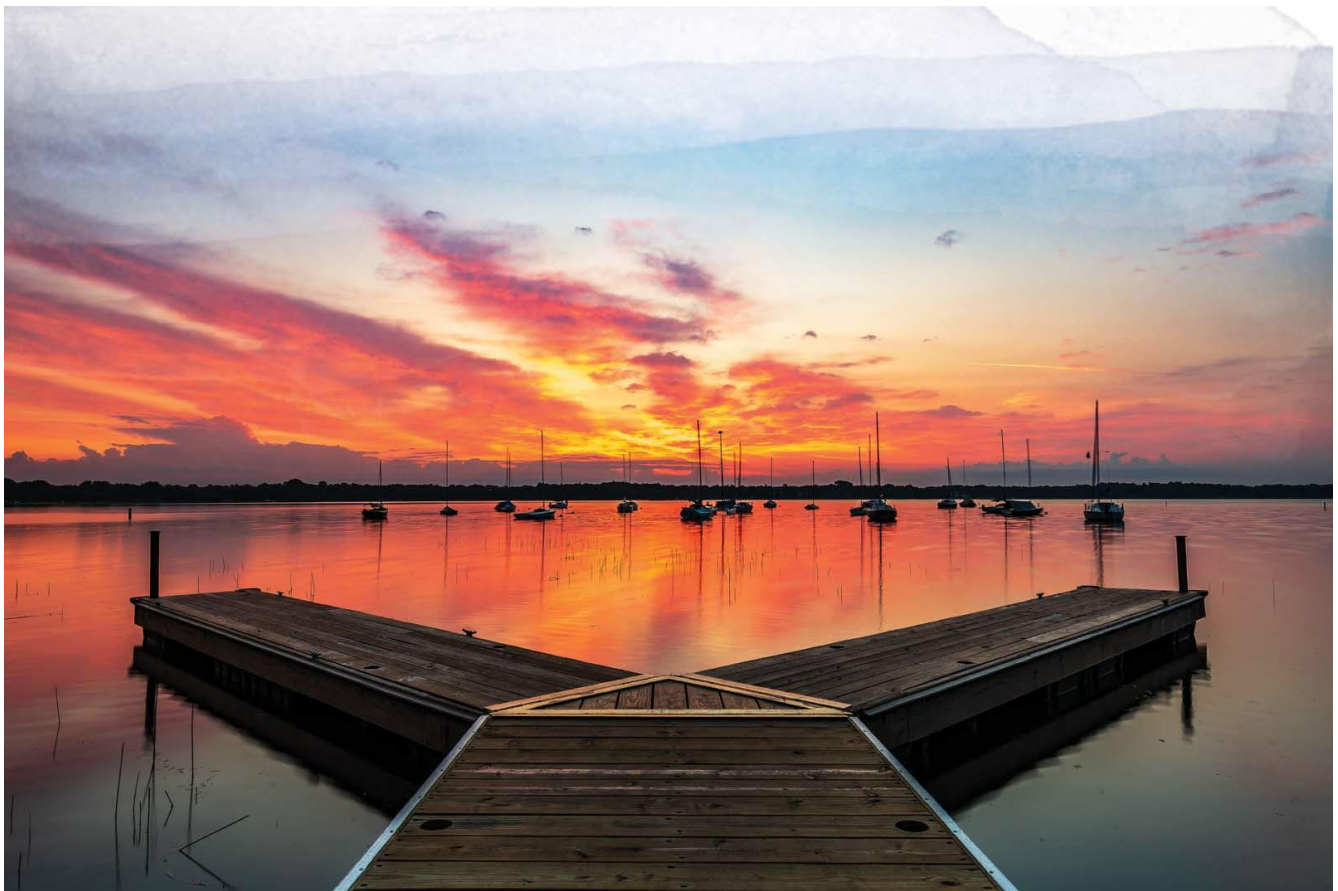


Minnesota Monthly

All the Reasons White Bear Lake Won Our “Best MN Town” Contest

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Erik Tormoen



A brilliant sky over the public docks at Matoska Park

Photo by Jim Delesha

After 57,696 votes, judges’ feedback, and editorial hand-wringing, we have declared the second winner of our Best MN Town contest: White Bear Lake.

