

# Still Life

Come Valentine's Day, savvy Midwestern lovebirds know to fly north — not south — to Stillwater, Minnesota, a sleepy Victorian hamlet of antiques and rare books guaranteed to resurrect your inner Wordsworth and Barrett Browning. **By Jodie Jacobs**

**May we offer you a trade?** Don't worry. It's a simple transaction. A real bargain. All you'll need is a car, a couple tanks of gas, a road map to Stillwater, Minnesota, and the one you love. What you get in return is pure Valentine's Day bliss.

Here's how it works: You bring all your stresses, your worries and anxieties and drop them off at the doorstep of the Rivertown Inn, a restored 1882 lumberbaron's estate perched above the scenic St. Croix River in Stillwater. Innkeeper Lisa Lothson takes them, discards them and provides you with all the hallmarks of a 19th-century romance novel in exchange.

Pick your Victorian pleasure: Feeding each other chocolate truffles in a canopied bed. Toasting each other with champagne while luxuriating in a double spa tub. Reading each other excerpts from Elizabeth Barrett Browning sonnets ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways") while cuddling by a cozy fire. Or relaxing with wine and cheese while catching the afternoon breeze in a shady cupola or beside a garden fountain. They're all just a quick phone call to the front desk away.

"I wanted a place similar to what my wife and I want when we go away — a



beautiful place to reconnect as a couple," says owner Jeff Anderson. He imagined it. He arranged it. And the lovebirds came.

Rivertown Inn specializes in romantic interludes. Each of the B&B's antique-filled suites is named after a famous writer (from Lord Byron and Alfred Tennyson to Oscar Wilde and Agatha Christie), offering spa robes, gaslit fireplaces, CD players and works of literature from each author's oeuvre.

You're inspired to exchange romantic verse over continental breakfasts in bed or a lavish three-course morning meal in the dining room, which includes delicacies such as a pear and citrus salad with a ginger-honey emul-



Whether by land or by sea, Stillwater, Minn., is a true beauty. Taylor Falls Boat Tours allow guests to peacefully drift down the St. Croix River (top), while a stroll through downtown Stillwater (above) is filled with antique shops, rare-book sellers and sweet temptations.

## Destination: Stillwater, Minn.

### \*eat

**Barbara Ann's Fudge Shop** 317 S. Main St., Stillwater, Minn., 651/303-6329

**Bayport Cookery** 328 Fifth Ave. N., Bayport, Minn., 651/430-1066, [www.bayportcookery.com](http://www.bayportcookery.com)

**Cesare's Wine Bar** 102 S. Second St., Stillwater, Minn., 651/439-1352

### \*sleep

**Rivertown Inn** Quiet Season Package: Nov-April, \$325 [two nights bedchamber] or \$375 [two nights suites excluding Carriage House]. Regular season: Prices vary depending on date and room choice. 306 W. Olive St., Stillwater, Minn. Call 651/430-2955 or visit [www.rivertowninn.com](http://www.rivertowninn.com).

### \*do

**Rolling Down the River** If you're planning a visit to Stillwater during the spring or summer months and want to catch a breathtaking sunset or sail below a shower of glimmering moonbeams, the Rivertown and Stillwater Web sites link to gondola rides on the St. Croix.

Relax with a bottle of wine during the 45-minute boat ride. [You will remember to turn off the cell phone, right?] As to the wine, Rivertown Inn hostess/wine connoisseur Lisa Lothson can make a suggestion or even have a bottle on hand [just add it to your tab, and don't forget to ask about glasses and corkscrew]. Sunset and moonlight gondola rides fill fast,



Somewhere old Queen Victoria is smiling because the Rivertown Inn has spared no expense in re-creating the lavish splendor of the Victorian Age, whether it's the furniture and rugs chosen to decorate its carriage-house suites (above), the attention to detail given to the inn's exterior and surrounding grounds (right, top) or the posh fixtures used in its themed bathrooms, such as the Oscar Wilde bathroom (right, bottom).




sion, delicate crêpes with apricot compote, as well as fajita egg scrambles with pico de gallo and pan-roasted potatoes. All of which should tide you over just long enough to get you to your midday snack at Barbara Ann's Fudge Shop.

Stillwater is the sum of its Victorian parts. Antiques abound. Main Street is bookended by two huge emporiums: the 30,000-square-foot Midtown Antique Mall at one end and the equally large Mill Antiques, which is housed in an 1870s sawmill. You could easily spend half the day sorting through antiques, but if you love books, reserve some time to browse the shelves at Loomer Antiquarian Booksellers on South Main Street. Aspiring chefs will want to stop at the Chef's Gallery for hard-to-find cooking items or take a cooking class.

About halfway through the downtown, take out the camera to snap Stillwater's most

photographed landmark — a 1931 steel-lift bridge. On the National Register of Historic Places, the bridge is popular among the commuters and commercial vehicles that take Minnesota Highway 36 across the St. Croix to Wisconsin Highway 64. You might even catch the bridge's center truss lifting up to allow a boat through.

Existing on panoramas alone is fine poetically, but by the time reality hits after a long day of exploring, it may be too late to snag a table at a popular restaurant. If you want to linger over a multi-course gourmet meal that's worth the calorie count, book a table at the Bayport Cookery, a five-minute drive south on Highway 95 to Bayport. During February, the menu caters to chocolate lovers — *mmmmmmmm* — but the restaurant is always proficient in working around food restrictions and allergies.

Check the Web site for sample menus because you can go the "whole nine yards" for \$85 a person, opt for a five-course menu for \$55 or choose three courses for just \$35. For lighter fare there are several wine-bar/bistros in town. Cesare's Wine Bar on Second Street, for example, offers creative dishes and inventive wine flights, guaranteed to end your Victorian interlude on a rosy-checked high note. 

*For more romantic retreats, turn to page 61.*

so call or stop by the booth near Nelson Street and the river ahead for times and prices. Call 651/439-1783 or visit [www.gondolaramantica.com](http://www.gondolaramantica.com).

And if you've got a little more time on your hands, consider driving about half an hour north on Highway 95 to Taylors Falls, oohing and ahing at the famed tree-topped cliffs (called Dalles)

along the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. Take a sharp right into the Taylors Falls Scenic Boat Tours driveway, immediately before the U.S. Highway 8 bridge to Wisconsin, where you can enjoy a ride on a paddleboat. If you would rather canoe or kayak, ask at the tour booth for directions to their boat rentals located

in the adjoining Interstate Park. *Taylors Falls Scenic Boat Tours, Minnesota Highway 95 and U.S. Highway 8, Taylors Falls, Minn. Call 800/447-4858 or visit [www.wildmountain.com](http://www.wildmountain.com).*

**The Chef's Gallery** 324 S. Main St., Stillwater, Minn., 651/351-1144, [www.thechefsgallery.com](http://www.thechefsgallery.com)

**Loomer Antiquarian Booksellers** 201 S. Main St., Stillwater, Minn., 651/430-1092, [www.loomebooks.com](http://www.loomebooks.com)

**Midtown Antique Mall** 301 S. Main St., Stillwater, Minn., 651/430-0808, [www.midtownantiques.com](http://www.midtownantiques.com)

**The Mill Antiques** 410 N. Main St., Stillwater, Minn., 615/430-1816