

48 hours in Mankato: where to eat during Vikings training camp

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Even the most die-hard fan has to eat sometime.

Because nearly 50,000 Vikings fans make the annual trek to Mankato to watch their team during training camp, we thought we'd check out some of the local restaurants and let you know which ones are worth a visit.

We think local eateries say a lot about a place, and from what we learned in our 48 hours of eating our way through town, Mankato is a small city steeped in tradition and nostalgia. We recommend steering clear of the fancy places and sticking to what Mankato does best.

Mankato residents love sports -- especially football -- and pizza, beer and burgers. They also love bargains, and we'll tell you where to find a few.

GUENTHER'S CAFE

Since 1949, this tiny place -- formerly known as Hilltop Tavern -- has been slinging old-fashioned burgers and malts.

Articles on the wall proclaiming its burger is fantastic might be yellowed, but locals who pack the place during lunch every day haven't outgrown its wood counter and stools or kitschy decor.

The entire lunch menu fits on a 3-by-5-inch laminated card. Breakfast is served there, too.

We all had a burger (\$3.49); there wasn't much else to order. We added cheese, and when we asked what kind it was, our friendly waitress told us it was Velveeta and it was good. We went with it, and we weren't really sorry. Somehow the easy-melting slab of yellow was a perfect fit for the burgers, which pick up a lovely charred flavor from what we assume is a very well-seasoned flattop.

As for sides (\$1.50 with a burger), the Tater Tots were browned and crisp, but it was the buttered browns -- chunks of potato deep-fried until brown and crisp but still fluffy on the inside and doused with melted butter -- that caught our attention. Note: They did require a generous hit from the saltshaker.

A gigantic pile of onion rings with fluffy batter and tender onion insides was a steal at \$2.59, and a cup of chili (\$1.99) tasted just like my grandma's -- tomatoey, beefy and a little bland.

Guenther's Cafe: 1021 E. Madison Ave., Mankato, 507-388-2336

PIZZA OPTIONS

There are two legendary pizza places in town -- Pagliai's (pronounced polly-eyes) and Jake's Stadium Pizza -- and both are good.

Pagliai's edged out Jake's in our estimation simply because we preferred its chewier crust. However, both places serve typical Midwestern thin-crust pizzas with loads of cheese piled on copious toppings.

Jake's is across the street from the football fields, which makes it a convenient location for many who stay in the area. Wood pizza peels signed by Vikings players and many vintage trading cards of Minnesota athletes decorate the place. The newish space is clean and somewhat sterile. (The pizzeria, which began operations in 1964, moved to this location a few years ago.) Order at the counter and pick up the pizza when it's ready.

In contrast, Pagliai's, which is downtown, just a few miles from the fields, has been in the same hole-in-the-wall location since 1969.

The tiny, usually packed restaurant is all dark wood, dim lights and beer posters. There is a somewhat indifferent waitstaff, many of whom sport tattoos and piercings.

Pizza prices were similar at both locations (\$6.95 for a small cheese at Jake's, \$7.95 for a small cheese at Pagliai's). Pitchers of beer were incredible deals at both spots (\$8 at Pagliai's, \$9.50 for premium beer at Jake's), and both carry the decent local Mankato Brewery beer.

Pagliai's Pizza: 524 S. Front St., Mankato; 507-345-6080; pagliaismankato.com

Jake's Stadium Pizza, 330 Stadium Road, Mankato; 507-345-5420; jakesstadiumpizza.com

PUB 500

A big traditional pub on a downtown corner, Pub 500 is known for its long-roasted meats and decent beer list.

But the buffalo wings (\$9.79 for 10), definitely a large step above Minnesota spicy, were plump, lip-burning and tasty.

The pulled turkey sandwich (\$8.99) was good, but the tender, salty meat was completely lost in a massive, doughy bun. The accompanying house-made potato chips were nicely browned and addictive, especially with a sprinkle of malt vinegar.

Pub 500: 500 S. Front St., Mankato; 507-625-6500; pub500.com

WAGON WHEEL CAFE

Walking into the Wagon Wheel is like stepping back in time.

There are individual jukeboxes at every orange booth, a little counter to belly up to and, like so

many other places in Mankato, plenty of sports memorabilia. Oh, and there are wagon wheels worked into the decor.

The breakfast menu was refreshingly short, with a few egg combos, some omelets and french toast. Eggs were cooked to order, and the fluffy pancakes were as big as your plate.

None of our breakfasts cost more than \$5, and we walked out stuffed.

Don't skip the pie (\$2.16 a slice), either. The restaurant makes its own meringue pies (the others are mostly frozen, so be sure to ask), and the coconut cream and lemon versions were worth the calories

Wagon Wheel Cafe: 609 S. Front St., Mankato; 507-625-9604

EL MAZATLAN

There's nothing innovative about this suburban-looking Mexican restaurant, but if you're craving good versions of the classics, it's worth a stop.

Our hands-down favorite was the chile verde (\$9.99) -- large, juicy chunks of pork, slow-roasted and smothered in a tangy tomatillo sauce.

We were also pleasantly surprised by the shrimp tacos (\$10.99), which were topped with pico de gallo, fresh mango and guacamole. The presentation -- three overlapping tortillas with fillings piled inside -- made it impossible to pick up the tacos, though, and we ended up eating them with a fork.

For starters, the addicting fiesta dip (\$4.95), was a cast-iron crock filled with sizzling cheese and spicy chorizo.

El Mazatlan, 1525 Tullamore St., Mankato; 507-625-2406; elmazatlanfood.com

TAV ON THE AVE

Bright and modern with stonework detailing throughout, Tav on the Ave feels more like a big-city bar than do some others on the list.

Vikings coaches, journalists and other visitors frequent the spot, which serves basic pub fare.

The restaurant makes its own corned beef, so the Reuben (\$9.49) was a good bet.

Warning: The "State Fair cheese curds" (\$3.99) are decent, but quite unlike the battered versions served at the Great Minnesota Get-Together.

Tav on the Ave, 1120 E. Madison Ave., Mankato; 507-345-3308; thetavontheave.com

JOHNNY B'S

This tiny spot across Stadium Drive from the team's practice fields serves hot dogs, ham and pulled chicken sandwiches, but those didn't compare to the attention-grabbing sliced beef on toasted buns (from \$5.45).

The meat was tender and well-seasoned on its own, and a condiment bar stacked with onions, pickles, jalapenos, house barbecue sauce and horseradish made it even better.

There was a decent collection of bottled beers to order and just two taps -- Michelob Golden Light and Bud Light.

The joint was packed immediately after the morning practice, so it would be a good idea to hit it before the players leave the field or wait until 1 p.m. to grab a bite. If you can't wait, turnover was quick and tables opened frequently.

Johnny B's, 1600 Warren St., Mankato; 507-625-6276

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