



Spiaggia, Michigan Avenue; Photo by Jeff Kauck

Culinary Chicago

A food lover's town.

If you love food, you've come to the right city. With more than 7,000 restaurants, you can practically dine around the world, sometimes within the span of a few blocks. The following is just a sampling of key foodie neighborhoods and some extra special restaurants not to be missed.

GOLD COAST

This swank Chicago neighborhood is known for its exquisite boutiques, designer shops, and a surprisingly wide variety of dining opportunities. For time-strapped shoppers, the Water Tower Place has an upscale food court with quick and tasty options from a made-to-order organic juice bar to veggie stir-fry to comfort foods like baked macaroni and cheese.

Two restaurants with fabulous views are The Signature Room atop the John Hancock which serves contemporary international cuisine, and the stylish NoMi inside the Park Hyatt Hotel offers French cuisine with a creative twist. Both are also good choices for a leisurely Sunday brunch. For more casual meals, try deep dish pizza from where it originated at Pizzeria Uno,

Chi Talk

RICK BAYLESS

Chef, TV personality, Cookbook author, Restaurant Owner (Frontera Grill and Topolobampo).



Where were you born and raised? Oklahoma City, OK

Where do you live now? Bucktown

Five things you love most about Chicago:

- 1 Its food! I think Chicago is really on the cutting edge of great cuisine. Inspired by all of our local farmers.
- 2 Lake Michigan. Obvious, I know, but c'mon ... a city built with a fabulous, beautiful lake!
- 3 The Art Institute and the Mexican Fine Arts museum. Two of the best.
- 4 Millennium Park. It is really spectacular. Our city is just gorgeous!
- 5 Steppenwolf Theatre. Just doesn't get any better.

What excites you about running restaurants in Chicago?

Chicago's got a vibrant restaurant scene, but one that is filled with reliable favorites.

Where would you recommend people new to Chicago shop for authentic Mexican ingredients?

Chicago is filled with small Mexican "supermercados," but if you want a Chicago-only experience, go to Maxwell Street Market on Sunday mornings for food and a whole lot more.

What's a favorite Chicago attraction you'd recommend people visit to experience the "real" Chicago?

Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum on 18th Street in Pilsen. The best Mexican Art Museum outside of Mexico.

or Johnny Rockets for burgers and thick malted milk shakes.

Just west of the Gold Coast and among the newer and quite popular restaurants is Green Zebra, named after an heirloom tomato. This mostly vegetarian restaurant serves internationally inspired dishes of small plates such as avocado panna cotta with tomato gelee, crème fraîche and sweet corn chips, and celery root soup with walnuts and black truffle essence. Reserve weeks in advance for a Saturday night dinner.

WEST LOOP

Seeking the trendy experience? Check out this neighborhood where a restaurant row literally popped up within the city's meat packing district. For gourmet Pan-Asian dining, there's Red Light; for an interesting variety of sushi choices in an oh-so-hip metal and exposed brick interior, there's Sushi Wabi. For a sleek wine bar restaurant with an unpretentious waitstaff try Avec, serving inventive gourmet items to share paired with wine from an impressive wine list.

LINCOLN PARK

This popular Chicago neighborhood is chockablock with delicious restaurants that offer cheap eats as well as elegant dining. The only shortage you'll find here is parking. Among the most notable restaurants are Charlie Trotter's, an internationally renowned restaurant with elegant dining inside a traditional Chicago brownstone building. Reservations are a must. North Pond, set in a renovated park district building in Lincoln Park itself, is another wonderfully elegant option with a fantastic view of the river and skyline. For a casual breakfast, The Original Lou Mitchell's is a longstanding favorite Chicago diner.

AUTHENTIC ETHNIC EATS

Chicago is a city historically built by immigrants and as such has many eateries tucked within traditional ethnic neighborhoods. Just west of downtown

is Greek Town. On weekends you'll hear music from the homeland and see young Greek crowds in area cafés and clubs. Among the more popular restaurants is Pegasus, where the must-have appetizer is a flaming plate of "Saganaki" (Greek cheese set aflame and extinguished with lemon.)

On the northwest side is an Indian/Pakistani neighborhood. It's locally referred to as Devon Avenue. Tiffin Kitchen is the most upscale Indian restaurant on the strip though the prices are still quite reasonable. Entrees include many tandoori and curry dishes and the ever popular "saag paneer," a mild curried spinach with cubes of fresh homemade cottage cheese.

On the city's south side Chinatown holds tight to many traditions and is a haven for newly arriving Chinese immigrants. Chinese families crowd into area restaurants for steaming servings of dim sum. Three Happiness in particular attracts many who enjoy the steamed dumplings and other bite-sized specialties especially on Sundays.

In River North, the Frontera Grill, the creation of internationally renowned Chef Rick Bayless, features regional Mexican cuisine with authentic spices, mole sauces, awesome guacamole and high quality meats and produce sourced from local farmers.

LINCOLN SQUARE

Once the domain of German immigrants, this neighborhood has transformed into one of the city's newest scenes for dining and nightlife. You'll still find traditional brats and German brews, but you'll also find sushi, Balkan and Turkish cuisine along with wine stores, quirky shops, and cafes such as Selmarie which has a wide selection of bakery items and a serene outdoor seating area.

So, whether you go out for traditional ethnic cuisines or one of the cities more famous gourmet restaurants, you'll find plenty to enjoy in Chicago.

Bon appetit! ■

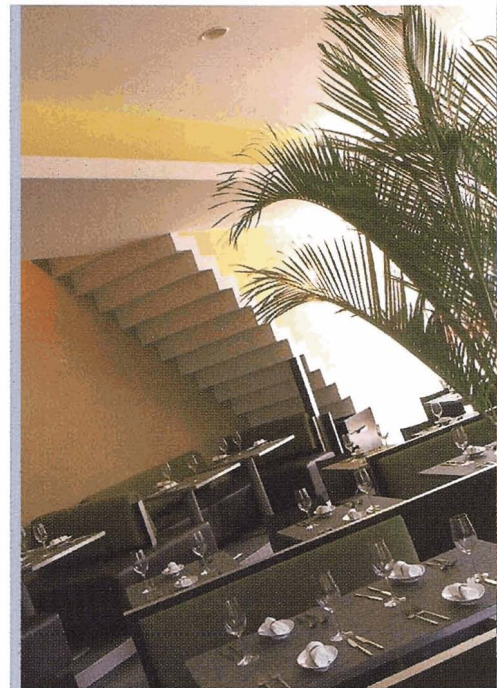


Photo courtesy of Green Zebra

Reservations are
required weeks in
advance for **Green
Zebra**, a restaurant
popular among
vegetarians.