

Asian Fairfield

For all this remarkable diversity though, nothing compares with Fairfield. When you enter from the west, the Jefferson County seat looks similar to most midsize towns in Iowa — Taco John's, Hy-Vee, Subway, Dairy Queen, Fairfield Diner, Jefferson County Fairgrounds, a livestock and land dealer. Then there's a building shared by a sports bar and the Istanbul Grill. The latter is a three-meals-a-day cafe that serves American favorites alongside a Turkish menu of flame-grilled chicken and lamb kebabs, gyros, falafel (fried mashed garbanzo beans), hummus (mashed garbanzo beans, sesame paste, lemon juice, and fresh garlic), baba ganoush (roasted mashed eggplant), and kisir (cracked wheat salad). Just as Istanbul is Europe's gateway to Asia, Istanbul Grill stands as an introduction to the culinary mainland of Asian Fairfield.

Window shopping around the town square reveals the uniqueness of the place. Multiple acupuncturists and massage therapists dot the streets. Signs point to stops along the community's monthly art extravaganza, 1st Fridays Art Walk — an unusual happening for a town of less than 10,000. Radio Shack displays paintings of Shiva and Krishna. A music store has as many tablas as guitars in its window. Thai Deli houses the Fairfield Museum of Renewable Energy. Asian Deli assists a dog and cat adoption service. Gupta Vegetarian Restaurant advertises its additional services: "We do all kinds of bead stringing and wire linking."

Holly Moore, current president of 1st Fridays Art Walk's board of directors, gave the scene a remarkable context. "Fairfield has more restaurants per capita than San Francisco. We did the research and the math on that," she confirms. "What's more, they are so accessible and so affordable that we don't cook much at home. We eat dinner at Asian restaurants here at least three times every week."

At least ten Asian restaurants serve the Fairfield diners. Some are completely organic and/or natural. Some are 100 percent Fresh & Local, meaning that everything served is raised locally and never frozen, processed, or recycled as leftovers. Some are vegetarian and even Ayurvedic, adhering to strict prescriptions of an ancient philosophy of holistic existence. All use local organic dairy products from Francis Thicke's free-range Radiance Dairy. Most use organic vegetables raised at two local greenhouses: Maharishi Vedic Organic Greenhouses and the Maharishi University of Management (MUM) Organic Farm.

Stacey Hurlin, founder of Fairfield-based ArtLife Society, sees the restaurants as key to the town's image. "Asian restaurants are one of the elements that make this town



A staple of Indian cuisine, naan bakes in the tandoor, or clay oven, at India Cafe (above). With a unique taste provided by the oven's charcoal, this fine-flour bread is soft and airy and the perfect accompaniment to any dish.

because, as much as anything else, they draw attention to the amazing diversity of this place."

Fairfield probably has the most cosmopolitan per capita population in Iowa. Hurlin, who moved there from Laguna Beach, California, says that MUM attracts students each year from at least 50 different countries. 1st Fridays Art Walk, says Moore, increasingly includes exhibits and performances from not just regional and national but international artists. Restaurant owners in town hail from at least six different countries. "The little miracle of Fairfield is the town's unique blend of cultural diversity and traditional Midwest values," says Moore, who moved there from Pennsylvania. "In many ways, not the least of which is restaurant choices, Fairfield is a modern-day immigration success story."

Will Merydith, who came from Seattle, directs a new development center for California-based ScribeStorm. The company creates interactive media-asset management products in Fairfield for the websites of companies such as ESPN. Merydith explains how Fairfield's dining opportunities help attract such high-tech business to town.

Fairfield's Asian Restaurants

Asian Deli

117 E. Broadway, 641-472-2649

The original Thai Deli owners moved two blocks down Broadway and opened a new place with similar fare.

Ching Dow

117 East Burlington Avenue, 641-469-5858

This Chinese-American favorite is Fairfield's oldest Asian restaurant.

First Thai Taste

50 South 2nd Street, Fairfield, 641-469-3050

Drawing customers from near and far.

Gupta Vegetarian Restaurant

51 South Court Street, 641-472-0548

Indian vegetarian meals feature fresh, homemade organic paneers (soft cheese).

India Cafe

50 West Burlington Avenue, 641-472-1792

Paramjeet Singh serves South Asian cuisine, both vegetarian and nonvegetarian.

Istanbul Grill

50 S. 2nd Street, 641-209-1458

Cartographically in southeastern Europe, Istanbul garners a place in Fairfield's Asian lineup. Turkish

native David Foraker moved here from the culinary citadel of Napa, California, where he owned American Canyon Pizzeria.

Mohan Delights

101 West Broadway Avenue, 641-469-6900

"Whenever I come home from traveling, the first place we go is to Mohan Delights, and it always brings tears to my eyes because it is so comforting, so pure a form of nourishment," testifies Holly Moore for this Ayurvedic Indian cafe.

The Raj

1734 Jasmine Avenue, Maharishi Vedic City, 800-248-9050, www.theraj.com

Town & Country magazine rated this resort one of the five best spas of the third millennium. *Elle*, *Spa*, *Vogue*, and *Fitness* are among others who also praise it. Its midday Ayurvedic buffet is open to the public.

Thai Noodle House

59 North Court Street, 641-472-0222

One of the most popular places in town, Noodle House serves slow food fast.

Thai Deli

120 W. Broadway, 641-472-3902, www.thaideli.net

Sitti Charoenkul's vegetarian and nonvegetarian cafeteria has been rated the best bargain in eastern Iowa. Homemade pies sell out daily.



Food for thought: After a cafeteria-style dinner complemented by fresh-daily baked pie, diners at Thai Deli can visit the Fairfield Museum of Renewable Energy that currently shares space with the restaurant.

"When I came out last year to do some 'recon' on Fairfield to see if we could move here, the first thing I noticed was the number of Asian restaurants. To me this said, 'This is not your ordinary rural/small town in the Midwest,'" he remembers. "After visiting several of these restaurants, and seeing how crowded they could be, I concluded that Fairfield had a sizable population of people that were not afraid to try new things, and in fact demanded them. Access to decent food was my single biggest requirement before moving, and Fairfield fulfilled that."

Fairfield's Asian restaurants also fulfilled a metaphoric cycle of destiny, or "yuga" in the Fairfield vernacular. After a century in Iowa, Asian restaurants have now gone from contraband to contribution, from notorious to nurturing. ♣

Jim Duncan writes about food frequently in The Iowan (and eats frequently about the state).