You’re going where? Kalamazoo is tired of your Creedence Clearwater jokes

By Maya Kroth June 25, 2015

Every spring, serious scholars and amateur historians flock from all over the country to attend the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies, the largest event of its kind, held at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. Some of these people arrive in full costume and carrying lutes. I know this because my long-distance boyfriend, David, who’s getting his PhD at Western, dragged me to the conference last year, and my upcoming visit once again coincides with it. This time, however, I’ve learned my lesson. While he’s busy attending roundtable discussions of Middle Low German medical literature, I’ll be exploring the city’s cooler side.

When David told me he lived in Kalamazoo, I didn’t believe it was a real place. I thought maybe Creedence Clearwater Revival just made it up so they’d have a rhyme with “kazoo.” And I’m not the only one, apparently: Once upon a time, the town’s official marketing slogan was “Yes, there really is a Kalamazoo.” Now that I’ve had time to get to know the place, I can confirm that not only does Kalamazoo exist, it’s actually much more interesting than it gets credit for, with vibrant art, food and beer scenes fueled by a young, college-educated population, according to City-Data.com, and reasonable cost of living.

The first time I drove through downtown, it instantly felt familiar, in that historic Rust Belt way, all 100-year-old low-rise brick buildings and gorgeous English Gothic-style churches. But it was a new structure — the towering Mondrian-inspired glass facade of the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema — that gave me my first inkling that the town had some hipness hidden up its sleeve.
“Kalamazoo reminds me a lot of our home town of Austin, with its strong economy, large university, great beer scene and solid arts community,” says Tim League, chief executive of the Texas-based chain of indie movie theaters that also serve really good beer. (You remember the Alamo: It was the target of an angry, expletive-filled voice mail that went viral a few years ago from a woman who’d been ejected for violating the theater’s strict no-texting policy.)

Along with first-run and art-house films, the Alamo dusts off cult classics for one-off events such as a “Footloose” dance-along and a glowstick-enhanced showing of the 1980 Olivia Newton-John roller-disco picture “Xanadu.” Its menu of gourmet snacks includes cinema-inspired cocktails like The Dude’s White Russian, plus a large selection of craft beers from nationally recognized local breweries.

Foremost among those breweries is Bell’s, which has been rated one of the best in the country by RateBeer and Beer Advocate despite being distributed in only 20 states. A regular stop on Midwest beer-tourist itineraries, the Bell’s taproom, called the Eccentric Cafe, is just a few blocks from the Drafthouse. The place is decked out in an eclectic mix of exotic masks, quirky stained-glass artworks and vintage beer ads. Its chalkboard menu lists dozens of experimental brews, including wild-fermented brown ales and an entire series inspired by an orchestral suite by composer Gustav Holst.

“We always wanted to be that other place that you can go that’s not home or work or church, where you can hang out and be comfortable and socialize,” says owner Larry Bell, who adds that his first wife named the Eccentric Cafe after his personality. I’ve heard stories about Bell’s idiosyncratic “holidays,” like Adult Prom and Eccentric Day, when regulars compete to see who can dress in the most bizarre costume. In March, David and I lined up outside the brewery at 9
a.m., joining dozens of Bell’s die-hards who took the day off work to celebrate the long-awaited release of the summer beer Oberon.

Every time I visit, the number of breweries here seems to multiply, each one hoping to capitalize on what Larry Bell started. Craft beer is now such big business that both Western Michigan University and the local community college recently announced degree programs in sustainable brewing, beginning this fall. A vibrant foodie movement blooms alongside the beer scene — not surprising, given Kalamazoo’s location in the heart of Michigan’s agricultural belt, which is one of the most diverse growing regions in the country. At the Saturday farmers market, which dates to the 1940s, local produce runs the gamut from kale to heirloom tomatoes to Honeycrisp apples.

This bounty makes its way from the farm to the kitchens of locavore eateries such as Food Dance, where nearly everything comes from small-scale Michigan suppliers, be it the pastured chicken or the maple syrup that’s poured over the house-baked brioche French toast. It’ll get some competition this summer with the opening of Principle, a new locally sourced, seasonal-menu restaurant whose chef trained under Michael Symon of “Iron Chef.”

About a block from Bell’s, the Black Owl Cafe brews its own fiercely good libations made not from barley and hops but from coffee beans that are roasted in small batches on-site. Yes, third-wave coffee has reached Kalamazoo, in the form of this cozy little spot tucked into a former 1920s-era carriage factory next to the railroad tracks. It’s reclaimed-wood wall cladding, bearded baristas and Mason jar light fixtures give the cafe a nostalgic railroad-car/log-cabin vibe.

When owner Garrett Krugh arrived in Kalamazoo to study business at Western seven years ago, the coffee scene left something to be desired. “You’d get your coffee from an air-pot that came out of a machine two hours ago,” he says with a laugh. But the locals have embraced new businesses like his, where you can get your java French-pressed, siphoned or served pour-over style. “They’re really excited for all the new changes in the city,” Krugh says.

