

EXCERPT FROM *THE SECRET ATLAS OF NORTH COAST FOOD*

From the chapter “LADIES BOOKS AND TACKLE SOCIETY” by Susan Pagani and Maria Manion | illustrated by David Witt

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A Day of Poor Fishing is a Day of Fine Eating

In which we travel widely in search of snacks

One morning in early summer, we awoke to a storm, the rain flying sideways at our windows and the wind whipping the tops of the trees. Unsure how long or how hard it had been or would be raining, we determined to set off and try our luck on the Lower Kinnickinnic. Sure enough, as we crossed the St. Croix River, the clouds blew away, and we were rewarded with a gloriously sunny day. Yet things at the river were not so brilliant. The banks were all sludge and a downed tree forced us off the path, where our boots muddled the damp, wild plants, so that the air around us was redolent with mint and flowers. But the water was high and it resembled fast-moving chocolate milk. Nothing was hatching, and though we tried our brightest flies — a soft-hackled partridge and orange — the trout could not see them to be tempted. There would be no fishing this water, so we let Cricket, our black Labrador retriever, take a dip, and tossed him sticks while we considered the day. It would be hot, but if the breeze held, it would be a good day for a picnic at the rainbow trout pond in Plum City. And so we set off, stopping here and there to pick up the things we like to eat in the area.

With its striped awning, *the Dish & the Spoon Café* presents an unimposing but friendly face among the old buildings that line Main Street in River Falls. It's a pleasant spot, and we often see a pair of old fellows sitting out front with their coffees. On this particular morning, they smiled and wore sandals and seemed relaxed enough, but our eavesdropping ears found them engaged in a combative review of the world's news. We slipped past with a “Good morning,” and headed to the counter, where we built our sandwiches by circling and checking bread, protein, dairy, condiments and various veggies on a clipboard. The choices were not startling — turkey, tuna, roast beef, etc. — but we knew from past experience that everything in the sandwich would be fresh and crisp. Of course, it was still much too early for lunch, so the nice people delivered our sandwiches and a few Sprecher ginger ales in a brown bag and we put them away for later.

The trick to making what is solid and wholesome streamside fair into something quite lovely is to doctor it up with cheese from Cady Cheese Factory. However, the factory's retail shop does not open until mid-morning. Our stomachs were growling for breakfast, so we overshot the factory by a few miles and headed to the *Spring Valley Bakery*. This little bakery has been turning out pastries, cookies, and doughnuts for more than 60 years. From the outside, it resembled a pub — with a crimson façade and black trim — but inside it was warm and smelled of sweet dough and melting chocolate. We took away a bag of raised doughnuts. Among them, a

plump and rather racy thing called the Honeymooner, glazed and topped with a heavy crown of dark sour cherries.

We inhaled the doughnuts under a tree on Wonderland Road. There, in the middle of a wheat farm, is a bit of the Rush River we like to fish. The water was just as murky, but the grass had been recently mowed and smelled of clover, the air was cool beneath the tree, and the doughnuts were tender and delicious. The wind ruffled the wheat. We heard the dull roar of a tractor at work somewhere, not far off. Cricket rolled in the grass delighted, and we were tempted to take a nap.

As a dairy, the *Cady Cheese Factory* belongs among the fields and farms, but it is still strange to turn into a parking lot and see the well-appointed retail shop, which looks like it should live between knicknackereries on the boulevard of some resort town. From its crowded cases, we tasted a 14-year-old sharp white cheddar. It broke off the block in shards and had a texture that was both creamy and granular. The flavor was wonderful too —salty, tangy, and bright. We bought a hunk of the cheese and stowed it in the brown bags with our sandwiches.