What put this northeast-metro, 25,000-person town on top? A lot, actually.

Last year, we asked communities to tell us how they embody “the spirit of Minnesota.” The state has its hallmarks: per-capita arts funding that’s first in the nation, enviable recreational

amenities (read: lakes), and a food scene mixing Midwest classics with Coast-baiting class. While growing in these areas, White Bear Lake has shown off our reputation for innovative education and expressed “Minnesota nice” in residents’ creative charitable projects. Here’s a closer look at the city of lakes and legends.



Manitou Days

Photo by Lisa Beecroft

Recreation

“Everything that happens here happens because of the lake,” says Lisa Beecroft, a marketer and lifelong White Bear Lake resident. She’s summarizing what she’s learned working with the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society. “The original settlers that came here? Because of the lake. The events and activities we have? It’s because of the lake.” And it’s part of why municipalities around the city—including White Bear Township, Mahtomedi, Gem Lake, Hugo, Vadnais Heights—share resources and partner on events. With emphasis: “All these communities come together around the lake,” she says.

On June 13, Beecroft helps launch **Manitou Days**—as does practically every business, arts organization, and restaurant in the area. For three weeks, this 50-year-old tradition turns White

Bear Lake into a massive party-slash-community expo. Craft fairs, pie contests, petting zoos, water ski shows, a farmers' market, a 300-person picnic, a musical, a medallion hunt, a golf tournament, Fourth of July fireworks set off by volunteers, music on the rooftop of Rudy's Redeye Grill, a Grande Parade that rolls downtown toward a beach dance party, and 60-70 other events happen free of charge.



Mahtomedi Beach

Photo by Jim Delesha

"Marketfest brings people in—with the downtown food and booze, arts and crafts, and amusement stuff," says Bill Foussard, chair of Explore White Bear Lake and owner of Rudy's and White Bear Country Inn. "But it's really celebrating the community. Cerenity Senior Care does an ice cream social. Lots of local music. The Classic & Vintage Boat Show. Everybody is doing things to highlight what they offer."

The second-biggest body of water in the metro area buzzes year-round. You can snowkite in winter. The **Bear'ly Open** golf tournament on ice raises money for the local food shelf. After the thaw, folks take up sailing at four commercial marinas and put away cocktails at lakeside-patio restaurants like Tally's Dockside, Admiral D's, and upscale Italian eatery Acqua in the downtown **Marina District**.

In 2018, the State Legislature approved the **Lake Links Trail** after a decade-long push by residents. Construction will connect 10 miles of trails around the lake by 2021, so cyclists and

pedestrians can enjoy it uninterrupted. Also off the lake, to the east, golfers swing at **White Bear Yacht Club**, an old F. Scott Fitzgerald haunt (before he and Zelda got thrown out for rowdiness) with a course that's consistently named among the country's top 100 and the state's top five. There, the nonprofit **White Bear Sailing School** guides novice skippers and sure-footed racers alike.

For wilder green, **Tamarack Nature Center** has preserved 320 acres of forested paths and wildlife. Less than 10 minutes northwest of downtown, seasonal programs immerse kids and adults in nature, up close or from behind a camera.



The new Hanifl Center for the Performing Arts

Courtesy of Hanifl Center for the Performing Arts

Arts

Residents proved their devotion to the arts with the debut of 2018's roughly \$9 million **Hanifl Performing Arts Center** theater. That money came from individual donations. The result: more programming for younger audiences, with Hanifl's resident **Children's Performing Arts** putting on productions like *The Music Man Jr.* in June 2019. Plus, there's more room for the **Lakeshore Players Theatre**, which organizes the fan-favorite **10-Minute Play Festival**, May 30-June 9.

Anyone can submit a super-short play; the Lakeshore Players perform them back to back, now for the 15th year.

The Hanifl sits beside the **White Bear Center for the Arts**. One of just a few independent art centers in the suburbs, it moved to a permanent space in 2013, enough to multiply pottery classes from two to 10 per week and boost membership by the hundreds.

“We were intentional about creating casual spaces for people to just run into each other,” says executive director Suzi Hudson—such as on the expansive front porch, or in the fireplace-furnished artists’ library.





The Lakeshore Players' October 2018 production of "Elephant and Piggie: We Are in a Play!"

