

FIELD TRIP

THE NEXT GREAT AGRITOURISM DESTINATION ISN'T WHERE YOU THINK IT IS

Tucked against the Connecticut shoreline, this New England village is quickly becoming a must-visit for food lovers.

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNA SAWIN

Think “agritourism destination,” and Italy’s Tuscany or Puglia, California’s Napa Valley, or even New York’s Hudson Valley likely come first to mind. Not a small New England village tucked against the Connecticut shoreline. And yet, Mystic, Connecticut (I know, I know, if you’re of a certain age you’re thinking pizza), is one of the most exciting food locales in the country right now.

“We have access that no one else has,” says restaurateur Daniel Meiser. “When we buy fish, the docks are a mile and a half down the road. We’re really fortunate to be so geographically blessed that we have a wealth of farmers, fishers and artisans in such close proximity.”

This is where I should confess something: I grew up in Mystic, but the Mystic of today, at least when it comes to food, is not the Mystic of my childhood or even my early 20s. Yes, there was always great seafood and amazing products coming out of local farms, but the area lacked a restaurant scene inspired by that bounty.

Meiser, who is the co-owner of three eateries in downtown Mystic—Oyster Club, Engine Room and Grass & Bone—and has a stake in the nearby Stone Acres Farm, and chef James Wayman, are two of the people who’ve revolutionized Mystic’s dining scene, turning it into a place where practically every establishment offers up vibrant food and drinks in a laid-back and at-times quirky setting. And always leaves me anxious to return.

It’s worth nothing that while Mystic is an easy weekend getaway, 48 hours isn’t remotely long enough to check out all of the area’s offerings. I often find myself reciting to my husband a list of things I want to eat on our way to Mystic only to discover there’s not time to squeeze in happy hour at M-Bar, have a lobster roll from nearby Ford’s or grab an ice cream cone at Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream (I hear they now offer a rotating vegan flavor), let alone visit any of the breweries, wineries or farmers markets just a few miles out of downtown. But if you’ve never been to the area or haven’t been in the past few years (looking at those of you thinking pizza), here’s where I’d start.



OYSTER CLUB, ENGINE ROOM, GRASS & BONE

No matter the vibe you're seeking, owners Meiser and Wayman have a seat for you.

Searching for fresh-cut steaks or house-ground burgers to throw on the grill, or want a quick meat-centric meal? There's the butcher shop and restaurant Grass & Bone (don't leave without trying the rotisserie chicken). Want classic, American comfort food with a craft beer in a no-fuss yet chic, setting? The Engine Room is your place. (While I order a different entrée every time, the hush puppies are my go-to small bite.) Or eat your weight in oysters at happy hour and follow it up with an ultra-seasonal menu that changes daily but always pairs well with an impeccable wine list at the Oyster Club. At the heart of each place is a very simple philosophy:

"Yes, we're chefs, yes, we're entrepreneurs, yes, we're businessmen, but the hopeless romantic in me is that we're storytellers," Meiser says.

The idea of being storytellers is one Meiser and Wayman talk often about with their staff. They employ nearly 200 people and last year put almost \$1 million back into the local economy.

"Knowing the people that create your food allows us to build relationships and create community," Wayman says. "And it allows us access. We're incredibly lucky to have access to some of the best seafood and produce in country."



The best—no bias.

When you hear locals say SIFT is the best bakery in town, believe them. One of its owners, Adam Young, was recently named the best baker in America by Food Network.

And now with Stone Acres Farm just a few miles down the road, they're continuing to tell stories. The restored farm, which dates back to the 1700s, provides produce to the restaurants, a few other local businesses and for a 200-plus member CSA. But it also offers the restaurant staff a new perspective on the ingredients they cook with.

SIFT

Betcha you can't buy just one thing at this bake shop. From the chocolate, raspberry croissants to the seasonal honey latte to the traditional French breads, SIFT quickly became my go-to for a coffee with friends, a sweet treat on a morning walk with my dog or a stop on the way out of town when it opened in 2016.

There's never a wrong thing to order, except for perhaps not ordering enough. Put your trust in Adam and Ebbie Young, the husband-and-wife team behind the bakery. The two met while working in the hospitality industry, recently opened a second seasonal location in nearby Watch Hill, and Adam won this year's Food Network's *Best Baker in America*. All of which is to say that while the two and their staff are busier than ever, their food and drink offerings remain exquisite.

RISE

Born and raised in Mystic, Melody Pere is the force behind the area's new breakfast scene. When she opened RISE in 2016, it was basically the only full-service sit-down breakfast place downtown. While that's since changed, I've still never been to tiny







The sweet stuff.

Don't leave Mystic without grabbing an ice cream cone from Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream. It's the perfect treat to enjoy as you watch the eponymous drawbridge in action.



RISE, which has just a few cozy tables inside, when it wasn't busy. But the eatery, which offers up nostalgic dishes with a twist—think egg, peanut butter and bacon on an English muffin—is worth the wait. And at the heart of all of the dishes served for breakfast and lunch are the people behind the food.

"Whether it's a head of lettuce that comes from a farm and it's just beautiful, or it's some of the prepared items we get, such as sausage made from a family recipe from Westerly Packing Co., you can tell there's love in it," Pere says.


Her favorite item on the menu is the old-school pancakes, the first recipe she created for RISE.

"I grew up with a great love for pancakes, and ours are exceptional," Pere says.

GETTING TO, WHERE TO STAY + WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT EATING

From the North Fork, Mystic is an easy ferry ride and a 15-minute car ride (you can hail an Uber or a Lyft if you're not bringing a car). From other Long Island points (and especially from the city), it might be faster to drive or take the train. Once in the downtown area, virtually everything is walkable or bikeable, although a car does help if you're planning to visit the wineries, orchards or extend your stay.

Make your base the newly renovated Whaler's Inn or book into one of the many vacation rentals in town. When you're not eating and drinking, pop in and out of the shops, especially SALT offering a curated selection of artisan-made goods and the independent Bank Square Books, go paddle boarding or kayaking or visit cultural institutions such as the Mystic Seaport Museum or Mystic Aquarium.

Finally, my must-do on my last morning in town is to drive into Stonington Borough to the town docks, to buy a few pounds of scallops directly from the family that fishes for them. There's a credit card machine and a money slot for depositing money and taking the scallops if they're not open. And I promise you've never had a better Atlantic scallop. 

Bridget Shirvell is a NY-based freelance writer covering food, travel and sustainability. Her work has appeared in VICE, Condé Nast Traveler, PBS NewsHour and more. When she isn't busy working, Bridget and her husband are often trying to tire out their golden retriever with long walks in Bronx and along the Connecticut shoreline.

Photograph: Anna Sawin