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BETTER LUNCH IN A SNAP



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Summer Shakespeare in Bloomington-Normal

An inventive summer-long Shakespeare festival—including created-on-the-spot plays—stars during weekends in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois.

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Light-hearted Shakespearean twists star alongside classic performances at the Ewing Mansion in Bloomington, Illinois. Photo courtesy Bloomington-Normal Convention and Visitors Bureau.



Photo courtesy Bloomington-Normal Convention and Visitors Bureau.

For theater-lovers, summertime means outdoor Shakespeare. But in downstate Illinois, that takes on a fresh new form. Want improv Shakespeare? Sing-along Shakespeare? Or just a performance of his classics? Starting in late April or May, and running through mid-August, the [Illinois Shakespeare Festival](#) in Bloomington-Normal (130 miles southwest of Chicago) reveals its ode to the Bard.

Theatergoers picnic on the grounds of English-style Ewing Mansion, the university's cultural center and host to the festival each year. As the sun sets, guests head toward the 438-seat outdoor theater to catch the show—perhaps professional actors in *Macbeth* or a performance by Shakespearean Globetrotters, who improv a Shakespeare-esque play based on audience suggestions.

The performances anchor weekend getaways. Normal's Uptown neighborhood pulses with funky cafes, pizza joints, and book and record shops. Classic and independent films star at the Art Deco Normal Theater. Bloomington's restored 1800s buildings house farm-to-table restaurants, shops and live-music venues. Inside the three-story courthouse, a museum highlights the area's historical treasures. Overnight guests should try to stay at the luxurious Vrooman Mansion, built in 1869. The antiques-decorated inn serves breakfast in a lavish dining room where Eleanor Roosevelt once dined. Over pumpkin waffles, guests chat about Shakespeare—whichever form they enjoy him in.

Two-day getaway

Day 1

Start in Bloomington, the county **seat**, at the **McLean County Museum of History** inside the Renaissance-style courthouse. Exhibits recount settlers' daily lives and politics influenced by area residents Abraham Lincoln, David Davis and Adlai Stevenson. Admission charged. (309) 827-0428; mchistory.org

You'll find unique souvenirs in a handful of downtown Bloomington storefronts: Fair-trade shop **Crossroads** carries handcrafted gifts from around the world (309) 827-0121, and **The Chocolatier Inc.** makes turtles, creams, toffee and Italian ice. (309) 821-0277

For lunch, try the grilled smoked gouda and turkey sandwich with a kicky raspberry-jalapeño spread at **Kelly's Bakery and Cafe**, a bustling European-style bistro. (309) 820-1200; kellysbakeryandcafe.com

East of downtown, the **Beer Nuts Company Store** sells flavored, chocolate-covered and mixed nuts and shows videos of the process for making the famous nuts. (309) 827-8580; beernuts.com

Guided tours of the 1872 **David Davis Mansion**, a restored Victorian-style home and garden built by an influential judge, bring fresh perspective on that era. (309) 828-1084; daviddavismansion.org

Dine on house-made Andouille sausage and seasonal specialties at **Epiphany Farms Restaurant**, a farm-to-table restaurant in an old firehouse. (309) 828-2323; epiphanyfarms.com Or pack a picnic to take to the **Illinois Shakespeare Festival**. (309) 438-2535; thefestival.org

Five historically themed guest rooms at **Vrooman Mansion** feature down pillows and microfiber robes; guests also enjoy gourmet breakfast. From \$110. (309) 828-8816; vroomanmansion.com

Day 2

Don't head home without checking out **Illinois State University** and its Uptown neighborhood, where you will find dozens of shops. **The Garlic Press** combo cafe-kitchenware shop features fun gifts and artsy home decor. (309) 452-8841; thegarlicpress.com Next door, **Uptown Gifts and Accessories** sells colorful scarves and jewelry. (309) 452-7999

Uptown has more than two dozen restaurants. The menu at **Medici** includes upscale pub fare and entrees like salmon over smoked Gouda mac 'n' cheese. For dessert: a warm **skillet** cookie with chocolate chips and cherries. (309) 452-6334; medicinormal.com

For more information: Bloomington-Normal Convention and Visitors Bureau (800) 433-8226; bloomingtonnormalcvb.org

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