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## ALEX SCHLOOP

### THE INNS OF AURORA, AURORA, NEW YORK

by Kelsy Chauvin

From scenic lakeside drives, to relaxing inns, world-class restaurants, and wineries, New York's Finger Lakes region beckons travelers all year long. It's a large area whose stunning landscapes are dotted with charming towns, each with something distinct to offer.

Aurora is among the area's top destinations. It may be small with just 400 residents, but from its prime spot on the eastern shore of Cayuga Lake, Aurora is sophisticated, picturesque, and home to a national historic district—in part because of Wells College, one of the first higher learning institutions for women, dating back to 1868.

**The Inns of Aurora** (391 Main St., Aurora. Tel: 315-364-8888. [www.innsaufaurora.com](http://www.innsaufaurora.com)) is one of the town's main attractions for its cozy accommodations, fine restaurant, and romantic lakeside lounge areas. Even better, its Creative Director Alex Schloop is one of the local experts travelers rely on for insider advice. He started at the hotel's front desk, then rose through the ranks as brand manager and innkeeper, all the while absorbing the best tips and insights on his way to what he calls his "dream job."

Schloop describes his hotel as an *albergo diffuso*, which translates to "scattered hotel," since The Inns of Aurora occupy four separate, handsome structures, all built between 1833 and 1909. Each one has its own style, and thanks to the owner, Pleasant Rowland (famous for founding the American Girl enterprise), each is decorated with fabulous art from her personal collection.

To get the best guidance for the Finger Lakes region, Schloop has a stream of wisdom for LGBT travelers seeking the best places to dine, drink, shop, and unwind.

#### Where are the coolest places for cocktails in the area?

**Bar Argos** (408 E. State St., Ithaca. Tel: 607-319-4437. [www.argosinn.com/barargos](http://www.argosinn.com/barargos)), in Ithaca, has fantastic vintage-inspired cocktails. Think house-made apple-fennel shrubs, local gin and flower bitters, and milk punch. Bar Argos is on the ground floor of Argos Inn, a recently restored ten-room inn with turn-of-



the-century details. **The Linden Social Club** (12 Linden St., Geneva. Tel: 1-315-787-0099. [www.thelindsocialclub.com](http://www.thelindsocialclub.com)) in Geneva has great cocktails for hot nights (my favorite is the "mustachio" with gin, pistachio orgeate, lime, and egg white). Ask the bartender for a toasted marshmallow.

#### What are the best restaurants for a romantic dinner?

There's something magical about dinner in the **Aurora Inn Dining Room** (391 Main Street, Aurora. Tel: 1-315-364-8888, [www.innsaufaurora.com](http://www.innsaufaurora.com)), especially during the summer. It's one of the few places to eat right on the water, and the sunsets over Cayuga Lake are spectacular. As the sun sets, the veranda is lit by candlelight. Inside, the original 1833 fireplaces keep the atmosphere warm and cozy. Executive Chef Patrick Higgins and his team make everything from scratch, from the charcuterie to the ice cream, and almost everything is sourced from local farms. During the summer, take your glass of wine down by the shoreline and watch the sunset. This region does Italian food very well too. Try **Rosalie's Cucina** (841 W Genesee St. Rd., Skaneateles. Tel: 1-315-685-2200. [www.rosaliescucina.com](http://www.rosaliescucina.com)) in Skaneateles. It's

a staple for a reason: great homemade pasta, hearty portions, and intimate atmosphere.

#### Who serves the greatest weekend brunch?

**The Carriage House** (305 Stewart Ave, Ithaca. Tel: 1-607-645-0152. [www.carriagehouse-cafe.com](http://www.carriagehouse-cafe.com)) in Ithaca does a great brunch. Everyone serves brioche French toast, but these are really exceptional, as are the lattes. The Aurora Inn Dining Room is as fantastic for brunch as it is for dinner: bright citrus salads, heavenly eggs Benedict, mimosas with local brut—brunch is beautiful thing.

