**The Charms of Autumn**

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Ahhh, September, one of my favorite months; and one of my favorite times of the year. While I do love the fun that the hot yellow of summer brings, it’s a gratifying transition to me when the seasonal baton is passed to golden autumn days and crisp nights (great time for a fire).

It’s the time of year for open windows, shorts and sweatshirts, less bugs, fruits of the harvest, and the autumnal equinox – on September 22 this year – when the sun shines directly on the equator and the length of day and night is nearly equal.

September is also ripe for apple and pumpkin picking, fall colors, and state fair food – the time when, right or wrong, one might say “screw the diet.” In light of that, what follows is a list of fall events and activities (mostly) around the Twin Cities area; the list is varied to cater to differing needs and interests. Some activities are family-oriented, some are free, while for others there are fees that vary in price.

**Apple/Pumpkin Picking**

There are a number of metro area orchards to visit and pick – or just purchase – apples, pumpkins, and other goodies. Great for family outings, these places also offer other fun stuff, including hay and wagon rides, pony rides, petting zoos, corn mazes, baked goods, and entertainment such as live music. Here’s a partial list of nearby orchards and farms:

—**Afton Apple Orchard –** 14421 South 90th Street, Hastings, MN 55033

—**Anoka County Farms –** 125 Bunker Lake Boulevard, Ham Lake, MN 55304

—**Homestead Orchard –** 1080 County Road 92, Maple Plain, MN 55359

**—Minnesota Harvest Apple –** 8251 Old Highway 169 Boulevard, Jordan, MN 55352

—**Natura Farms –** 19060 Manning Trail North, Marine-on-St. Croix, MN 55025

One event worth mentioning is the Twin Cities Harvest Festival and Maze. Boasting the largest corn maze in the state, it’s open weekends from late September through October. Each year the maze itself has a sports theme; this year it’s the Minnesota Vikings and their inaugural season at US Bank Stadium.

The event costs $10 (small children get in for free), but for each ticket sold a portion is donated to the Viking Children’s Fund. The ticket price also includes other perks, such as live music, a petting zoo and hayrides. A few extra dollars will get you such things as food vendors, a big yellow gunny sack slide and helicopter rides over the maze. More information can be found at the website: twincitiesmaze.com.

**Fall Colors**

The changing of the leaves is truly a sight to behold, with a dazzling array of reds, oranges, and yellows against a vivid blue sky; pleasing to the eye and soothing to the soul. Fortunately, the Twin Cities are blessed with several large city parks that offer great fall-color viewing. In Minneapolis there is Minnehaha Park and Theodore Wirth Park, while St. Paul has Highland Park and Hidden Falls Crosby Park. Or one can walk, kayak or canoe one of the many lakes or both the Minnesota and Mississippi River. Here is a list of other close-by excursions:

**—Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge –** Located south of Bloomington along the Minnesota River Valley, this area of protected wooded wetlands offers a visitor’s center, hiking trails and a chance to see some Minnesota wildlife.

Note: Also in Bloomington, Hyland Hills Ski Area is hosting their annual Fall Colors Chairlift Rides on October 5 and 6, which offers a great view from the top of one of Hennepin County’s highest hills. The cost is $6 per person and is only suitable for children over two.

**—Red Wing: Bluff Country –** One of Minnesota’s oldest towns, Red Wing offers a trolley ride around the historic town or a cruise down the Mississippi River. South of Red Wing, Bluff Country is a beautiful stretch following the Mississippi, with the terrain becoming hillier and prettier the further south one goes.

**—Stillwater and the St. Croix River Valley –** There’s plenty to do in Stillwater, with boutiques, galleries and restaurants, or you can take the trolley or a scenic cruise on the river. Stillwater also holds an annual Fall Colors and Jazz Festival—this year it is October 6 and 7.

**—Taylor’s Falls –** If one follows the St. Croix River north out of Stillwater (or I-35 north out of the Twin Cities and then east), you will reach Taylor’s Falls, a charming, historic town surrounded by beautiful scenery. Interstate State Park is great for short hikes amongst high cliffs and geological features like “potholes,” which were carved in the rock during the ice ages.

Although a bit farther to travel (about two hours north on I-35), a visit to the north shore during fall colors is definitely worth the trip. The gorgeous multi-colored trees against the big, blue backdrop of Lake Superior is, to say the least, breathtaking. And cities like Duluth and Two Harbors offer lots of “touristy” things to do. Having been to the north shore numerous times, including during fall colors, I highly recommend it.

**—Minnesota State Fair –** Billed as the “Great Minnesota Get-Together,” the fair runs for 12 days, from August 25 through September 5 (Labor Day) at the state fairgrounds in Saint Paul. The state fair offers something for everyone, from exhibits to animals, and from rides to grandstand concerts. The state fair is also a great place just to people watch and take in the sights, sounds and smells. Many of those smells emanate from all the deliciously decadent food available, such as corndogs, chili dogs, pronto pups, mini donuts, Sweet Martha’s Cookies, and about anything you can think of—on a stick. Yummy. Pre-fair tickets are $10, otherwise adult tickets are $13 at the gate and seniors and kids are $11 (children under five are free).

**—Minnesota Renaissance Festival –** Held annually in Shakopee, MN, this year the festival runs every weekend from August 20 through October 2. It’s a fun-filled throwback to another time, with a plethora of merry maidens, mermaids, fairies, swashbucklers and jousters. There are numerous events, including live entertainment and armored jousting; artisans are also on hand, displaying their handmade crafts to view or purchase. Various food and drink are also available – including giant turkey legs. The cost is a bit pricier than other activities listed here: in advance, adult tickets are $20.95 and kids (5-12) are $12.50; at the gate, one will pay $23.95 and $14.95 for the same tickets (children four and under are free).

**—Farmers Markets –** Fall is a great time to visit a farmers market, with many of the slower growing produce now matured and available; another good option for getting those apples and pumpkins. It also helps support local growers, which in turn stimulates the local economy. There are too many farmers markets to mention here, but two of the metro mainstays are:

**—Minneapolis Farmers Market: Lyndale Market –** Located just west of downtown Minneapolis at 312 East Lyndale Avenue North, this market is open daily from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., and runs from April-December.

**—Downtown St. Paul Farmers Market –** Held in a dedicated space in the Lowertown district of downtown Saint Paul (the block at the corner of Fifth Street and Wall Street), this market is open weekends from April-November. Hours are 6 a.m to 1 p.m. on Saturday and 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Sunday.

Whether you find something from this list or on your own, it’s a great time to get out and take in the charms of autumn. Enjoy.