

VIRTUAL L

Next stop: Oak Park, Green Line



BY KAY DALY
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A sign in this Green Line train station announces "Village of Oak Park." Village is right: This burg is like Mayberry in a slightly higher tax bracket. From the park on the corner to the posters advertising local theatrical productions (is it just a coincidence that "Our Town" is about to open?), this is a family-friendly suburb with an emphasis on community. Where else would the citizenry picket to save the hallowed neighborhood hotdog stand, The Tasty Dog, from eminent domain? Oak Park folk did, so you can still grab a pup at the corner of Lake and Euclid. But there's more than just down-home charm. After all, this Mayberry was home to two historic Americans, Ernest Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright.

In-the-know spot

UNIQUE FREAQUE
121 N. Kenilworth
(708) 445-8900
www.uniquefreaque.com

While you're gawking at the Unity Temple (a Wright landmark), take a moment to look across the street or you'll miss another, albeit smaller, architectural wonder. The Unique Freaque is just as it's billed: a one-of-a-kind gem housing similarly special artistic creations. Located in the reconverted garden level of an 1890s row house, this quirky shop displays the work of local artists in a truly unusual setting. Gothic gargoyles support the low, stenciled ceiling, and artistic treasures hide in the dusky grottos that dot the interior. The wares are just as charming: from cigar-box purses to theatrical masks crafted from recycled paper bags, these unique creations would tickle even jaded shoppers.

Where to chill

SHOPPING AROUND OAK PARK AVENUE
www.shopoakpark.com/theavenue

If you're the sort that craves a dose of retail therapy, the shops that surround the intersection of Oak Park Avenue and the L tracks offer plenty of relief. For the artistically inclined, there's the Lindsey Gallery (111 N. Oak Park), with its fine jewelry and accessories, and Camille et Famille's funky housewares and wearables (129 N. Oak Park). If you're longing for the old country, browse the Waterford crystal and wool sweaters at the Irish Shop (100 N. Oak Park). Music fans will love Val's Halla Records (723 1/2 South Blvd.), a tiny purveyor of new and used music, or if your taste is more high-brow, stop in at Cabernet & Company (732 Lake) for fine wines and artisanal cheeses.

OBERWEIS DAIRY
124 N. Oak Park
(708) 660-1350

All that shopping can work up a sweat, but Oberweis is there to cool you down. Grab a cone, sundae or shake at one of Chicagoland's favorite ice cream chains. The low counter and red-topped stools recall an old-fashioned ice-cream parlor of America's Main Street, and the chessboards (complete with playing pieces) installed in the tables invite you to linger as you lick your scoop.

Dinner date destination

CAFE LE COQ
734 Lake
(708) 848-CAFE

Nothing would impress a date more than a quick trip to Paris, but who has the bankroll for that? Thankfully, you can skip the jet and enjoy the culinary wonders of the City of Light at this intimate bistro. The green and gold accents and beautifully ornamented bar ooze Old World charm, while the menu boasts continental classics like coq au vin and boef Bourguignon. Desserts are equally appealing; word on the street is that the rosemary roasted pears are a must-try. Reservations are highly recommended.

SAFETY RATING: You'll be as safe as if in your mother's arms.

PANHANDLER RATING: Seldom or never.

Cheap eats

NEW POT
727 Lake
(708) 383-1682

This cheery Thai restaurant only recently opened, but already there's a buzz. And why not? The menu offers all the classic favorites, from pad Thai to potstickers, with most entrees coming in around the \$7 mark. Portions are ample, so unless your appetite is lumberjack large, you could probably split an entree and appetizer with a buddy and leave feeling satisfied.

Best of the nighttime world

LAKE ROOM
728 Lake
(708) 358-8900

Until recently the village was dry, so you won't find a lot of night spots around these parts. Thank heaven, then, for the Lake Room. With its sleek dark interior accented in mauve and rose, this new restaurant/lounge offers a welcome escape for hipsters and night owls. Grilled steak, chicken and seafood dominate the entrees, but the real claim to fame is the appetizer menu, rumored to be the best in town. The Lake Room also offers some of the only live entertainment around, with salsa on Wednesday nights and a swing band on Fridays. The kitchen stays open until the doors close, and on weekends that's 2 a.m.

No wallet needed joint

POOR PHIL'S
139 S. Marion
(708) 848-0871

Don't be fooled by its location in a hotel lobby: this corner joint is a favorite of locals. And with its comfortable outdoor seating, laid-back atmosphere and great specials, it's easy to see why. The specialty of the house is seafood, and the daily "Cocktail Sauce Hour" (Monday-Friday, 4 p.m.-6:30 p.m.) makes it easy to fill up on the shelled critters; oysters and shrimp go for a mere 50 cents apiece. And with no cover and multiple TVs, this is a great place to catch the game and a cheap, tasty meal.