The Center just celebrated 50 years of a "come as you are" philosophy. When Hudson steps outside her office, three days a week she sees women weaving scarves in the atrium. She took in this group of disabled artists, called Bloom, when they lost their original space four years ago. It's now where they lead workshops and sell their textiles.

"I've had people say, 'This place has saved my life,'" Hudson says. Free, open programming includes cooking classes, writing workshops, photography critiques, and an at-capacity clay program she hopes to expand.

About 10 minutes south, on the Century College campus, **Shakespeare & Company** enters its 44th season, June 29-August 4, staging the Bard as he liked it: on an outdoor stage in an unpretentious environment. Community talent star in three shows, dressed in Elizabethan finery while, audience-wise, children tumble in the grass, among picnic blankets and lawn chairs. This year, see *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (June 29-August 4), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (July 5-August 3), and *Coriolanus* (July 12-August 2) at the state's longest-running outdoor classical repertory theater.



7 Vines Vineyard in Dellwood

Food & Drink

At an outdoor spring music festival in Blaine, Denise Atkinson couldn't find any good coffee. So, she started peddling her own. In 2015, the **Anchor Coffee House** embarked across the state in a cozy, cream-colored trailer serving Lindstrom-based Northwood Roasterie's small-batch brews. Atkinson, her husband, their son, and his wife opened at a downtown storefront in late 2017, sharing the space with farm-to-table restaurant **Margaux's Table** in the Atkinsons' hometown of White Bear Lake.

"It just seemed wrong that there wasn't a craft coffee shop in downtown, because it still has a unique, small-town feel," says son Brad. "There's a lot of people who walk the lake, who take a two-block detour for a cup of coffee—runners and bike groups. So, we use our spot as a hub." Their high-end joe (try the lavender latte) and baked goods even found room at last year's Minnesota State Fair.

Pine Tree Apple Orchard made it to the fair, too—as one of the original growers of the headline-snatching First Kiss apple. Imagine a tart, peppery Honeycrisp. "It's one of the best early apples we've seen," says orchard co-owner Bill Jacobson, noting that they typically ripen around the first week of August. On 300 acres, for more than 60 years, three generations of the Jacobson family have reared apples and pumpkins in fall, tended strawberries through summer,

and baked pies year-round.

Meanwhile, the baked goods at **Grandma's Bakery** got an update: The 40-year institution welcomed Danny "Klecko" McGleno, who had to leave behind some 30 years at his Saint Agnes bakery in St. Paul after ICE targeted his staff—just as they were gearing up to make bread for 2018 Super Bowl crowds. Now, Klecko has brought his lauded recipes to White Bear.



At Anchor House Coffee

Courtesy of Anchor House Coffee

Across the lake, **7 Vines Vineyard** is pushing Minnesota's wine frontier. The scenic, 188-acre estate sat unused under railroad baron James J. Hill's descendants until 2010, when St. Paul natives and real estate professionals Ron and Arlie Peltier bought it. Near a dusty road in Dellwood, the Peltiers built a "Ritz in Colorado" wine bar and event space overlooking their vineyard's gentle hills. They opened to the public in 2017, devising flatbreads, cheeses, soups, and other bites to pair with reds, whites, sparklings, and rosés. Their cold-hardy grapes withstand 30-below temps. Somehow, the Marquette, the Frontenac, the La Crescent still blossom with notes of candied cherry, plum, raw honeycomb.

For even wilder flavors, **the Alchemist**, in downtown White Bear, carries on the legend of Twin Cities mixologist Johnny Michaels. His cocktail lounge couples a twisted Old Fashioned with

chocolate bacon, in steampunk-inspired digs next door to the craft **Big Wood Brewery**.

A couple blocks west, the spring opening of **Cup and Cone** kicks off a local holiday. By summer, lines can extend 100 people deep. The family-owned ice cream shop is small, with a walk-up window and retro yellow signage. But they keep up with social media, posting soft-serve flavors of the day (pumpkin, watermelon, birthday cake)—a mark of the third generation taking over. While they do sell dairy-free Dole Whips, the new **Vegan East** bakery proved good enough to expand to Minneapolis last year, after fewer than six months in downtown White Bear. Think cartoonish cupcakes, gluten-free cinnamon rolls, chili “cheese” nachos, and more.



