

TRAVEL

Peeps art contest, Frank Lloyd Wright buildings and kringle make the Racine-Kenosha area a fun-filled and delicious destination

By MARY BERGIN

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Some artists paint with oils or watercolors. Others mold clay or bend hot glass. In southeastern Wisconsin, the medium of choice as Easter approaches is Peeps, the neon-bright marshmallow candy.

The Racine Art Museum hosts the 12th annual International Peeps Art Competition, March 25 through April 10. Sugary chicks and rabbits star in family-friendly dioramas, sculptures and more with pop culture, current events or punny themes.

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For example: “Sgt. Peepers Lonely Hearts Club Band,” “Peephead in Packerdise,” “An Imperfect Impeachment” and “Schitt\$ Peep” were introduced in 2020.

The 100-plus entries came from artists, hobbyists, families and businesses. Rules remain loose: Artwork has a size limit and must incorporate Peeps characters or candy.

“I’m surprised every year,” says Bruce Pepich, executive director of the museum known for treating contemporary craft as fine art. He hopes this year’s show will reflect “a sense that life is returning to normal.”

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Staffer Lisa Englander gets credit for the show concept. “We should be adding color to the world,” she thought, while passing a drugstore’s candy aisle during a dreary pre-Easter day.

“Coco’s Ofrenda,” a nod to the animated movie “Coco” and Day of the Dead altars, won emerging artist Susan Buhler of Racine the exhibition’s top award in 2020. It was her Peeps show debut.

“That show is a highlight of the winter,” she says. “When we were stuck inside because of COVID, I decided I was going to make something happy. It saved my sanity.”

Years ago, melted Peeps were used to re-create Van Gogh’s “Starry Night.” A Peeps-style necklace with rhinestones and glitter mimicked The Crown Jewels in England. Nurses who assist with colonoscopies came up with “Colonosco-Peeps.”

All playfully follow the Racine Art Museum’s mission. “We want the public to see what artists can do with something familiar to them,” Pepich says, of Peeps work and contemporary craft. Hundreds of unusual teapots are a favorite subset of the museum’s permanent collection of 9,500 curated items. “The Art of the Cup,” through Aug. 7, will

exhibit vessels with unconventional materials, purposes and styles.

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Face masks are mandatory at the downtown museum. Expect one-way and social-distancing signage, plus a capacity limit, especially in the Peeps show gallery. Group tours are available by appointment. ramart.org

More to see in the Racine-Kenosha area

Much in the lakeside Racine-Kenosha area has changed since my years of living and working there in the 1980s, when the inner-city Lake Michigan shoreline was largely an industrial eyesore.

What a makeover since then.

A 70-acre **campus of museums** (two with Civil War and dinosaur specialties) and sculptures (along a paved lakeshore path) replaces the gritty aftermath of auto manufacturing in downtown Kenosha. museums.kenosha.org, kenoshahistorycenter.org

Street art covers buildings boarded up after civil unrest in Kenosha made national headlines last summer, but a \$400 million downtown revitalization project will expand parks, performing arts, housing and retail. Boutique lodging in repurposed buildings — **The Stella**, a former Elks club, and the upcoming **Apis**, in a long-vacant department store — is a short walk from craft breweries and shops (including Jockey International's factory store and Mike Bjorn's, known for eclectic decor and men's apparel).

visitkenosha.com

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A marina and 5-acre park for festivals replaces coal piles and gas storage tanks in downtown Racine. Cherished for more than a century is 50-acre **North Beach**, the first in Wisconsin to earn Blue Wave certification for cleanliness. Next door is the 28-acre **Racine Zoo**, on the lakeshore since 1923, and 3 miles north is the 1880 **Wind Point Lighthouse**, still active. realracine.com

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In the area are two National Historic Landmarks, both Frank Lloyd Wright works: **Wingspread**, a conference center designed as a private residence in the 1930s, and the **S.C. Johnson Administration Building**. The latter is flanked by modest homes and the **Golden Rondelle**, a theater and 1964 World's Fair remnant that resembles a flashy spaceship.

Free S.C. Johnson tours begin at the theater and include the newer Fortaleza Hall, a repository of company and family history. Wingspread tours are free too. Search "tours" at scjohnson.com.

The pandemic has affected access to these and other Racine-Kenosha attractions, so check for updates or settle for a self-guided walking or windshield tour of the area.

I always factor in a little shopping time, too, but not just because of **Pleasant Prairie outlet mall's** 90-some stores, near the Illinois border. Open Saturdays all year is **Kenosha Public Market** (about 30 indoor vendors selling baked goods, meals, artisan food products and crafts). At **Seven Mile Fair**, north of Racine and open on weekends,

is a maze of trash-to-treasure flea market merchandise with a strong sense of Hispanic heritage.

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Regardless of when I visit the area, my souvenirs are edible. That means:

Cheese curds from the roomy Mars Cheese Castle, medieval in theme, inside and out. Fresh curds are sold four days a week, and the supply dwindles fast. Add chunks from Badger-based Carr Valley, Sartori or Roth Kase — cheesemakers with international awards. marscheese.com

Mama P's Ho Ho Cake, a family recipe and takeoff on Hostess Brands' creamy cake roll. Buy it by the square at Lou Perrine's, a downtown Kenosha gas station and market. The Original — chocolate cake base, creamy and not-too-sweet filling and fudgy topping — makes the cut on a few local restaurant menus too. louperrine.com

Kringle, the oval and Danish pastry that is much too hard to make at home. We're talking two or more days of rolling, folding and resting the buttery dough. Pecan is the most popular filling at O&H Bakery, Racine's kringle kingpin, but I also like two smaller, family-owned bakeries in West Racine: Bendtsen's and Larsen's.
ohdanishbakery.com, bendtsensbakery.com, larsenskringle.com

Pizza from Wells Brothers, in business 100 years for good reason, in an unassuming Racine neighborhood. The little Italian family restaurant, in its fourth generation, offers the option of par-baked pies for takeout — a sensible choice for travelers, since the crust is oh-so-thin. Chicago authors of "Everybody Loves Pizza," a book about pizza history, chose Wells as one of the nation's top 10 pizza makers. wellsbrosracine.com

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Mix history with a meal from **Kewpee Lunch**, art deco on the outside and all about Kewpie dolls inside. Racine's retro burger joint is one of five remaining in the franchise,

which had 400-plus locations before World War II.

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It's cash only both at Kewpee and at a Kenosha classic, **Franks Diner**. Inside the narrow building of brick is a railroad lunch car, pulled into town in 1926. The biggest menu talker is the massive Garbage Plate, which begins with three or five eggs and hash browns. After that, meat, cheese and veggie choices are up to you.

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The meal comes with thick slabs of bread made in-house (the recipe involves wheat bran, yogurt and honey) and likely lippy service to match the diner's sassy signage. Guy Fieri has visited, for "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives." franksdinerkenosha.com

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