Shimmying through “Fat Man’s Misery,” a cleft in towering granite bedrock, is among the pure, kid-like joys of scrambling in Purgatory Chasm State Reservation. The entire site is a geological funhouse—of uncertain origins. “It’s a fault,” posits Nichols College geology professor and glaciologist Mauri S. Pelto, who has studied the area south of Worcester and updated previous theories, “and the fault was exploited by a glacier that plucked out the rocks” that now litter the adjacent Purgatory Brook Valley. It was also likely a sacred place for the regional Nipmuc peoples—and given its pejorative name, conventional wisdom holds, by colonists intent on Christianizing them.

Whatever the history, the very essence of the 70-foot gorge and its cavernous, perhaps ominous, terrain still captures the imagination. Check out the precipitous outcroppings—“Lovers’ Leap” and “Devil’s Pulpit”—or take the half-mile loop that winds through the boulder-strewn bottom and then circles back on a rough path along the cliffs. For those less eager to test their agility by clambering the 1,800-acre park—celebrating its centennial this year—has tamer trails following brooks or through the woods, along with a playground, grilling zones, and a visitors’ center.

After everyone’s exercised, drive through pastoral scenery, stopping for snacks or lunch at the Sutton Center Store, en route to exploring art, culture, and food in Worcester.

The Worcester Art Museum’s exhibit “Knights!!” offers medieval arms and combat—with live demonstrations—using objects from the Higgins Armory Collection (through November 6). “With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant,” opening September 21, looks at women’s social, political, and medical conditions, notably during the Weimar Republic, and includes “The Trouble with Pregnancy: A Forum on Art and Reproduction,” on October 18, as well as a community arts showcase on the subject.

Check out the city’s emerging artsy Canal District, with its giant murals, Saturday farmers’ market, shops, bars, and restaurants. A self-guided walking tour explains the 1820s Blackstone Canal, which linked to Providence’s seaport, and the ensuing industrial boom. Lock 50 serves super-fresh salads, burgers, and crêpes, or go to El Patrón Mexican Restaurant for enchiladas and tortas. Binh An Market offers Asian teas and take-out fare, such as Vietnamese spring rolls and honey-soaked pastries; walk a few blocks and eat them in the courtyard of a converted factory that now holds the Crompton Collective—stalls of vintage clothing, antiques, and local artwork. Upstairs, don’t miss the “lifestyle and plant boutique” Seed to Stem, packed with ingenious botanical creations and home goods.

Get back into nature at the nearby Ecotarium, a kid-oriented science center. It has hands-on experiment stations, a planetarium, walking trails, and a new Wild Cat Station featuring sibling mountain lion kittens found orphaned in California.

Worcester’s food evolution makes dinner easy. For inventive grilled fish, meat, and vegetarian dishes, go to deadhorse hill, or dig into the artisanal pies at Volturino Pizza Napoletana. Sole Proprietor is a traditional favorite for seafood cooked every which way, while the newer Fatima’s offers Africa-centric cuisine, like Ethiopian injera (spongy flatbread) and Kenyan ugali (cornmeal porridge). Eat before or after a show at the historic Hanover Theatre, where groundbreaking comic actress Carol Burnett appears for An Evening of Laughter and Reflection on October 17.

A day in purgatory, it turns out, is not that bad.~N.P.B.