



AMERICA'S MIDDLE GROUND

Chicago in the American Midwest is the country's new culinary capital, with innovative modern restaurants, storied steakhouses and those famous hot dogs.

Text by Amber Gibson



International travellers who skip the middle of the United States in favour of either the West or East coasts are missing out. The food scene in Chicago is second to none. Last year, the James Beard Awards, nicknamed the Oscars of the food industry, were held in Chicago for the first time instead of New York. The city boasts more than 40 James Beard Award winners, so it was a fitting decision that highlighted Chicago's rising reputation and culinary diversity – big draws for more than 50 million annual visitors. The country's top chefs, restaurateurs and bartenders descended on Chicago again in May for another indulgent weekend of eating and drinking to celebrate the 2016 James Beard Foundation Awards.

The Windy City has an international reputation for its steakhouses, deep-dish pizzas and the colourful Chicago-style hot dog. In the fine-dining scene, Grace and Alinea both have three Michelin stars. However, what truly sets Chicago apart is the quality and creativity of the city's more modern, casual restaurants. You don't have to dress up to discover the most delicious food in the city. Whatever your palate desires, you'll find it in Chicago. There's Macanese fare at Fat Rice, Korean-inspired flavours at Parachute, Anglo-Indian bar grub at Pub Royale, and refined Mexican dishes at Cantina 1910. But before the recent boom in reinterpreted ethnic cuisine, there was the steakhouse.

From the American Civil War (1861-1865) to the 1920s, Chicago was the meatpacking capital of the United States and nicknamed the "hog butcher for the world". By the turn of the 20th century, the Union Stock Yards slaughtered and processed more than 12 million cattle and hogs annually, more than anywhere else in the world. Its carnivorous past lives on in more than 250 steakhouses dotting the city today. On a frigid winter day, it's easy to see the appeal of hunkering down in a cosy leather banquette with a big piece of juicy meat.

A couple of newer steakhouses are giving old favourites such as Gene & Georgetti a run for their money. In trendy West Loop, Swift & Sons offers a surprisingly adventurous menu. There



From top: Michigan Avenue Bridge; lamb dumplings and cucumber from Pub Royale



16th-floor terrace before dinner. Or begin with a glass of vintage bubbles from the tantalising champagne cart before embarking on a 12-course journey with chef Thomas Lents. His thoughtful presentation, precise technique and intellectual menu concepts have won two Michelin stars and international acclaim.

At the north end of Michigan Avenue, Spiaggia serves the most refined Italian food in the city, along with great views of Michigan Avenue and Lake Michigan. It's no wonder this is a favourite date-night haunt for President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama when they come home. Lady Gaga is also a frequent diner. Each winter, parmesan white truffle gnocchi make an appearance on an indulgent white truffle tasting menu.

Most hotels are located downtown in the Gold Coast area, where restaurants and shopping options abound. Ask locals for their favourite restaurants though, and you'll find they all have a go-to neighbourhood eatery. Alinea's chef Grant Achatz can be found at The Bristol in Bucktown on his rare days off, while Osteria Langhe in Logan Square is a favourite with hipsters and young families. Most neighbourhoods are easily accessible via the CTA "L" trains and buses, and as the city is pretty compact, neighbourhoods such as Wicker Park, Bucktown, Lincoln Park and Lakeview are just a short cab ride away.

When it comes to cocktails, options abound. The Aviary has the most theatrical and elaborate concoctions, but locals prefer The Violet Hour, The Berkshire Room and GreenRiver for an aperitif or nightcap. GreenRiver is the newest of the bunch, and just opened last autumn on the 18th floor of a Northwestern hospital building, with a 100-seat outdoor terrace. The cocktail menu reads like a book, with detailed stories behind every drink, each named after famous and infamous Irish-American figures in Chicago's history. It's an educational finale to a few days of gluttony in a most delicious city. ■

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Adam Alexander Photography



A Chat with

Sean Murray
Executive chef
Allium, Four Seasons Chicago

Why do you live in Chicago?

The city is very rich in history and culture, so every area you visit has a story to tell. It is also very walkable, which makes it great for days off. You can go from the lake to the middle of downtown in a short amount of time. The eclectic blend of old and new architecture here makes for great sightseeing and photo opportunities. The best reason to live in Chicago, though, is the people. Chicago locals are genuinely friendly and always up for a good laugh.

What did you have for dinner last night?

