Cultural Daily

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Christmas in St. Paul, Minnesota

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, December 11th, 2019

Christmas in St. Paul, Minnesota sounds about right. Chances are, it'll be white. And cozied up near a roaring fire with holiday lights could be the perfect ticket as you say so long to the century's second decade.

The city's revitalized downtown is an optimal place to start, ground zero being Rice Park and its surrounding historic buildings, all lit and decked for Christmas.

Landmark Center was built in 1902 as the Federal Court House and Post Office – for the entire Upper Midwest. Now, the turreted building is a renovated cultural center for music, dance, theater and exhibitions.

St. Paul's downtown Landmark Center / Photo courtesy of the Landmark Center

The 1985 Ordway Center for the Performing Arts and 1921 James J. Hill Reference Library also line the park, as well as the venerable St. Paul Hotel. Opened in 1910, the establishment has been host to John F. Kennedy, Charles Lindberg, royalty, star athletes and more than a few 1920s gangsters.

St. Paul Grill's Christmas dinner

Christmas Eve or Day dinner at the hotel's St. Paul Grill is about as picturesque as you'll find with the restaurant's mammoth tree. Rice Park's glow is just outside. A three-course prix fix menu is traditionally served with the region's famed wild rice done up in a cream soup. Honey glazed ham and chutney and bread pudding with crème anglaise are also featured.

The restaurant's paneled walls and walnut wainscoting beneath vaulted ceilings create a gentlemen's club vibe. Completing the picture: white tablecloths and green banker lamps perched over leather banquettes.

St. Paul Grill / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The grill's bar is extensive – it reportedly has the largest collection of single malt Scotch in the country.

Try the overly large wedge salad with its meaty bacon chunks or the hearty Manhattan clam

chowder. One regular swears by the chicken pepper noodle soup: “One of the best things in winter you can eat to warm yourself from the inside,” he says.

Another holiday favorite: the pumpkin cheesecake with a thick sour cream top, all drizzled with pumpkin sauce.

The hotel annually hosts the “It’s a Wonderful Life” live radio play. Shows are December 5-24.

St. Paul holiday lights / Photo courtesy St. Paul Convention & Visitors Bureau

St. Paul’s holiday lights

Extensive Christmas lights are a short drive away along Summit Avenue, home to the Governor’s mansion and scores of the state’s storied homes, many of them Victorian. F. Scott Fitzgerald lived along the stretch. You can also walk some or part of the nearly five-mile district.

One block south of Summit is Grand Avenue, a 26-block shopping district strewn with the city’s premier foodie stops and more holiday lights.

Beyond the holidays, the long-running St. Paul Winter Carnival is an institution. It runs from January 23 to February 2.

A damn good egg sandwich at downtown’s The Buttered Tin

The Buttered Tin / Photo: Theo Page

Amid the dinners and holiday light gazing, you’ll need to pack in a good breakfast.

Downtown St. Paul’s premier spot is The Buttered Tin on Seventh Street East. Launched in 2013, the restaurant is open daily from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Although the cafe serves up a great lunch, the better bet is breakfast – bakers arrive at 3 a.m., to whip up whole display cases of pastries and sweets.

The restaurant expanded nearly three years ago to accommodate the crowds – there were lines out the door, reports general manager Julie Thornburg.

The Buttered Tin / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

High banquettes are placed against a background of pale yellow walls and gray-paneled wainscoting. The seating is hung with silver fixtures topped with large circular shades making for a nice hit of elegance amid the homey-sunny decor.

Buttered Tin’s favorites

Buttermilk pancakes arrive with ample curls of Fischer Farms bacon and a generous slab of salted maple bacon butter – all wreathed with grapes and blueberries. The cakes are at once sweet and savory, delicate yet hearty as they balance contrasting tastes and textures. It’s a bang-up way to start the day.

The “Damn Good Egg Sandwich” is just that. As a connoisseur of egg sandwiches, I was

impressed. The ample dish: two fried organic eggs, white cheddar, Fischer Farms bacon, tomato, onion and mayo on toasted sourdough. It's served with a house salad with cider vinaigrette.

The Buttered Tin's Damn Good Egg Sandwich / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Other breakfast favorites: the "Pig's Eye," huevos rancheros and crab cake benedicts, Banana Foster French toast – or just simple hot cereal (quinoa simmered in coconut milk with fresh berries).

In the pastry department, the pies are a crowd favorite – everything from apple and cherry to pecan and key lime. Sumptuous straight-from-the oven cinnamon rolls fly out the door starting at 7 a.m.

Holiday cookies and tins, Bundt cakes and sweet bread can also be ordered and picked up as holiday gifts.

The Buttered Tin's pastry case / Photo: Theo Page

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Top image courtesy of St. Paul Convention & Vistors Bureau

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