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Location

City:

Boise

State/Province:

Idaho

Postal code:

83709

By: [Deborah Franklin](#) ^[1]

Indie culture? Acres of riverside parks? Gourmet spuds? Idaho's capital has it all.

Near the busy corner of Broadway and East Warm Springs avenues, close to the heart of downtown Boise, lies Idaho potato heaven.

“Would you like russet, gold, or purple fries?” asks the young man behind the counter of the Boise Fry Company. “We also have yams, white, Okinawa, and sweet potato.”

I decide to go for the gold. “Buttery,” he says approvingly. “Would you like those home-style, regular, curly, or shoestring? It’s all about the flavor profile.”

Laugh if you want, but BFC’s fresh take on its roots has drawn throngs of customers since the fries-and-burger joint opened in 2009. The Food Network loves this place for its precision-cut fried potatoes (mostly grown locally), nine flavors of salt, and eight handmade dipping sauces.

The restaurant typifies Boise’s scene. With a river rushing through the center of town, the state’s capital—originally settled as a supply outpost for nearby mining camps and pioneers traveling westward on the Oregon Trail—mashes extensive natural beauty with bustling independent commerce and frontier spirit.

Like most cities, this 200,000-person metropolis has felt the impact of the recent recession; unlike many of them, it has rebounded in artful and inventive ways. For proof, look no further than the vendors at the Capital City Public Market, some of whom departed the local tech industry to become artisan entrepreneurs. The market, held Saturday mornings along a several-block stretch of downtown Eighth Street, boasts an abundance of uniquely Idahoan treats and

indie creative spirit. Visitors can sample nutty, Basque-style manchego or tangy sheep's-milk "ewe-gurt" flavored with apples, cinnamon, and honey from the family-run Blue Sage Farm of Idaho's Lincoln County; peppered jerky from Black Canyon Elk Ranch in Emmett, less than an hour away; and draft root beer from BuckSnort—so called for the childhood nickname of proprietor Kainoa Lopez, one of the entrepreneurs who started a business after being laid off from a tech job. Lopez brews small batches of his spicy soft drink in a commercial kitchen 138 miles away in Bellevue (near Sun Valley), using an original recipe of molasses, sassafras, licorice root, wintergreen, and vanilla, and sells it to restaurants and at fairs and regional farmers' markets.

One of those restaurants is the Bittercreek Alehouse, also on Eighth Street, toward the center of the market. Diners can find, in addition to BuckSnort, 39 Northwestern craft beers on tap; smoked Idaho trout; a slow-roasted pulled-pork sandwich; and other regional fare. On a warm evening in the early fall, a table on Bittercreek's sidewalk patio provides ample people-watching opportunities. One of the best times to indulge is during the city's monthly First Thursday celebrations, when many downtown shops and galleries stay open late, providing free music, winetasting, and other special events. Conveniently, much of the city's creative community is within strolling distance of Bittercreek.

Just a couple of blocks away is the Basement Gallery, a showcase for whimsical and comically dark illustration and sculpture, which for decades has been a center for local artists a bit outside the mainstream. Curator Jane Brumfield bought the gallery from its original owner in early 2010 and has maintained its edgy, narrative bent while adding some of her favorite European artists.

Laura and Bruce Delaney brought their shop, Rediscovered Books, downtown from elsewhere in Boise in 2010. Their clean, bright space, a short walk from the Basement Gallery, stocks among its general selection a broad array of titles for young adult readers—a group the couple felt was underserved by chains. The store hosts regular authors' readings, several book discussion groups, and fund-raisers for public-school libraries. The owners' approach seems typical of Boise's innovative yet neighborly spirit: Fill a need creatively while building community along the way.

They have a solid template for the endeavor. Take, for example, the Egyptian Theatre: On the far side of the block from Rediscovered, it's a stylish homage to the boy-king Tut, built during the Roaring Twenties and lavishly restored in 1999. Today the gilded interior of the old movie palace hosts live concerts, screenings of silent movie classics (accompanied by the original Robert Morton pipe organ), and performances by Opera Idaho. For elegance from a different era, walk just two blocks to the marble-columned neoclassical state capitol, built between 1905 and 1920 and rededicated in January 2010 after a 2½-year renovation.