The MAD Burger at MAD Social; it's garnished with pork belly, crispy onions and cheese, and comes with a mountain of fries.

What is your opinion of the local dining scene?

Almost everyone you meet in Chicago has their list of favorite restaurants and is eager to give you suggestions. Each neighbourhood also has their own individual style, this makes for must-visit dining spots, sometimes off the beaten path. Chicago also has a great farmer's market scene in the summer. No visit to Chicago is complete without a hot dog or deep-dish pizza.

Name one thing the city offers that nowhere else can.

The number of legacy sports teams. Classic stadiums such as Soldier Field or Wrigley Field with the "roof top" bleachers are both amazing to see and experience. Chicago locals are proud of their sports heritage and their enthusiasm towards it is contagious.

What's your favourite street in Chicago?

I have only been here a few months, so for now it is Randolph Street. Chefs Rick Bayless, Curtis Duffy, Paul Kahan and Stephanie Izard all have restaurants on Randolph Street. Most of the places on Randolph also have great patios that are often lined with flowers and trees, making a stroll down the street that much more picturesque.

As told to Jon Chan

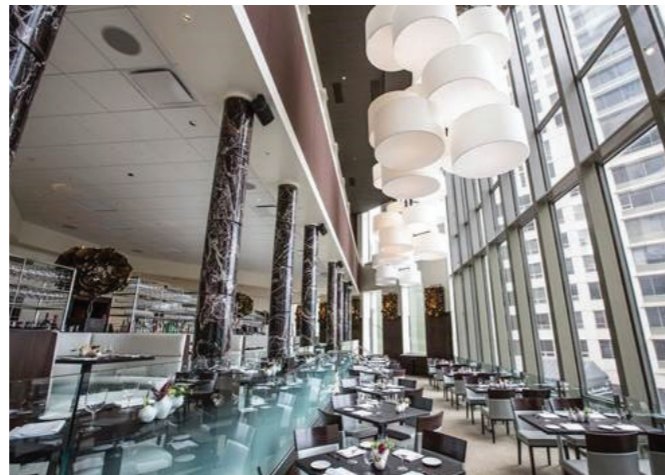
DINING HIGHLIGHTS



1 ALLIUM

A hidden secret, this elegant restaurant in the Four Seasons keeps guests coming back with seasonal specials such as plump gnocchi with veal ragu, kale mascarpone polenta and lobster paella. You might even be lucky enough to try one of executive chef Sean Murray's raw cacao power truffles.

120 East Delaware Place, Chicago, IL 60611
Tel: +1 312 799 4900



4 SPIAGGIA

The menu at this Italian institution changes seasonally, but expect delicious focaccia drizzled with olive oil to begin, expertly cooked meats and miniature gelati and sorbetti cones as a playful prelude to dessert. Go big or go home with the quattordici tasting menu and wine pairings to enhance your meal.

2/F 980 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611
Tel: +1 312 280 2750



2 PARACHUTE

This creative Korean-American restaurant, run by husband-and-wife team Beverly Kim and Johnny Clark, was a James Beard finalist last year for best new restaurant. Start with the baked potato bing bread and boudin noir then branch out into Midwestern dishes with funk, fermentation and umami inspired by Kim's Korean upbringing.

3500 North Elston Avenue, Chicago, IL 60618
Tel: +1 773 654 1460



5 THE BRISTOL

Chicago's nose-to-tail movement originated here in 2008. The Bristol was serving trotters, kidneys and sweetbreads before it became trendy. The menu changes daily and features international flavours such as charmoula on dill chapatti, but the house-made pasta and duck-fat fries with garlic aioli will forever be staples.

2151 North Damen Avenue, Chicago, IL 60647
Tel: +1 773 862 5555



3 PUB ROYALE

The fusion of British and northern Indian fare is complemented by a great selection of beers and innovative cocktails such as mango rum lassi – perfect on a sizzling summer day. Cold drinks are necessary to temper the mouth-tingling spicy fare, such as buttered paneer with salted chilli and India hot chicken.

2049 West Division Street, Chicago, IL 60622
Tel: +1 773 661 6874



6 THE FIFTY/50

No other sports bar in town serves food this good. It's dedicated to hormone-free chicken and freshly ground Midwestern beef. Dig into jumbo chicken wings doused in hot sauce, cheesy waffle fries and customised burgers while watching basketball, American football, hockey or baseball on more than 20 flat-screen TVs.

2047 West Division Street, Chicago, IL 60622
Tel: +1 773 489 5050