At Donatelli's, kids learn how to get and keep a job
at a restaurant

Education

“That’s creepy,” students said when Wing Young Huie told them he takes pictures of strangers. “How many of you feel like a stranger to most of the students in your school?” he countered. Most raised their hands. The Duluth-based photographer directed these students, of White Bear Lake Area High School, to sit down with a classmate they didn’t know yet, pose questions —“What do others assume about you?” “How would a dictionary define you?”—and present their findings.

In a ceramics class, each student crafted two cups to reflect the peer they had gotten to know—one, say, for how they act at home, the other for how they act in school. Typical teens, they complained of awkwardness. But, by the end, after photographing the results and exhibiting them in the halls, they noted a cultural shift. “One person being open and vulnerable affects hundreds of others,” one said. “This is the opposite of Instagram,” said another.

Huie worked with 25 teachers to reach some 1,500 students. The 2017 project, ***What Do You See?***, carries on 20-plus years of his work. Trained in journalism, Huie interviews and snaps strangers to confront biases. “We take photographs of each other every day in our minds,” he explains. “What we project onto the reality in front of us has to do with all of those images we consume—Hollywood, television, social media, advertising, and all the selfies.”

He landed 2018’s prestigious McKnight Distinguished Artist Award shortly after an exhibition of the students’ work at the White Bear Center for the Arts, which helped organize his collaboration with the school. Huie wants to make *What Do You See?* even bigger, possibly with a zine covering his school-based work.

Meanwhile, for their post-graduation lives, some kids in White Bear are finding guidance beyond school. If you see fifth-graders making pizzas during the lunch rush at **Donatelli’s**, know they’re from Willow Lane Elementary, and they’re learning how to hold down a job. They wrote cover letters, sent résumés, demonstrated good and bad interview habits, and trained for months to work beside Donatelli’s staff over a couple hours. For nearly 10 years, the Italian eatery has annually tutored 60-80 kids in late winter. Even former governor Mark Dayton stopped by White Bear for a slice.

Back at the new Hanifl Performing Arts Center, kids are prompted to think a little more globally. Children’s Performing Arts introduced **Spotlight on a Cause** last year, teaching elementary students not just about the international water crisis but how to advocate for solutions. They performed a play based on children’s book *Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope* and worked with local nonprofit H2O for Life. Funds raised at each show went toward building a well near a school in Tanzania, where clean water is scarce.



Chris Harms, founder of Giving Gardens

Philanthropy

A few years ago, Chris Harms, a therapist living in White Bear Lake, read *Confronting Urban Poverty in America*. The book describes how the recession spread poverty to the suburbs, from urban and rural spaces. In the White Bear Lake Area School District, nearly 28 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, according to the district—one indicator of poverty.

“[White Bear Lake is] a place that has a deep sense of pride in who we are and the resources we have,” Harms says. “How can that exist side-by-side with such need?” In response, he started **Giving Gardens** about three years ago. The nonprofit subverts seasonal slumps in community garden participation by providing homes and businesses their own beds to tend. They grow produce, then donate a majority portion to nearby food shelves.

“The way I process things going on in society—in terms of despair and disparity, whether in equal food access or whatever—I’ve got to make a contribution,” Harms says. Sourcing from local lumberyards, Giving Gardens has rolled out 200 garden beds since 2017, with another 100 expected this year. “If food insecurity is an area that I care about, then the best way to start is in your backyard.”

For about four years, another backyard nonprofit, **Bear Boating**, has aimed for equal access to recreation. The organization takes seniors, disabled persons, and active and retired military members on lake excursions for free, where they fish, learn about the lake, and watch for nesting eagles.

White Bear Lake resident **Joe Miller** does good on a smaller, homespun scale. He was in the hospital with heart problems five years ago when he saw a fellow patient crocheting. He took up loom knitting and now does it year-round. By winter, Miller has hundreds of hats to donate. After he saw kids waiting, bare-headed, at bus stops in winter, he figured this was how he could help.

White Bear Lake’s **John King**, meanwhile, is all for bare-headed kids in winter. That is to say: high school hockey players. In observance of an annual Minnesota High School Hockey Tournament tradition at St. Paul’s Xcel Energy Center, players from statewide schools doff their helmets, unsheathing often-luscious locks, and glide mid-rink to preen for the camera.

