



Besties' retreat

Stark County makes a case to host that girlfriends' outing you know you've been hankering for.

BY WENDY PRAMIK

Like many moms whose children play sports in school, Kim Fulks of North Canton has formed close friendships with other moms just like her. Their sons play football, and the moms regularly meet at practices, games and other extracurricular activities that define their roles as parents.

But during one warm, breezy evening in mid-spring, Fulks and five other football moms exchanged their hoodies and sweatpants for dresses and sandals, creating a one-of-a-kind girlfriends' getaway.

They embarked on a night out with Canton Food Tours, a service that local entrepreneur Barbara Abbott established a decade ago as a fun way to explore the city through its assorted eateries.

And as she lightly dipped a spoon into a bowl of turtle soup at Bender's Tavern, Fulks said she relished the opportunity to kick back without a game result, homeschooling chores, or the uncertainty of the pandemic to worry about.

"Having that chance to take a break and get away from the kiddos and everyday crazy life is a breath of fresh air," says Fulks, an aesthetician instructor in nearby Uniontown. "We need it. It gives me motivation to keep things going."

The Canton area caters to moms with an abundance of great food, shopping, and other laid-back ways to get your kicks. Abbott offers food tours with flexible start times to accommodate those with little ones in school — moms can enjoy a day-tour and still be on time to pick up their kids or have dinner ready for them after they get off the bus.

"I've certainly seen an increase in girls' outings for our food tours," Abbott says. "There's a need in general for people to reconnect, and the tours are a great way to do so."

The moms chose the "Evening Hall of Fame City Food Tour," which lasted a few hours and was led by a tour guide. They dined on gourmet hot dogs and selected a card game from thousands of options at Milestone Games.

Then, they popped into Bender's Tavern for a slow-paced dinner with wine before sampling calzones and meatballs at Johnny's Lookout Pizza Tavern. They picked up takeout at Basil Asian Bistro and visited an art gallery. Along the way, they learned how Canton earned its reputation as the "Hall of Fame City."

That was especially fun for one of the moms, Stephanie Snee, of Jackson Township, who organized the night out. Snee teaches kindergarten and said she loves the city's football history, including the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"It was such a fun mom's night out," she said. "I'm a type-A planner, but it's kind of nice to let someone take over."

The food tour is one of several ideas to set up a girls' getaway for a day in the Canton area. Here are a few others:



Have high tea and cute sandwiches

Gal pals seeking an afternoon bite with a dollop of elegance will enjoy the Dragonfly Tea Room in Canal Fulton.

Situated inside one of the area's oldest homes, the tearoom is the perfect spot for sipping tea and noshing on finger sandwiches and scones smeared with Devonshire cream. High tea, accompanied by petite goodies neatly stacked on tiered trays, is served from 11 a.m.–3 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Take a seat inside the darling dining room, decorated with teapots and doilies, or sit outside on the breezy patio. Each customer's tea arrives in separate teapots, which are delightfully mismatched.

Tiffany Craney opened the tearoom in the city's historic downtown in 2011, but the business quickly outgrew its space. In 2019, Craney moved it to a spacious lot along the Tuscarawas River that used to be an art gallery and glass studio, tripling its size.

Also on site is a bed and breakfast above the tearoom, a gift shop and the adjacent Dragonfly Winery, which offers flatbread pizzas to go along with nearly a dozen types of wines. The tearoom and winery are popular spots for wedding showers and baby showers.



Enjoy spirits, music inside a Tuscan-inspired chapel

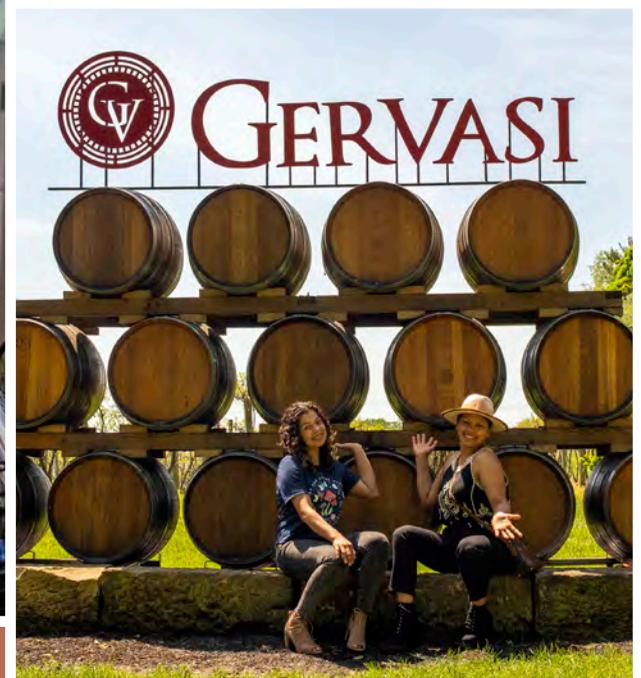
If a visit to Gervasi Vineyard is on your bucket list, take the girls to the Still House for a taste of the 55-acre, Tuscan-inspired wine resort.

Opened in late 2018, the 10,000-square-foot chapel is modeled after the 17th-century St. Gervasio church in Denno, Italy, where owner Scott Swaldo's grandmother was baptized. The vaulted ceilings, stained glass windows, and iron chandeliers set the stage for a tour of the cutting-edge distillery where wine-barrel bourbon, rose vodka, and orange gin are made.

The Still House is a coffee shop by day and lounge by night, with extensive selections of spirits, cocktails, draft beers and wines and live music. It offers more than 120 varieties of bourbon, whiskey, tequila, and other spirits.

"We try to keep it fun and light-hearted in here," says Maria Terez, a barista and bartender at the Still House. "You can pop in anytime."

Terez recommends a Lush Blush, made with Gervasi Spirits Sinner's Blush Rose Vodka and strawberry puree. Those strong of heart might enjoy the Wrath of the Bean, a showstopper drink made with Gervasi's wine-barrel bourbon, Grand Marnier, Fernet Branca, and Gervasi's bold cold brew coffee and served in a French press with dry ice.





Sip sangria, rent a ball gown in downtown Massillon

Dori Heck opened the Sangria Stand in downtown Massillon to appease a growing number of moms who'd developed a taste for the delicious, homemade wine-and-fruit drinks she served from her front porch.

"They'd yell out their minivans, 'You got that sangria today?'" says Heck, seated outside her bar and boutique. "Yeah, come on up."

At the time Heck, originally from Redondo Beach, Calif., was selling vintage clothing on Etsy. She collected hundreds of high-end gowns during her travels between California and New York, and women would inspect the clothing while drinking sangrias.

"I'd come home from work and there'd be 10 women drinking on our porch," says her husband, Matt. "Our daughter described it as a lemonade stand with sangria."

So, in 2014 Heck decided to meld the two hobbies into one business. She secured a liquor license and opened the Sangria Stand. Now, women come to hang out, shop and sip the cool, fruit-infused wine while checking out gowns for sale and rent.

Shop your heart out in Hartville

Whether it's a bedazzled jean jacket or the new Star Wars-patterned Vera Bradley backpack, you'll find all the latest trends at the Shops at Hartville Kitchen in Hartville.

The 25,000-square-foot retail space is part of an even bigger shopping hub that's home to a gigantic hardware store, flea market and the Hartville Kitchen, where you can order meatloaf with mashed potatoes with a slice of Dutch apple pie and even see a live dinner show.

The center holds periodic "ladies' nights," which include dinner and a presentation of some of the hottest items for sale at the shops.