

A SLICE OF CHICAGO

Yes, the deep-dish pizzas are delicious, but there's so much more on the Windy City's menu. Stroll around the foodie districts and enjoy a feast of flavours.

STORY CATHERINE MCGREGOR

This page: A Chicago deep-dish pizza.
Opposite: Cafe Spiaggia executive chef and Top Chef TV show winner Joe Flamm at work.



CHICAGO IS A city of big appetites. Its hunger for power, money and growth are woven into the fabric of the metropolis, from the soaring skyline down to its political machinations. It stands to reason, then, that Chicago's native cuisine is filling and hearty, heavy on the cheese, beef and potatoes.

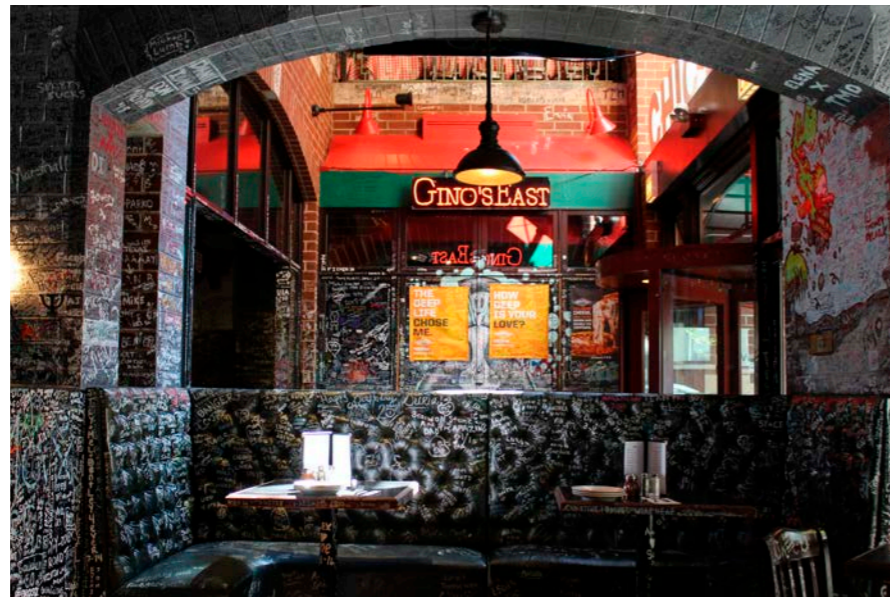
But there's so much more to dining in Chicago than meat-feasting and carb-loading. This is one of the most diverse cities in America, and you could spend a month eating your way through its food neighbourhoods, from the baked goods of Swedish enclave Andersonville to the *banh mi* and *pho bo* of Little Vietnam.

Sadly, you probably don't have that long, so here's a trip around the food highlights of central Chicago, plus a quick jaunt along a stretch of Route 66, the world-famous highway that starts here.

THE LOOP

Where other cities have downtown or the CBD, Chicago has the Loop. Named for the elevated train system that encircles it, the Loop is where Chicagoans come to work and visitors do the museum-and-gallery rounds. As a result, eating options here favour quick lunches and pre-theatre bites. Both needs are well met by the Revival Food Hall, an "all local" dining marketplace featuring 16 stalls, mostly outposts of well-loved Chicago neighbourhood restaurants.

Chow down on deep-dish pizza, house-smoked barbecue and spicy fried chicken, or stay virtuous with healthy salads and freshly squeezed juices. Recommended for meat eaters: the "secret sandwich" from charcuterie specialist Danke, featuring duck-liver mousse, cured pork belly, Swiss cheese and a generous lick of whole-grain mustard. Even handier to the lakeside museums – and a whole lot more old-school – is Fontano's Subs on Michigan Avenue, where you must order an "Italian beef",



a Chicago-born sandwich consisting of thin slices of gravy-soaked roast meat in a soft roll, topped with a dollop of spicy giardiniera pickle.

The birthplace of the skyscraper, Chicago still boasts one of the world's great skylines, so know that if you stick to street level you're missing out on half the magic. The city is dotted with rooftop cocktail bars and restaurants with views, but none offers a vista quite like Cindy's.

Up 13 floors above the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, Cindy's is a vaulted, glass-roofed bar/restaurant with fairy lights and plenty of comfy couches. Here, you can sit back and take in the phenomenal views of Millennium Park, the Art Institute and Lake Michigan beyond. Tear yourself away from the view to focus on the menu and you'll find an American melting pot of dishes – Maine lobster, sushi-grade kingfish, shrimp and grits, grilled pork porterhouse – and some superb craft cocktails.

WEST LOOP

Not so long ago, the area west of the Chicago River was home to factories, warehouses and wholesale markets. Back then the streets were deserted after dark. Now, thanks to its new status as the hottest restaurant district in town, there are throngs of diners every night. Much of that heat can be attributed to one woman: Stephanie Izard, whose acclaimed nose-to-tail restaurant Girl & the Goat became the cornerstone of the blocks-long strip known as Restaurant Row.

In nearby Fulton Market is Izard's third West Loop opening, the "reasonably



Clockwise from top: Gino's East restaurant; delicious, cheesy deep-dish pizza; buzzy Fulton Market.



authentic" Chinese restaurant Duck Duck Goat, a bustling 100-seater designed to evoke, Izard says, the "curious chaos found in most American Chinatown communities".