After savoring a cup of Chemex-brewed Sumatran dark roast at the Black Owl one recent morning, I set my compass west, headed for a neighborhood called Parkwyn Village. In 1947, Frank Lloyd Wright designed a small number of homes there in a style he dubbed “Usonian,” short for “United States of North America,” on the shores of Little Asylum Lake. In classic Wright style, the low-slung homes nestle seamlessly into the landscape, with open floor plans, cantilevered roof overhangs and clerestory windows. The Wright homes add to the city’s diverse mix of architectural styles, from the 19th-century Italianate and Queen Anne houses of the Vine and South Street historic districts to downtown’s art deco city hall.

“Kalamazoo has really changed from a decaying downtown to a pretty vibrant downtown with interesting businesses and restaurants,” notes Bell, who opened his brewery here in the early ’80s, around the same time that many of its largest employers, such as GM and the Checker cab company, were beginning to shut down. In 1984, the Gibson Guitar factory moved to Nashville after more than a century of making mandolins, banjos, ukuleles and one of the world’s first electric guitars in Kalamazoo. (That aforementioned Creedence lyric is actually a reference to a Gibson guitar model called the Kalamazoo.) You can still make out the Gibson name on the factory’s rickety old brick smokestack.
For years, Kalamazoo was known as the Paper City, for the dozens of mills that set up shop on the banks of the Kalamazoo River. Although almost none remain today, the tradition lives on in artisan fashion at Kalamazoo Book Arts Center (KBAC), which has all the equipment needed to turn pulp into paper, as well as a letterpress, printmaking and bookbinding studio. It’s on the ground floor of the Park Trades Center, a century-old former manufacturing plant that’s been reimagined as a haven for artists. During Art Hop, a free monthly citywide gallery crawl, you can see paper-based exhibitions at the KBAC, then watch a glassblowing demonstration at the adjacent foundry before heading upstairs to explore more than 50 studios where painters, sculptors, metallurgists, weavers, potters and performance artists display their work and ply the public with free wine and snacks.

“Kalamazoo really over-indexes on the arts for a city its size,” adds Bell, who points out that the community of just 75,000 manages to support an 85-year-old theater company, a 94-year-old symphony orchestra and a 35-year-old modern dance troupe. Since 1924, it has also been home to the Kalamazoo Institute of the Arts, a museum specializing in 20th-century American artists. Though the collection includes works by Alexander Calder, Richard Diebenkorn and Andy Warhol, the stunning 400-piece chandelier by glass artist Dale Chihuly that hangs in the foyer is worth a visit all by itself.

On my last swing through town, I stopped in at the Michigan News Agency, downtown’s only remaining independent bookstore, where I discovered that Kalamazoo also has a surprisingly robust literary scene that includes a number of National Book Award finalists — writers like Bonnie Jo Campbell, whose short stories have been recognized with the Pushcart Prize.

“Long winters mean many of us are great readers,” says Dean Hauck, whose family-run bookshop has been in business since 1947. It has one of the largest magazine newsstands in the country, with 7,000 titles ranging from the Bourbon Review to the Paris Review.

After browsing the stacks — “cruising the News,” as Hauck encourages passersby to do — I walked a few blocks farther down Michigan Avenue and stumbled upon Sydney, a boutique in the lobby of the Radisson Hotel. That’s where I found my perfect souvenir: a super-soft, made-in-Michigan T-shirt with green lettering that reads, “Yes, there really is a Kalamazoo.”

If you go

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Kalamazoo House B&B**
447 W. South St.
269-382-0880
www.thekalamazoohouse.com

Many rooms in this circa-1878 Victorian house-turned-inn are equipped with fireplaces, plus cookies at bedtime. From $119.
WHERE TO EAT

Bell’s Eccentric Cafe
355 E. Kalamazoo Ave.
269-382-2332
www.bellsbeer.com

A must-stop on any beer lover’s Kalamazoo itinerary, Bell’s has an ever-changing selection. Try the summery Oberon ($3.50) or the Neptune Mystical Stout, the latest in a series of brews inspired by Gustav Holst’s “Planets” orchestral suite, due in July ($4.50).

Food Dance
401 E. Michigan Ave.
269-382-1888
www.fooddance.net

This downtown restaurant and gourmet market sources ingredients from small farms in West Michigan’s agriculture belt. The menu is gluten-free-friendly, but pasta lovers should indulge in the mac 'n' cheese ($19).

WHAT TO DO

Art Hop
269-342-5059
www.kalamazooarts.org

Arts exhibitions, dance performances, book readings and more take place the first Friday of the month at venues citywide. Wander around the Park Trades Center building to see glassblowers, metal sculptors and other visual artists hone their craft as you sip free wine.

West Michigan Beer Tours
269-350-4598
www.westmichiganbeertours.com

Sip your way across town with a weekend walking tour of Kalamazoo breweries. $19-$29.