Another compelling example of Boise's rich history and fiery spirit is its extensive Basque community, represented at, among other places, the Basque Museum & Cultural Center on the 600 block of downtown's Grove Street, just off Capitol Boulevard near the terminus of the public market. Basque immigrants arrived from their Spanish homeland in two primary waves over the last 130 years. The first group came in the 1890s, seeking economic opportunities, and settled into shepherding—rugged, independent work that didn't require fluency in English. The next arrived following fascist persecution during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Both groups found community and shelter in Boise's Basque-run boardinghouses.

The Basque Center, built in 1949, is a hub of language, music, and culture for the 12,000 to 15,000 Basque Americans in the area. Visitors can hear the Euskera language and view artifacts; down the block, the cozy Bar Gernika lures the curious with solomo, a traditional sandwich of mouthwatering marinated pork tenderloin and pimienta on a sliced baguette. Across the street, the Basque Market holds popular 90-minute cooking courses and winetastings: Enjoy tapas and Spanish wine one session, and paella with sangria the next.

Want to work off some calories from those cooking classes (or repeat visits to the Boise Fry Company)? The city's Greenbelt is a necklace of leafy bike and pedestrian paths linking riverside parks—485 acres' worth on both sides of a 23-mile stretch of the Boise River, and that's just within city limits. It extends from Lucky Peak Dam in the east to Garden City in the west, running along the edge of downtown. In essence, the Greenbelt serves as Boise's front yard, a place where nature and culture blend. Along its route, Julia Davis Park is home to Zoo Boise, the Boise Art Museum, a formal rose garden, the Idaho State Historical Museum, and an interactive science center.

The Basement Gallery's Jane Brumfield, born and raised in England, says Boise's downtown reminds her of a small European city in its scale, but with less formality and a generous dose of Western outdoor culture. A full flavor profile, if you will.

In the end, of course, it has to come back to spuds; this is Idaho, after all. As the old saying goes, when life gives you potatoes, you make Okinawa curly fries. At least that's what they should say at the Boise Fry Company, which may be the only restaurant in the world to list french fries as primary menu items and burgers as side orders.

Perhaps it's a lesson for the rest of us. As Boise proves, emphasizing the small things seems to make everything better.

Photography by [Joshua Roper](#) [2]

This article was first published in September 2011. Some facts may have aged gracefully. Please call ahead to verify information.

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Request the *Idaho, Montana & Wyoming TourBook* and *Boise, Nampa and Caldwell* city map at [AAA.com](#) [3] or any AAA branch. To find a place to stay, visit [AAA.com/hotels](#) [4]. For more information, contact the **Boise Convention and Visitors Bureau**: 1199 Main St., (800) 635-5240, [boise.org](#) [5]. Area code is 208.

To do

The **Museum Pass** sponsored by the Boise Museum Association is Boise's best cultural bargain. Just \$19 (or \$9 for kids) gets you admission to seven museums within a seven-day span. Buy it at most participating museums or visit [boisemuseums.org](#) [6] for more information. **Opera Idaho** shows Gilbert and Sullivan's classic, *The Pirates of Penzance*, Oct. 7 and 9 at the Egyptian Theatre. 700 W. Main St., 345-0454, [egyptiantheatre.net](#) [7]. **Basement Gallery** features a show by dark, comic pop-surrealist painter and Boise native Erin Ruiz Sept. 1–Oct. 1. 928 W. Main St., 333-0309, [basementgalleryboise.com](#) [8].

EATS

Bar Gernika Chorizo, marinated pork tenderloin, lamb kebab, and other shepherd comfort food. 202 S. Capitol Blvd., 344-2175, bargernika.com [9]. **Bittercreek AleHouse** Fresh, local dishes plus copious beer and wine. 246 N. Eighth St., 345-1813, justeatlocal.com [10]. **Boise Fry Company** 111 Broadway Ave., Ste. 111, 495-3858, boisefrycompany.com [11]. **Le Café de Paris** Quiches, flaky pastries, and other fine bistro fare. 204 N. Capitol Blvd., 336-0889, lecafede-paris.com [12].

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