

By Bill and Susan Dragoo

Bill & Susan's Excellent Food Adventures

It's not unusual for this Norman couple to go off the beaten path in their travels near and far. While they're on the road, that includes sampling local cuisine in the alleys of Shanghai, the high villages of the Andes, and best of all, along Oklahoma's back roads.

I squint into the sun, piloting the truck as we drive the last few miles home. My copilot is napping, giving me the chance to drive. Bill only relinquishes control when he's on the verge of falling asleep at the wheel. Right now, he's waking up.

B: Where are we?

S: On I-40. Almost home.

B: Good. I'm hungry. I was dreaming about that little place where we stopped in Mangum awhile back.

S: **Hamburger Inn**, on the town square—the place with the onion burgers and special hot sauce. The recipe is more than sixty years old.

B: That's it. It's been operating for more than eighty years.

S: I love that little concrete building. They hauled the pieces in from

Tulsa in 1928. It was the first pre-fab building in southwest Oklahoma.

B: It's fun to see it still in use, and I like how Sammy and Bonnie Parker have integrated the old Dr. Pepper Bottling Company building next door for more seating.

S: Those deep-fried strips of jalapeños and onions they call Texas Toothpicks are tempting, but Mangum is several hours west, so we might ought to think of something else.

B: Out west reminds me of **Grassland Coffee** in Elgin. Tim and Nicole Hicks hand-make everything, from the soup to the light fixtures. Tim even built his own coffee roaster!

S: Fresh comes to mind when I think of Grassland: fresh-roasted coffee, fresh-baked bagels, cookies, and

bread, homemade soups. They even culture their own buttermilk.

B: Remember that buttermilk biscuit with bacon gravy? It was huge and light. Maybe you should start making biscuits and gravy.

S: Um, no. We'll save that for a treat away from home. But let's plan another trip to the Wichitas soon so we can stop in Elgin on the way.

I need to take you to **Coleman's All Beef Burgers** in Okmulgee. I grew up on those burgers, and you wouldn't believe their onion rings. Sliced thin with a light, crispy coating and slightly sweet—they're the best I've eaten. And the restaurant's still in the Coleman family after eighty years.

B: Bring back memories?

S: I remember the aroma of their bakery's fresh bread from childhood. Last time I was there, I tried their coconut cream pie. I didn't even know I liked coconut cream pie. The crust was tender and flaky, with almost but not quite a crispy finish, the filling fluffy and not too sweet. I wish I could have eaten it all.

JOHN JERNIGAN

A cheeseburger and fries is the staple meal at Hamburger Inn in Mangum. Above right: Susan and Bill Dragoo at Hamburger Inn

B: At least you brought me the leftovers. Thanks. Speaking of pie, those made-to-order fried pies at **Somethin' Sweet** in Stilwell were incredible. Mike Hosty would be proud. Remember his song about fried pies? "Gonna grab me a fried pie down south on 35."

S: Yes, but like Brenda Hale, who owns **Somethin' Sweet**, said, you can get fruit pies anywhere. Her pecan and German chocolate fried pies served hot with ice cream were intense.

B: I can't imagine eating a fried pie any other way now—that crispy crust glazed with powdered sugar. The other thing that blew my mind at **Somethin' Sweet**—this will mortify your vegan friends—was the chili cheese fries.

S: Yes! Hand-cut fries, cheese, chili, bacon, and jalapeños.

B: How great was that story, that Brenda and her daughter Kelly opened that place five years ago with two Crock-Pots, a Fry Daddy, and a Walmart griddle? They've come a long way.

S: I'd drive a long way to eat there again.

B: You're going to have to stop talking or feed me.

S: We're almost home. How about **Jana's Italian & Thai Restaurant**?

B: Deal. Jana's still serves the best pad thai anywhere. Remember how we thought it might be better in Bangkok?

S: It wasn't. Jana's homegrown vegetables and herbs have a lot to do with the fresh taste. And what a love story. She and her husband are from Thailand and met working at Othello's on Campus Corner.

B: Tinky cooked Italian, but he fell in love with Jana's Thai. They got married and opened a restaurant serving both.

S: Those Parmesan cheese rolls are a must with any dish. Delicious and cheesy, fresh out of the oven.

B: I keep hearing the word *fresh*.

S: Seems like we find some of the freshest food exploring Oklahoma's out-of-the-way places. Looks like Jana's is still open. I'm hungry for mango and sticky rice.

B: Me too. Great choice, honey.



JOHN JERNIGAN

ELGIN

GRASSLAND COFFEE



WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH: Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Saturday, 8 a.m. to noon. 7927 Highway 277, (580) 492-4900. 🍴

MANGUM

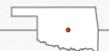
HAMBURGER INN



WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH: Monday through Saturday, 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 8:30 p.m. 126 South Pennsylvania Avenue, (580) 782-5254. 🍴

NORMAN

JANA'S ITALIAN & THAI RESTAURANT



WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH: Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m. 1324 North Interstate Drive, (405) 447-7200. 🍴

OKMULGEE

COLEMAN'S ALL BEEF BURGERS



WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH: Tuesday through Friday, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. 118 North Seminole, (918) 756-0560. 🍴

STILWELL

SOMETHIN' SWEET



WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Approximately three-quarters of a mile west of U.S. Highway 59 on Blackjack Street, (918) 696-2067. 🍴