



Photo from Flossmoor Station Restaurant & Brewery

All aboard: Flossmoor Station & Brewery resides in a former train depot that dates to 1906.

The rail world

Chicago relishes its role as a railroad hub. Hop a train for a quick ride south to see just how much.

By Dawn Reiss for USA TODAY

For decades, Chicago has been an epicenter of railroads. The city grew up around a critical mass of train tracks, a fact that's reflected on its South Side and in the Southland suburbs.

The largest switching terminal railroad in the country, the Belt Railway of Chicago, resides near Midway Airport. Further south, in the towns that were once escapes for wealthy citizens of the city, trains and train culture have been embraced, preserved, and transformed.

By the numbers

25

Years Oak Lawn's Rosie's Drive-In (10235 Cicero Ave.; 708-636-7717) has been open. It was recently featured on the CBS sitcom *Mike and Molly*

The Flossmoor Station Restaurant & Brewery (1035 Sterling Ave., Flossmoor; 708-957-2739; flossmoorstation.com) is housed in a train station that dates back to 1906, and it looks like it would fit perfectly in a Thomas Kinkade painting. It's even got a caboose outside, where ice cream is served during the summer.

Inside, it's a modern, casual sports bar crossed with a brewpub. Wander around and view the black-and-white photos of trains and the people who worked and traveled on them around the turn of the



Photo from Choo Choo Johnny's

Now serving: Staff at Choo Choo Johnny's.

20th century.

The former luggage holding area contains a 15-barrel brewing system. Brewers brew two times a week. The brewery, which won Best Small Brewpub at the annual Great American Beer Festival in 2006, produced an estimated 1,560 barrels of beer in 2011. There are always eight beers on tap, along with a rotation of seasonal offerings.

The food is great, too. Try the brew-fried green beans or the light and flaky brewery fish and chips, which are battered with Flossmoor's own Station Master Wheat Ale. Other house specialties include hearty beer cheese soup, white bean chicken chili, and various beer-b-que items.

If you're looking for a train-inspired restaurant great for kids, head to **Choo Choo Johnny's** (667 North La Grange Rd., Frankfort; 815-806-9005; choochoojohnnysfranchise.com). Two train tracks—one featuring an old steam locomotive and the other James from *Thomas & Friends*—weave through a small village. Sit in the red booths while a train circles near the ceiling, or sit at one of the 42 stools at the counter, where another whistle-blowing, bell-ringing locomotive delivers food from the kitchen.

Kids' fare includes the usual chicken nuggets, fries, quesadillas, and milkshakes, as well as the Choo Choo Dog and the Baby Choo Choo Dog, a three-inch hot dog. Adults can choose from burgers, Philly cheesesteaks, and a variety of Wraps Around the Tracks, including buffalo chicken and chicken Caesar.

Get there

SOUTHLAND



Take Metra's Electric District Line south to the 111th Street/Pullman stop for the Pullman Historic District. Continue to Flossmoor Station for the Flossmoor Station Restaurant & Brewery. The nearest Metra stop to Choo Choo Johnny's is the Hickory Creek station on Metra's Rock Island line, but it's more than a mile and a half walk. To drive, take I-55 South to US-45 South, which turns into La Grange Road.



The Electric Line passes near many of Chicago's most famous sites: Millennium Park, the Shedd Aquarium, the Field Museum, Soldier Field, the Adler Planetarium, the University of Chicago, among others.

To get a more serious sense of the area's train history, tour the **Pullman Historic District** (1141 South Cottage Grove Ave.; 773-785-8901; pullmanil.org), the former factory town that George M. Pullman built from 1880-84 for his Pullman's Palace Car Company. It's where the famous railway sleeper cars that once dominated the train industry were launched. During its heyday, the area was a famed stop along the Illinois Central line. Now the Historic District is just steps from the 111th St./Pullman Metra stop.

The Historic Pullman Foundation offers group tours that last 2 to 3 hours, or you can walk around on your own among the preserved buildings, including the Hotel Florence, the Market Hall, and the Historic Pullman Foundation Visitor Center. The latter is a good place to get acquainted with the district's history and architecture.

Start by watching the video about the town's history, then check out model trains, historic furniture, and artifacts. Make sure to take time to look at the *Visual Interpretations of Pullman* mural, which showcases life in the era of the Pullman Palace Car.