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When in Highland Park, do as the natives do

6 can't-miss stops when you're in the neighborhood

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By Anne-Elizabeth Dwyer, Special to the Tribune

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Having grown up in Highland Park, I've always thought it offered the best of all worlds: a welcoming downtown shopping district bordered by green parks, wooded ravines and pristine beaches. It still remains for me a nice break from the city. Here are the spots I keep coming back to.

Taqueria Los Mogotes de Michoacan #2: Vibrant tangerine walls and an extensive menu of **Mexico's** Pueblan and Michoacan specialties, some of which are barely translated, make this Mexican restaurant several notches above many of the indistinguishable taquerias throughout Chicago. The restaurant's pozole is deeply satisfying: fat pork chunks and large white corn kernels submerged in a spicy chili broth that seems as if it might melt the plastic foam container. Los Mogotes serves my favorite al pastor tacos: crispy chopped pork and onions with sweet seared pineapple chunks. Handmade quesadillas — thick, bumpy sand-colored tortillas made from pumpkin flour, fried on the flattop and stuffed with chicharrones (fried pork **skin**), squash blossoms or mushrooms — are a house specialty. Anoint them with the tangy and fruity salsa verde from squeeze bottles on the tables, and you'll wonder why you ever waited an hour for a seat at Big Star. *2069 Green Bay Road, 847-432-5667*

Michael's Chicago Style Red Hots: I can't tell you the last time I actually had a hot dog at Michael's. There are just too many other good options. Tangy, thick cheddar on the fries. Juicy, dripping char-burgers. Tender grilled chicken sandwiches. You ask for extra pickles on the side and are handed a cord of garlicky green spears. The family-operated and flagship location here in Highland Park is just a happy place to be. In recent years, Michael's inexplicably added a Dippin' Dots stand. While space-age ice cream seems like a mismatch for a place that serves great quality baked stuffed potatoes, buffalo burgers and a killer chopped salad bar, the clusters of squeaking, hopping children disagree with me. *1879 Second St., 847-432-3338*

Once Upon A Bagel: Worth the trip up from the city on a Saturday morning, Once Upon A Bagel specializes in traditional Jewish deli offerings but also offers some of the best bagels and bialys you'll encounter in the metro area. These are no dry flavorless breakfast orbs one finds at

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These are no dry havenness breakfast ones one finds at corporate meetings: The bagels and bialys here are squishy and fragrant, delicious whether slathered with toppings or just gnawed straight from the hand. Order a bialy, which is akin to a soft, flattened bagel with a little more chew to it. A bialy may lack the hole of a bagel, but it makes up for it with a handy catchall indentation that corrals any errant sesame seeds, garlic bits and onion nibs. Get the full experience by ordering sides of lox or tuna salad and a hunk of sweet or savory noodle kugel. Don't you dare order low-fat cream cheese. *1888 First St., 847-433-1411*

Ross Cosmetics: A generic-sounding name belies a really enjoyable toiletries shopping mission. In addition to normal store brands, you'll find lesser known yet brilliant lip glosses and lipsticks by the hundreds. With an attached hair salon, Ross has every high-end hair product one could wish for, and every Esse and OPI nail polish shade your little nails could desire. But honestly, go for the clothes. Drugstore clothing selection may conjure images of pantyhose in eggs and frighteningly large rumped bras, but fear not: Ross has great basic tanks, tees and loungewear — in the style of what James Perse, Theory and Vince offer for three to four times the price at **Bloomingdales**. The perfect fix for when you want to look as though you spend \$125 on a thin white undershirt but are, in fact, not that silly. *625 Central Ave., 847-433-4340*

Stationery Station: Located just past the bronze relief map of Highland Park in the center of Port Clinton Square, Stationery Station offers all manner of paper services: custom invitations, several different styles of hand-lettering and calligraphy, imprintables, holiday cards and gift wrapping. The shop has been around for 30-plus years and is a go-to source for all things etiquette when it comes to properly addressing your correspondence. The shelves are lined with unique notecard sets so pretty they will shame you into writing a letter to a long-lost friend. *610 Central Ave., 847-432-3044*

Enaz: At the end of the main stretch of downtown is a trendy boutique with lovely glass cases, warm wood tones and a hint of Paris in its blood. Enaz lures customers in with a vintage-y counter of beauty salves and potions in irresistible packaging, soft feminine sweaters, high-quality denim and clean-lined modern jewelry. The wraparound layout allows one to browse happily and to discreetly put back the \$250 bracelet that one was hoping would have one fewer decimal place. *444 Central Ave., 847-433-6466*

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