

Gaining weight vacationing in New England

By Kathryn Reed

BOSTON – It started as a cycling vacation, but turned into more of a culinary tour of New England – at least that's the trip I was plotting before leaving Tahoe.

New England can certainly be a foodie experience, but that isn't what I had in mind. Beer, cheese and ice cream were on my list of things to devour. The cycling part of the holiday helped ease the guilt of eating my way through the East.

Inside the Quincy Market in Boston are a slew of places to eat and drink. Good thing. We had worked up an appetite walking the Freedom Trail. Whole lobster, clam chowder and Sam Adams – seems like a well-balanced meal.



Kae Reed eats
her way
through New
England.

Photo/Susan
Wood

I'm not sure Sue ever found a clam chowder she didn't like. Maybe it's just psychological, but there is something special and tasty about New England clam chowder in New England.

Near this tourist hub entrepreneurs recreated the bar from the TV show “Cheers” – though this tourist spot had nothing to do with the actual program. In fact, it was built after the show went off the air. Still, we had a beer at the end of the bar where Norm usually sat.

Farther along the trail is a farmers market. Wow – what a selection. Besides fruits and vegetables, seafood was also for sale. We grabbed a few items for a picnic of sorts to be had latter.

Sam Adams tour

It’s hard to believe Sam Adams is celebrating 25 years of being in the beer business. The free tour is great – and easy to get to by using the subway. Ah, functional public transit – what a concept.

Michael, our guide, was entertaining and informative.

The importance of water, barley, hops and yeast (the only ingredients in Sam Adams and most beers) were outlined for the nearly 60 people on the tour. And this was a weekday in October.

“Hops are the spice or soul of beer. They provide the bitterness and are responsible for a lot of the aroma,” Michael said.

Samples of barley were passed around – one being nutty, another more mild, another with a hint of chocolate.

Water comes from the tap. It’s filtered and continually tested to make sure its purity is consistent.

The yeast is responsible for alcohol content, carbonation and flavor profile.

It’s this brewery where brewmasters research flavors and quality control is maintained. Sam Adams has two other

breweries.

Men in waders roam around the fermentation tanks. At one point it looks like beer is flowing onto the concrete floor, which has drains in it, before water comes out of the metal contraption.

Bob, the bearded guy seen in so many Sam Adams commercials, comes out as most of the gang is headed in to the tasting room. He smiles and puts up with the tourists wanting their picture with him.

Inside, where three 7-ounce tastes are poured, Michael gives everyone a lesson on what to look for.

Visual appearance. It's the clarity of the Sam Adams Boston Lager we are looking for. You should be able to see your finger wiggle behind the glass.

Now, inhale. Smell those hops.

Take a swig. Notice the body, the carbonation level.

Then pay attention to the flavor. Michael said we should taste a roasted caramel sweetness on the tip our tongues, then citrus grapefruit, before a bitter, dry finish on the way back of our tongues.

I can't say either Sue or I would have described it like that, but we were ready for seconds.

The other beers being poured that day were Sam Adams Octoberfest and Sam Adams Cream Stout. The latter is only available on draft at the brewery. The bottled variety is pasteurized, while the draft isn't.

Having the stout proved not all dark beers are alike. This was thick and delicious.

Sugarhouse

I kept saying I wanted to know how maple syrup is made. People laughed. Just tap a maple tree. Really? It's that simple?

For the most part, yes. Though, that's like saying wine is made just by crushing grapes.

What I didn't know until I went to a sugarhouse – that's what they call the places where syrup is made – is there are four grades of syrup – Fancy Grade, Grade A Medium, Grade A Dark and Grade B. Grade B was our favorite – the darkest, and probably the sweetest.

“The trees respond to the warm temperature, which causes the darkness of the syrup,” explained Lara, who was giving lessons and samples of syrup and cheese at the Sugarbush Farm in Woodstock, Vt.

I think of syrup for pancakes and French toast. Vermonters see it as a staple.

“We put it in coffee around here,” Lara said. She also said syrup is used in marinades for seafood, used in baked beans, pumpkin pie and mixed in yogurt.

We got in on the end of a tour of the plant (which is rustic and in a barn) that owner Jeff Luce was giving. He talked about the trees needing to be 35- to 40-years-old before they are tapped.

It takes 6,000 tapped maple trees to make 40 gallons of sap, which is turned into 1 gallon of syrup. No wonder pure Vermont maple syrup is expensive and called liquid gold.

On this 550-acre working farm is a path through the colorful maple trees that shows how the trees are tapped with a device that is about a quarter inch in diameter and goes 2 inches into the tree. Only 7 percent of sap is taken from a tree.

A 16-quart sap bucket catches the liquid. It's quite an operation. Sap is perishable until its boiled.

And the season is only six weeks, in spring, usually with snow on the ground to start with.

Next step is the boiling process.

“The sap enters the pan at between 2 and 4 percent sugar and boils away enough water so it is reduced to liquid that is 7 percent sugar,” according to Sugarbush Farm. Maple syrup is syrup at 219 degrees. It is filtered and bottled to be sold right away, or stored in 30-gallon drums.

Vermont cheese

At the Sugarbush Farm they also make cheese. The most interesting thing was learning about the age of cheddar.

Lara told us that cheese aged for a year is what supermarkets call aged – “no matter what is on the label. And here that is young.”

For the 8-year-old cheddar she lets it dissolve on her tongue, not even needing to chew it.

On this farm they make 110 tons of cheese a year in 15 flavors.

Nearby (everything is close in Vermont) is a store with just Cabot cheese samples. Being the big guy in the state, it reminded me a bit of tasting wine at Mondavi in the Napa Valley – not impressed.

Still, it is fun to venture beyond the everyday cheeses I seem to get into a rut eating.

The best sample of cheeses was at the Woodstock Inn. Chef Jason Lawless prepared an impressive display of all Vermont cheeses to be sampled one afternoon by guests of the inn. The inn on random days does special free events for people staying the night.

Cheeses made from cow, sheep and goat milk were there for the taking. Some were aged for a few weeks, while Cabot's private stock is aged up to 18 months. Some were hard, some soft.

A Commersdale from Bonnieview Farm was super tasty. This semi-hard cheese took at second place in 2008 from the American Cheese Society.

Ben & Jerry's

Finally, we arrive at the other reason there are so many cows in Vermont – Ben & Jerry's. Five hundred family farms supply the ice cream company with milk.

At this plant in Waterbury 250,000 pints are made each day. The plant in Henderson, Nev., supplies the West Coast.

I had no idea between 55 and 65 flavors are sold at once. No grocery store I've been to has that many for sale. Cherry Garcia is the No. 1 seller, with Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough No. 2.

As luck would have it, my favorite, Mint Chocolate Chunk, was the sample of the day. The only disappointment was the tiny little cup it's served in. I think they could have spared a full cone. But I suppose that would cut down on sales.

I bought a scoop of Bonnaroo Buzz – a combo of coffee and malt ice creams, with whisky caramel swirls and English toffee pieces. Yummy, but incredibly sweet.

Sue wanted to bond with her fellow Vermonter and snowboarding Olympian from Sierra-at-Tahoe so she had a scoop of Hannah Teter's Maple Blondie. Good, but not good enough to get Sue to trade in skis for a snowboard.

More food stuff

Other places worth checking out on a trip to New England:

- Green Mountain Coffee in Waterbury, Vt.;
- Cold Hollow Cider Mill, Waterbury, Vt.;
- Charlotte Village Winery, tasting room in Quechee and Charlotte, Vt.
- Red Rooster restaurant, inside Woodstock Inn, Woodstock, Vt.

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