

## MIDWEST TRAVELER

# A North Shore tour of smoked fish

An Iowan discovers Minnesota's North Shore — and its smoky delights.

By BETSY RUBINER  
Special to the Star Tribune

By 9:30 a.m. on Labor Day in the small town of Knife River, about 15 miles north of Duluth, customers were already lined up behind the glass case at Russ Kendall's Smokehouse, eyeing amber chunks of sugar-cured lake trout and silvery whitefish pulled from nearby waters.

Several customers appeared to be locals, but others, including me, clutched insulated bags ready to fill for travel. I was heading home to Iowa after my first visit to Lake Superior's North Shore — and to three of its best-known smoked fish purveyors.

My appetite for locally smoked native fish stems from my Michigan childhood, when I fished with my father in the northern Lower Peninsula. When the fish were biting (oh, happy day!), we often took our catch to a smokehouse near Lake Michigan and picked them up later, wrapped in paper, ready to devour.

No surprise, then, that my maiden voyage to explore the 110-plus miles between Duluth and Grand Marais included stops to eat delicious salty, smoky fish, often atop a cracker smeared with cream cheese — as is the local custom, I learned.

### North Shore 101

When my husband and I weren't eating fish, we did other North Shore tourist basics. We searched (unsuccessfully) for agates on rocky beaches and hiked through birch and pine forest, along gorges and waterfalls, wondering about the water's yellow-



Docksider Fish Market in Grand Marais, Minn.

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low-brown color, reminiscent of root beer. (The odd color is caused by tannic acid, a natural plant compound used to tan hides and make dry wine.)

In Duluth, we watched ships pass under the awe-inspiring Aerial Lift Bridge — its midsection slowly rising parallel to the water, rather than swinging open in two sections — and strolled along the Lakewalk, past a pretty park, a garden and Fitter's, the imposing brewery building now home to an inn, microbrewery, shops and restaurants.

Twenty-seven miles north, in Two Harbors, we checked out Agate Bay's maritime marvels, walking out into the water along the long concrete breakwall for stunning views of the still-operating 1892 red-brick lighthouse and imposing docks where freighters are

loaded with iron ore.

Farther up Hwy. 61 in Grand Marais, we admired the art and crafts at Sivertson Gallery and the North House Folk School. Northeast of town, inside the remarkable Naniboujou Lodge's dining room, we were dazzled by the Cree Indian-inspired decor, with a high ceiling boldly painted in red, orange, yellow, green and blue swaths.

But the fish! Oh, the fish! I ate primarily whitefish — my favorite, moist and mild-flavored — and enjoyed it everywhere. The three shops we visited sell other smoked native fish at market prices, such as trout, herring and cisco, as well as several varieties of non-native salmon. (Lake Superior is stocked with salmon but it is not sold commercially.) They all offer fish to take out, eat in or mail-

order, and during our visits all had swiftly moving lines near a glass display case of fish. Yet each has its own distinct vibe and a little something extra.

### Northern Waters Smokehaus

Located on Duluth's attractive Canal Park waterfront, inside a 1909 warehouse reborn as a bustling marketplace, Northern Waters is a hip urban eatery, sporting a wall covered with signs touting its many sandwich options, from Cajun Finn (the top seller, with house-smoked salmon) to the Squealy Dan (yes, pork).

Although smoked fish gets top billing, this business, begun in 1998, also smokes other meats. During the lunch hour, my husband enjoyed his Silence of the Lambwich, featuring "haus-roasted curry-rubbed leg of lamb."

I was one of the few eat-



Source: maps4news.com HERE  
Star Tribune

centric, with fish and chips, fish burgers, chowders and a smoked fish wrap.

Arriving for a late lunch, we weren't alone — but again, I seemed to be the only person eating just plain smoked fish. I bought a small piece of whitefish, wrapped in white paper, that I ate outside.

(418 W. Hwy. 61, Grand Marais, Minn.; 1-218-387-2906, docksiderfishmarket.com.)

### Russ Kendall's Smokehouse

Home to a family business begun in 1908, Kendall's looks like a classic roadhouse — a red storefront on the side of a country road, with a neon sign advertising the smokehouse and Royal Bohemian Beer.

Inside, the place seems frozen in another era, with knotty wood paneling, mounted fish trophies and other taxidermy, classic beer signs, faded photos and memorabilia. "Well-known on television" reads a yellowed Kendall's ad for "Wrestling! Orchestra and Dancing!" — entertainment options no longer available, although a bar remains in the storefront, which survived a 2014 fire.

After buying fish at the counter, customers can eat in the adjacent dining area at one of the wooden tables covered with a floral oilcloth, but during our morning visit, no one ate in. Advertised specialties are sugar-cured lake trout and king salmon, but I stuck with whitefish, available that morning as a whole fish, not chunks. I plopped my paper-wrapped, edible North Shore souvenir into an insulated bag and hit the road.

(149 Scenic Dr., Knife River, Minn.; 1-218-834-5995, facebook.com/RussKendalls.)

Betsy Rubiner is a Des Moines-based travel writer.

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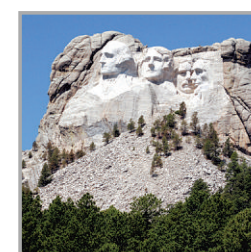
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