#### What are the hot shows in the area, and how do I get tickets?

**The Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival** (17 William St., Auburn. Tel: 1-315-255-1305. [fingerlakesmtf.com](http://fingerlakesmtf.com)), which runs June through October, brings in serious talent from around the country for some truly stellar productions. The festival is [mainly] in the **Merry-Go-Round Playhouse** (6877 E. Lake Rd., Auburn. Tel: 1-315-255-1785) at Emerson Park, right on the shores of Owasco Lake. It's the perfect spot for a pre-show glass of wine. The festival also runs a series called the Pitch, where writers and actors bring ideas for new musicals to intimate audiences followed by talkbacks.

#### What are the top local museums?

**The Seward House Museum** (33 South St., Auburn. Tel: 1-315-252-1283. [www.seward-house.org](http://www.seward-house.org)) in Auburn is one of the best house museums in the country. It was the home of William Seward, secretary of state and good friend of Abraham Lincoln. His home is filled with treasures from his international travels, and the property and collections have largely been untouched, giving visitors a real glimpse of what life was like in the late 1800s. Also, make sure to visit the **Corning Museum of Glass** (1 Museum Way, Corning. Tel: 1-607-937-5371. [www.cmog.org](http://www.cmog.org)). They have an extensive collection of historical glass (from ancient Egypt to Tiffany) along with beautiful contemporary sculptures of art glass. They have daily glass-blowing demonstrations, and you can blow your own ornaments and frost your own glasses.

**Which guided tours do you recommend most often to your guests?**

Definitely check out the **MacKenzie-Childs** (3260 NY-90, Aurora. Tel: 1-315-364-6118. [www.mackenzie-childs.com](http://www.mackenzie-childs.com)) farmhouse, shop, and grounds in Aurora. MacKenzie-Childs is known for their whimsical, *Alice in Wonderland*-style pottery and furniture, most of which is handmade in Aurora. Their grounds are an old dairy farm, and they've restored the 1800's farmhouse as a showcase home for their wares. Daily tours are free, and it's a rare chance to see their fascinating product used so artfully. The Finger Lakes region is a bounty of great themed trails. The **Cayuga Lake Wine Trail** (Tel: 1-800-684-5217. [www.cayugawine-trail.com](http://www.cayugawine-trail.com)), the oldest in the country, runs around the scenic byways that circle Cayuga Lake—make sure to taste the Riesling. **Heart & Hands Wine Company** (4162 NY-90, Union Springs. Tel: 1-315-889-8500. [www.heartand-handswine.com](http://www.heartand-handswine.com)), about five miles north of Aurora, is my favorite stop, although they're not technically on the trail. Also check out the Sweet Treats Trail, Haunted History Trail, Finger Lakes Beer Trail, and Cheese Alliance/Trail.

**What should be considered must-see annual events?**

The MacKenzie-Childs Barn Sale is a massive, four-day sale that usually runs in mid-July. Tens of thousands come for the sale, which offers MacKenzie-Childs' products at deep discounts (up to 70 percent). Many make this a fun annual event, and some even start camping out in line three days before the sale starts. Dates for the sale are only announced a few weeks before it takes place. Also check out the **Great Race** (Tel: 1-315-252-7139. [www.great-race.com](http://www.great-race.com)) in Auburn. Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the race is the country's largest team-only run/bike/paddle triathlon. This is not just for athletes, the whole community comes out. Afterward, there's a big party in Emerson Park on Owasco Lake.

**Where can you go to get the best views?**

At the risk of coming across as a broken record, **The Inns of Aurora** is the only luxury lodging in the Finger Lakes on the east side of the lake, meaning the sunsets across the water are stunning. Aurora is at the widest point of long, skinny Cayuga Lake, and the land across the lake from Aurora is mostly made up of vineyards and protected nature reserves.