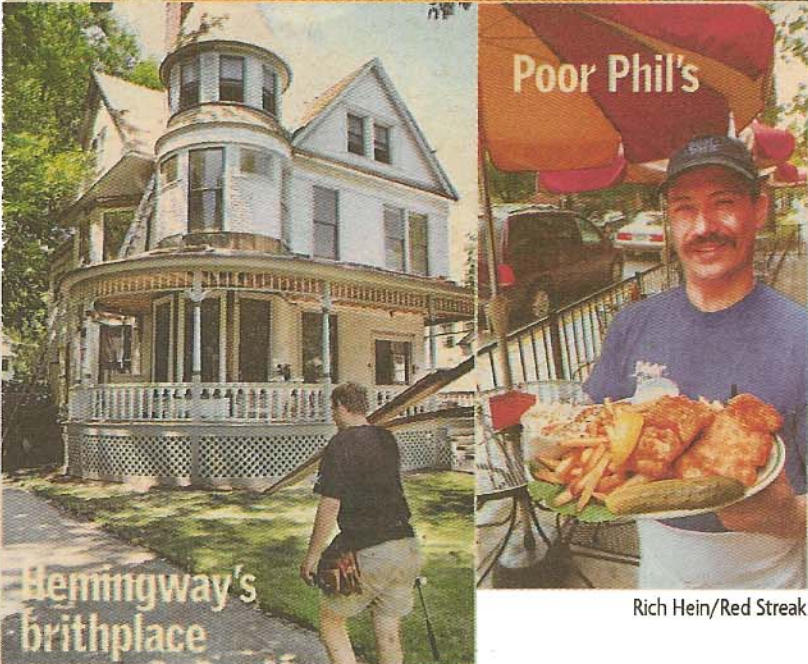
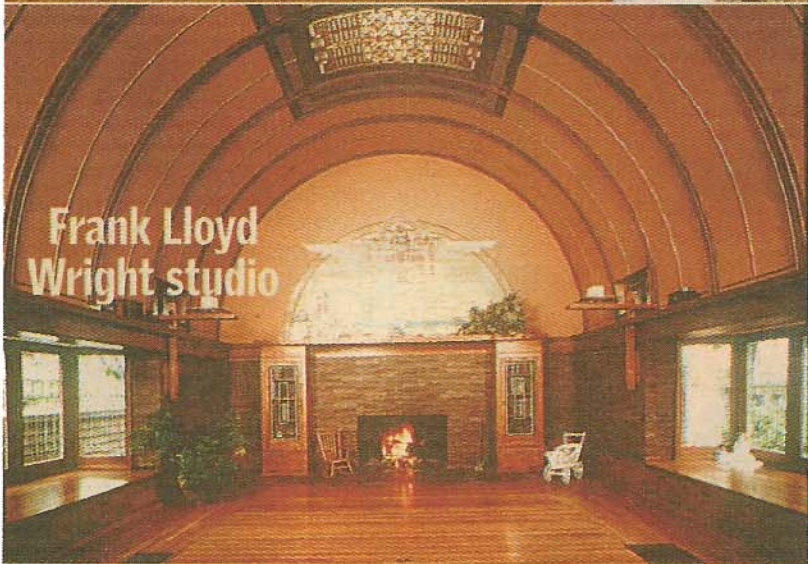
For the artiste

ERNEST HEMINGWAY BIRTHPLACE
339 N. Oak Park
(708) 848-2222

Believe it or not, hard-drinking, ambulance-driving, bull-running Papa actually hails from this cozy, affluent suburb. Tour the Queen Anne house he called home as a wee lad, before the weight of the world drove him to emigrate to Paris. To learn more about how Oak Park helped to mold this literary great, visit the Hemingway Museum, just down the street at 200 N. Oak Park. Video displays and memorabilia from Ernest's letterman days at Oak Park High School (he once got a "D" on an English paper!) add a new dimension to this American legend.

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT STUDIO & THE HISTORIC DISTRICT.
951 Chicago
(708) 848-1976

Is it any wonder that the former stomping grounds of the most famous American architect is now deemed a "historical district?" The swarms of tourists that clog the sidewalks of Chicago and Forest Avenues attest to the enduring popularity of domestic sightseeing. Get a fascinating look at architecture at work and play with a detailed tour of the master's home and studio; it's well worth the price of admission. But just strolling the neighborhood (on either a guided walking tour or on your own) is a feast for the eyes. Victorian and Queen Anne mansions dominate, punctuated by Prairie school samples created by Wright and his acolytes. Don't miss the Moore-Dugal residence (333 Forest Ave.), a sprawling Wright design that resembles an English Tudor on steroids.



Rich Hein/Red Streak