

WINGS, SWINGS AND WHISKEY

Fun in Pennsylvania

Margaret Swaine Jul 21, 2014

21 JUL 2014: After my recent trip to Pennsylvania wings, swings and whiskies are on my mind. Here's why. Let's start with whiskey. Who knew American whiskey was born in the city of Pittsburgh? Indeed, throughout the 1700 and 1800s, western Pennsylvania was the epicentre of American whiskey production.

By 1808 Allegheny County produced half a barrel worth of the hooch for every citizen in America. At the height of whiskey making there were 4,000 documented stills. Western PA is also where the Whiskey Rebellion took place in the 1790's pitting the distillers against 13,000 troopers led by George Washington.

Philip Wagle helped foment the Rebellion when he fought with a tax collector for his right to distil. Wagle Distillery, named in honour of this rebellious distiller, is Pittsburgh's first distillery since prohibition. Wagle, which opened about two years ago in The Strip District downtown, is a "grain-to-bottle" distillery. In other words, they mill local organic grain onsite the same day they start a batch.

The distillery offers tours, whiskey tasting flights and even "share options" for those who want a monthly shipment of booze.

A \$10 foundations flight gets you five samples to sip: white rye, aged wheat and aged rye, ginever (gin like whiskey with eight botanicals) and Landlocked Spice (distilled buckwheat molasses flavoured with spices and vanilla). I particularly liked their organic rye whiskey called Deep Cut. Deep Cut refers to the bold cuts taken on this whiskey to create a most assertive, rye-forward whiskey.

www.waglewhiskey.com

THE place to try a whole range of whiskies in Pittsburgh is Butcher and the Rye, a downtown hot spot that opened last year. The joint boasts a two storey wall of whiskies – a collection of over 400 bottles - available for sipping, about half of them American bourbon. The catalogue of options can be viewed on the bar's iPad along with detailed descriptions of every spirit.

Food in this cozy two level eatery is gastro pub great with dishes such as crispy pig “wing” with Thai chilli sauce, bone marrow with oxtail jam, Sunday Gravy (lamb neck with tomato and ricotta) and shepherd's pie made with beef cheeks. Twenty dollars will get you a flight of three 12 Year old whiskies Elijah Craig, Red Breast and Yamazaki. Cocktails here and at their nearby sister restaurant Meat and Potatoes are so inventive and tasty that the drinks alone draw the night crowds into Pittsburgh's formerly deserted inner city. www.butcherandtherye.com

Swings

Now let's talk about the swings. Mercer County in western Pennsylvania draws scores of Canadian golfers in search of good links at cheap fees. Ranked one of America's top golf destinations by Golf Digest Magazine it has multiple courses within a half hour's drive of each other. Unbelievable low weekday rates (including cart) abound such as \$29 at Pine Grove to \$35 at the challenging and verdant Tam O'Shanter.

It also boasts the world's only free golf course, Buhl Farm (par 34, 2,378 yards) in Sharon – just walk on and start swinging.

Spring Valley Golf Club's \$99 dollar stay and play packages include barbecue steak dinners cooked by the owners, the Mills family on the patio of their 1870's farmhouse restored into guest lodging. Those who want more upscale accommodation could stay at the 1890's Buhl Mansion in Sharon and wake up to a Steel Baron's Bloody Mary and full breakfast delivered to the room.

The mansion which resembles a small castle has ten large lavishly appointed rooms – mine was called Steel Magnate in honour of the area's former role as a steel manufacturing centre. Sister mansion, Tara in Clark built in 1854 takes its inspiration from Gone with the Wind. My room there was Fiddle Dee Dee. At Tara you can eat 7-course fancy in Ashley's Gourmet Dining Room or casual in Stonewall's Tavern on southern style dishes such as Cajun shrimp and pecan crusted salmon.

www.VisitMercerCountyPA.com

Wings

Finally what about the wings? There's PA's own home grown Quaker Steak & Lube. It was founded in 1974 when locals Gary "Moe" Meszaros and George "Jig" Warren bought a vacant automobile service station in Sharon, PA and converted it into a restaurant. This motor-sport themed spot began as a cook your own steak place. A couple of years later after visiting Anchor Bar in Buffalo and loving their wings, the co-founders began featuring Buffalo-style chicken wings.

Forty years later "The Lube" has spread its wings with over 60 full service restaurants (operating on a franchise model) all across America, serving up over 80 million wings annually. The Lube has bottled sauces for retail sale, has won the title of "Best Wings USA," and has hundreds of local, national, and international awards for their sauce recipes.

Their hottest flavour, the "Triple Atomic Sauce" made from the ghost pepper, is sold individually in a dropper bottle sealed in an oversized childproof prescription container. It's over 500,000 Scoville units (SHU) on the heat scale! (Jalapeños for example have 2,500–10,000 SHU.) Few have taken up the Atomic wing eating challenge. I wimped out at the merely hot (3,000 SHU) wings.

www.quakersteakandlube.com