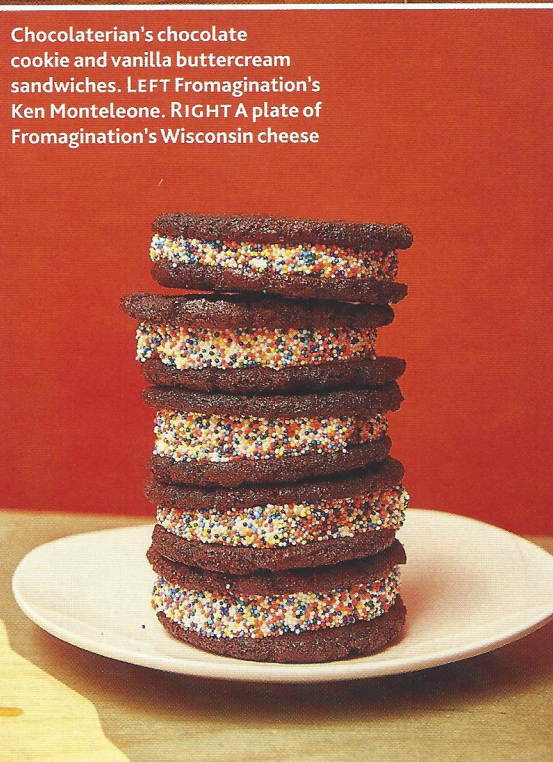
➡ Visit **Fromagination** (fromagination.com), take a food tour with **Madison Eats** (from £40; madisoneats.net) and cycle with **Hop Head Tours** (from £38; hopheadtours.com).



Jenina Mella of Madison Eats. LEFT Retro chairs in Tex Tubb's Taco Palace. FAR LEFT 11 beers are on tap at the Next Door Brewing Company



Chocolaterian's chocolate cookie and vanilla buttercream sandwiches. LEFT Fromagination's Ken Monteleone. RIGHT A plate of Fromagination's Wisconsin cheese



A flight of beers at the Ale Asylum brewery, which has 28 year-round and seasonal beers. LEFT Ale Asylum's Hathaway Dilba. FAR LEFT Sweet potato fries, grilled cheese on toasted sourdough and a craft beer at Alchemy