**Where are the best places to workout?**

Definitely skip the usual gym and hit the



Lake Cayuga

Photo: Michael Shake

great parks and trails around the Finger Lakes. There are waterfalls with trails in Ithaca, especially **Taughannock Falls** (1740 Taughannock Blvd., Trumansburg. Tel: 1-607-387-6739. [www.parks.ny.gov/62](http://www.parks.ny.gov/62)), and great hiking in **Watkins Glen** (1009 N. Franklin St., Watkins Glen. Tel: 1-607-535-4511. [www.parks.ny.gov/parks/142](http://www.parks.ny.gov/parks/142)). If you want to get out on the water, rent a kayak or canoe from **Owasco Paddles** (6912 East Lake Rd, Auburn. Tel: 1-315-567-1437. [www.owascopaddles.com](http://www.owascopaddles.com)) at Emerson Park in Auburn, or from **Finger Lakes Adventure Gear** (rentals by delivery, Tel: 1-315-237-8731. [www.fingerlakesadventuregear.com](http://www.fingerlakesadventuregear.com)) in Aurora.

**If someone is looking for a full-service spa, where do you send them?**

Hands down, **Rasa Spa** (310 Taughannock Blvd., Ithaca. Tel: 1-607-273-1740. [www.rasaspa.com](http://www.rasaspa.com)) in Ithaca is the best. They've taken such great care in selecting their therapists and refining their menu that it's hard to recommend just one specific treatment. My usual is a 60- or 90-minute deep-tissue massage, followed by their signature Ananda hot-oil scalp treatment. Essentially, the therapist massages hot, aromatic oil with vetiver and sandalwood into your scalp. You'll be amazed at how healthy your hair looks and feels. We've partnered with Rasa Spa to offer their treatment menu at **The Loft**, our new wellness center at The Inns of Aurora.

**Designer labels for less—do you have any suggestions for the smart shopper?**

There are lots of great antique shops throughout the region, but you can't beat the **Waterloo Outlets** for great discounted clothes (655 NY-318, Waterloo. Tel: 1-315-

539-1100. [www.premiumoutlets.com/outlet/waterloo/stores](http://www.premiumoutlets.com/outlet/waterloo/stores)).

**What are the best gay/lesbian bars or clubs in the area?**

I really like the **Bachelor Forum** in Rochester. Tel: 1-585-271-6930. [www.bachelor4m.com](http://www.bachelor4m.com). It has a great, low-key community feel, it's right in the arts neighborhood, and it's gay owned and operated. While it's not marketed as a gay bar, **Silky Jones** in Ithaca (214 E. State St., Ithaca, Tel: 1-607-288-3424. [www.silkyjones-lounge.com](http://www.silkyjones-lounge.com)) usually has a nice scene and is on the Commons, a pedestrian street with lots of great shops, restaurants, and bars.

**Where can someone get a good late-night meal?**

**Hunter's Dinerant** (18 Genesee St., Auburn. Tel: 1-315-255-2282) in Auburn (yes, "dinerant") is a classic 1950's diner with a large menu and jukebox controls in every booth.

**What is the iconic tourist souvenir, and where will we find it?**

Definitely a Courtly Check tea kettle from MacKenzie-Childs from their Aurora shop.

**Please finish this sentence: Don't leave the area without...**

1. Picking up produce at the amazing **Ithaca Farmers' Market** (545 3rd St., Ithaca, Tel: 1-607-273-7109. [www.ithacamarket.com](http://www.ithacamarket.com)).
2. Taking the scenic route and stumbling across something small and amazing, like **Bloomer Creek Vineyard** (5301 NY-414, Hector. Tel: 607-546-5027. [www.bloomercreek.com](http://www.bloomercreek.com)).
3. Drinking a local brew at Prison City Pub and Brewery (28 State St., Auburn. Tel: 1-315-604-1277) or at **Two Goats Brewing** (5027 NY-414, Hector. Tel: 1-607-546-2337. [www.twogoatsbrewing.com](http://www.twogoatsbrewing.com)).