Since 2011, King, a Fallon Worldwide advertising executive, has compiled hair highlights on YouTube as a hobby. He ranks the top 10, puts some of their follicular flips in shampoo-commercial slow-mo, and adds pun-laced commentary in his Upper Midwest monotone. He riffs on hockey patois that has dubbed these dos “salads” and “flows.” “Arugula,” for spicy styling. “Af-flow,” for a flouncy ‘fro. Mullets are toilet-seat covers, dual exhaust pipes, Pop-Tarts. Between his takes, Wild players give shout-outs. Some of King’s roundups have surpassed 2 million views.

But, as he told no less than *The New Yorker* this spring, “There are only so many jokes.” This year marks the 10th All Hockey Hair Team, and the last—the “Grand Flownale.” King, at 44, also

doesn't want to wake up one day as "the old man that grades the high school boys' hair."

To exit with grace, he set up a GoFundMe page for the Hendrickson Foundation, a charity that supports sled hockey for players with disabilities throughout Minnesota. Their motto: Hockey changes lives. "If you have ever laughed once watching one of these goofy videos the past 10 years—please consider donating \$1," King wrote. "And maybe, just maybe, together we can prove 'Hockey hair changes lives,' too!"



White Bear Yacht Club

Photo by Jim Delesha

Community

"I think people thought we were a sleepy town." At least, that seemed like the popular perception when Bill Foussard arrived in White Bear Lake to take over a struggling hotel in 2000.

He remembered it as a childhood summering spot from growing up in St. Paul. He already owned a St. Cloud hotel—in a city more than twice the size of White Bear—but the residents' tight, demonstrative friendliness won him over. "There's no way White Bear is a sleepy town," he says. "When you ask people to do something, they help you."

Like that time the west-metro suburb vied to host the Governor's Fishing Opener 10 years ago. "Everybody said, 'You won't get it,'" he recalls. "It always goes up north." Seven-hundred volunteers put on a picnic for 5,000, took state politicians fishing, and goosed up the city with fresh paint and flags. They got it.



The Old-Fashioned Cake Walk happens at Marketfest, on the first day of Manitou Days

Today, the White Bear Lake Area Historical Society reminds residents how far they've come. They bus them to Prohibition-era speakeasies and gangster foxholes. Free events restore ties to Native American heritage and trace the rationing, relocated legacies of WWII.

Downtown, family-owned retailer **GoodThings** has grown a lot since 1973: from a shirt-and-socks store—run by 22-year-old Sharon Conrad in the basement of a bank building—to a multi-level boutique with branches in Maple Grove and the Twin Cities. The trend-tracking gift empire is still owned by Conrad, now with her son Tyler. This spring, they merged with Biblelot, to save (and rebrand) its long-running Minneapolis and St. Paul shops. Their new neighbor in downtown White Bear opened only last year: **The Minnesotan** designs sporty state-pride apparel for women, men, and kids.

In another historical journey, an old sailboat site evolved into a residential hotspot. Off the lake, near what is now the Marina District, a Norwegian immigrant set up Johnson Boat Works. In the early 1900s, he unveiled the scow—a flat-bottomed sailboat of his own design. It skimmed

water, won races, and caught on in the U.S. In 2016, more than 20 years after Johnson Boat Works shuttered, the site became **BoatWorks Commons**, a development with apartments, boardwalks, and a plaza. The city's first public-art commission, installed there last year, recalls the scow's saga in sleek stainless steel.

Five minutes away, Foussard's **White Bear Country Inn** launches new legends. It's a special-occasion watering hole, connected to his Rudy's Redeye Grill supper club. A newly installed rooftop rig drops a light-up polar bear à la the Time Square Ball—but on every holiday, not just New Year's.

Bears come up a lot, in fact, talking w

ith residents. They symbolize their civic loyalty well. During Manitou Days, Twin Citians flock to public parks around White Bear to hunt for a medallion (and the \$1,000 prize). "And, of course, the medallion's a little bear puck—everything's about the bear," organizer Lisa Beecroft laughs. She adds, in a lowered tone, "It gets pretty intense."