

Mount Pleasant

You'll be pleasantly surprised by all it has to offer the curious traveller.

This is a grim time of year for those of us who love just-picked produce. Farm stands? Closed. Strawberries? Not yet. Asparagus, spinach, rhubarb, anything – anything! – fresh, green and local? No way.

So, until the early crops come in, let us console ourselves with food that knows no seasons: chocolate and bacon, sausage and jam and homemade pasta. Pack a cooler and hop in the car. We're going to Mount Pleasant.

This is an old town, one of the oldest in southwestern Pennsylvania. A tavern opened here in 1798, farmers came along, and pioneers stopped on their way west.

Lots of people still travel to and through Mount Pleasant without ever leaving busy Route 31, also known as West Main Street. That's a big mistake, because the good food is off the beaten track.

Driving along 31, watch for the small, black-and-white sign for **Kraisinger's Market** perched atop the sign for Quarry Street. Turn onto Quarry, and in a couple of blocks you will see a low building that

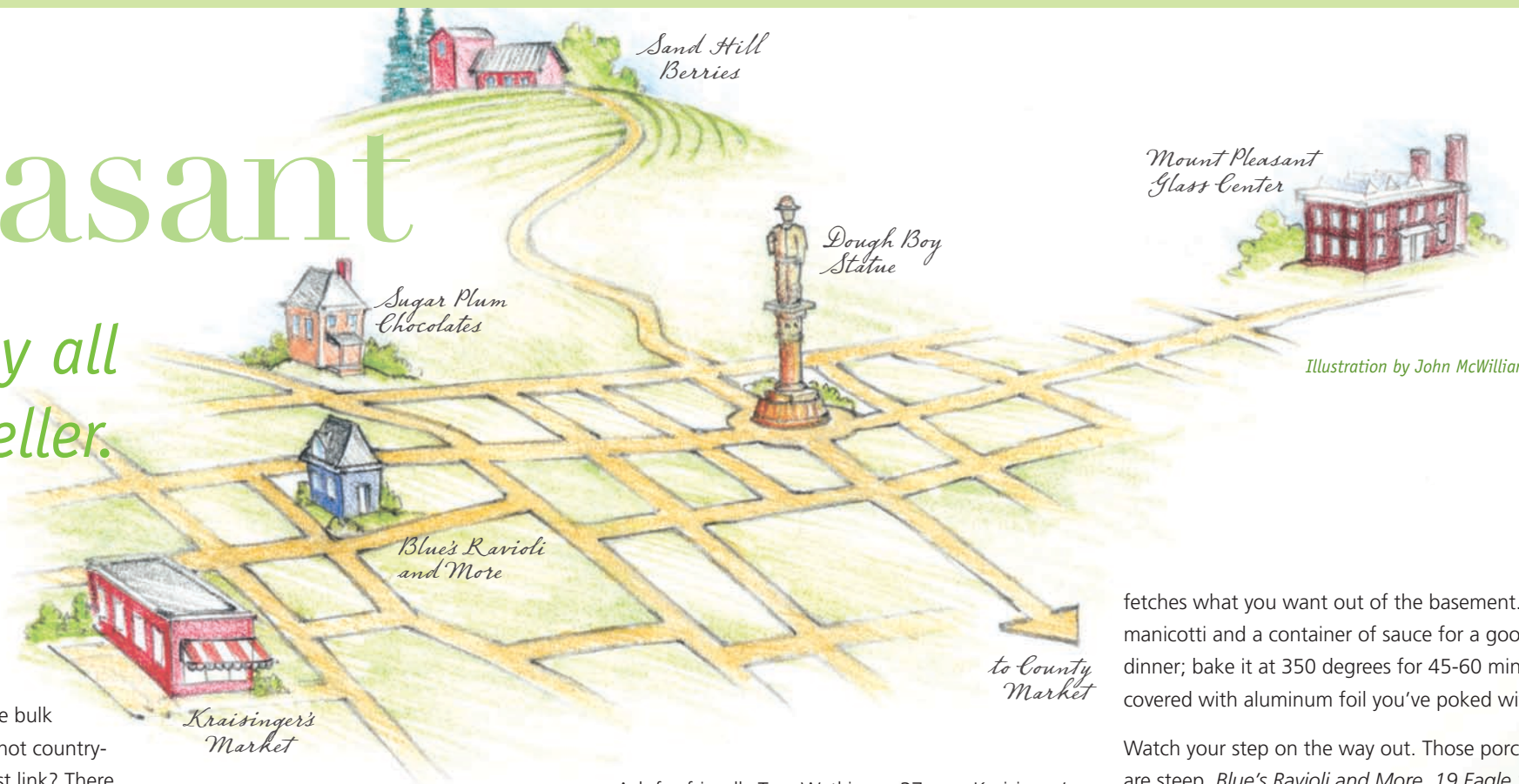
outsiders might dismiss as an ordinary neighborhood store but food lovers prize for its meat counter and deli.

You want sausage? Which kind – loose bulk regular, loose bulk hot, country-style, hot country-style, smoked, smoked hot or breakfast link? There are three kinds of kolbassi – original, low-salt and extra-garlic – and three kinds of bacon -- regular, paprika and garlic.

Homemade ham loaves – cute little bundles rolled in cornflakes with a pineapple ring and maraschino cherry on top – are ready to take home and pop in the oven (325 degrees, 45 minutes per pound, with a half-inch of water or ginger ale in the pan; uncover for the last 10 minutes). Also available are homemade ricotta, sauerkraut, ravioli, soup and two kinds of horseradish.

Visit at noon and join the local folks lined up at the deli counter for a take-out lunch: haluska, hand-breaded pork chops, fresh kolbassi burgers with peppers and onions. Among the 16 salads made in-house, the broccoli salad, a mix of red onions, golden raisins and bacon in a mayonnaise, vinegar and sugar dressing, is a stand-out.

Regis Kraisinger's father started the business in 1927, in the front room of the family home on Quarry Street. It moved up the street to the current site in 1937. In the basement, there's a sausage room and a salad room. Out back, there's a log-burning, brick smokehouse dating back to 1943. The market smokes its own meats there using sassafras logs, which burn easily and are plentiful locally. Sometimes Regis Kraisinger will mix in a little apple wood, and he experimented with cherry logs, but "sweet cherry makes the meat look too dark and sour cherry makes it taste bad."



By Cynthia Navadeh
Photos by Heather Mull



Ask for friendly Tom Watkins, a 37-year Kraisinger's veteran. He has done all the cooking for his own family since he was a boy, and is only too happy to share recipes with you.

"I sometimes forget a customer's name, but I never forget their face or what they order," he says. "When I'm out at a restaurant and someone calls over, 'Hey, Tom, don't forget my holiday ham!' I say, 'Yeah, I know, 10 pounds, smoked, next Friday by 5.'" *Kraisinger's Market, 112 S. Quarry Street, 724-547-4588*

Everybody on Eagle Street has a nickname – Shoe, Boots, Sappy, a few that can't be printed. Blue is the one with the frozen pasta business in his basement.

His real name is Clifford Zimmerman, and about 12 years ago, he started making ravioli, manicotti and gnocchi from scratch, using his Italian grandmother's old recipes. "She loved cooking. She loved people," Blue recalls. "Nobody could leave her house without eating something."

Blue says he doesn't bother to advertise because everybody knows his house, a white one with a big porch at the corner of Eagle Street and Spence Way. Eagle is a one-way street, so you have to go around the block if you're coming from Route 31. There's no missing the yard sign: "**Blue's Ravioli and More. Stop In!**"

Blue's sister, Joyce – everybody calls her George – might be the one to answer the door. She'll invite you to take a seat at the kitchen table while she

fetches what you want out of the basement. Get the manicotti and a container of sauce for a good, easy dinner; bake it at 350 degrees for 45-60 minutes, covered with aluminum foil you've poked with a fork.

Watch your step on the way out. Those porch stairs are steep. *Blue's Ravioli and More, 19 Eagle Street, 724-547-4178.*

On Church Street, in a small pink house with bright blue trim and a fairy mural, you will find **Sugar Plum Chocolates**. Walk inside and ask for a sample of Fairy Food.

You will receive a piece of milk chocolate with an airy molasses filling that's crunchy when you bite it and suddenly melts away. It's one of 60-some varieties of chocolates hand-dipped and sold here by Kim Michael, a Mount Pleasant native and one-time corporate lawyer who ditched a tiresome commute to launch Sugar Plum in 2004.

Like many of her candies, "Fairy Food is an old-time recipe," Ms. Michael explains. "The recipe books I use are from the late 1800s."

She supplements those old recipes with her own creations. "I'm always coming up with something different," she says, such as Elephant Dreams, a peanut butter meltaway with Spanish roasted peanuts, and Cherry Chip, a cream filling with chopped cherries dipped in milk chocolate and rolled in chopped peanuts.

Ms. Michael learned to master the temperamental ways of chocolate from "an 80-year-old gentleman in Nebraska who made chocolates all his life." Her Fairy Food is an example of an aerated sponge, which is made light by "a lot of beating." She also makes creams and cordials, "chewies" and "crunchies,"