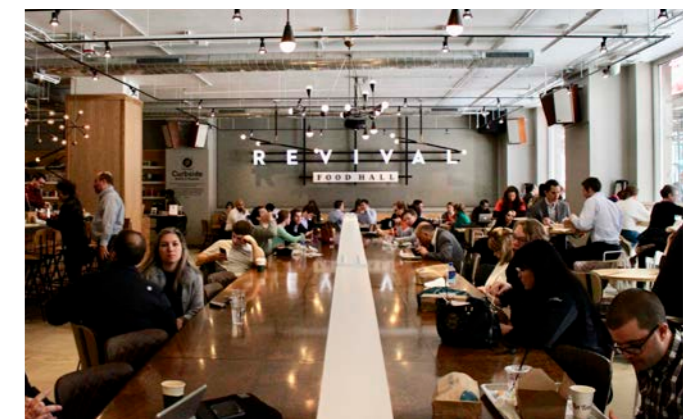
Dishes are similarly eclectic, full of surprising twists such as pickled coleslaw on the scallion pancakes, pecans taking the place of cashews in sweet-and-sour chicken and a side of ramps (a vegetable in the leek family) to accompany whole Peking duck.

Time for a nightcap – but no ordinary one. At CH Distillery, staff are still buzzing about the company's recent acquisition of Malört, a wormwood-based spirit which has become a Chicago favourite, thanks to its distinctive taste (CH's owner likens it to biting into grapefruit then sipping gasoline). CH's West Loop outpost won't serve you a Chicago Handshake – a shot of Malört paired with a local Old Style beer (the distillery doesn't serve beer) – but staff will shake you up a Malört cocktail, the spirit's jaw-clenching bitterness leavened by ginger, rosemary and aniseed.

At 85 years old, Malört is almost as long in the tooth as another Chicago institution, Lou Mitchell's. This neon-fronted diner began service three years before the 1926 opening of US Route 66, the Illinois-to-California highway that starts just down the



Clockwise from top: Duck Duck Goat in Fulton Market; Lou Mitchell's near the start of Route 66 in Chicago; the Revival Food Hall.





Clockwise from this picture: Chicago cityscape and river; Obed & Isaac's in Springfield; The Second City comedy company performs; Michigan Avenue.

road. Lou Mitchell's quickly became a favourite place for drivers to fill up with food before the long drive; today it's still a must-visit for delicious diner fare, even if you're going no further than around the block.

Can't face diner coffee? Stop by Mojo. Yes, *that* Mojo. The New Zealand coffee company's first US outlet is right here in the West Loop, serving up reliably good Kiwi-style flat whites in the same pale green crockery as at home.

MAGNIFICENT MILE

Keep walking north on Michigan Avenue and the museums and parks give way to department stores and upscale hotels. This is the Magnificent Mile (or the Mag Mile), known as a premier shopping destination, and a really good place to eat.

The options are endless, but you could do worse than pay homage to the city's Italian culinary heritage. Chicago's famed deep-dish pizza – thick upside-down layers (mozzarella goes on the bottom), surrounded by a flaky, high-sided base – might come in for some ribbing from other cities, but its Italian roots go a long way back, to the immigrants who arrived here through the 19th and 20th centuries. There are excellent examples of



the pizza all over the city, but the gooey, cheesy, saucy version at Gino's East, where the walls are covered in decades of customer scribbles, is among the best.

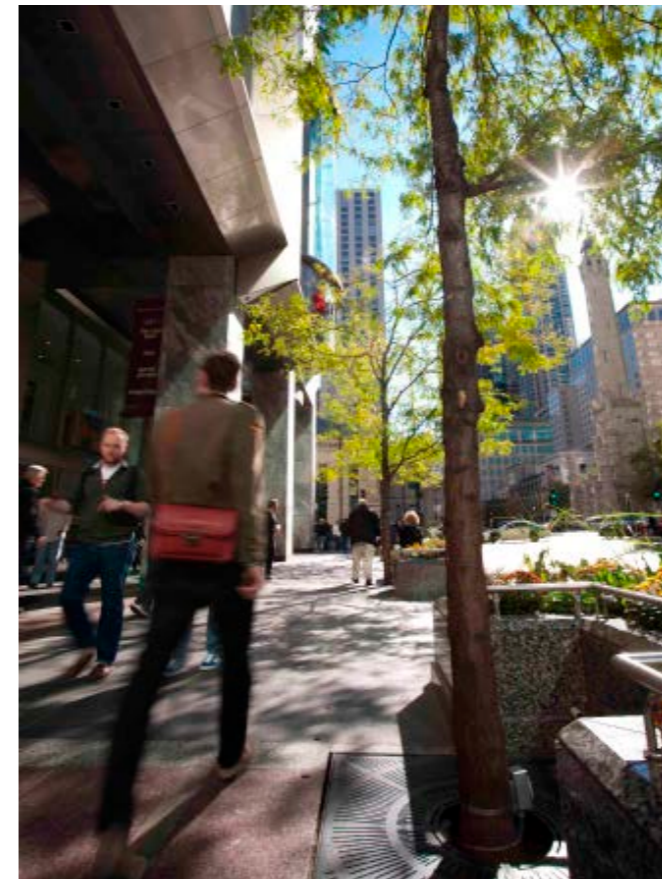
At the casual and intimate Cafe Spiaggia, meanwhile, chefs Tony Mantuano and Joe Flamm – the latter a past *Top Chef* winner – dish up their sophisticated take on rustic Italian cooking. Whatever you do, don't miss the gnocchi with wild boar ragu – pillow-soft hand-rolled gnocchi in a rich sauce that takes three days to make. But be warned: it's a ragu so good all future versions will pale in comparison.

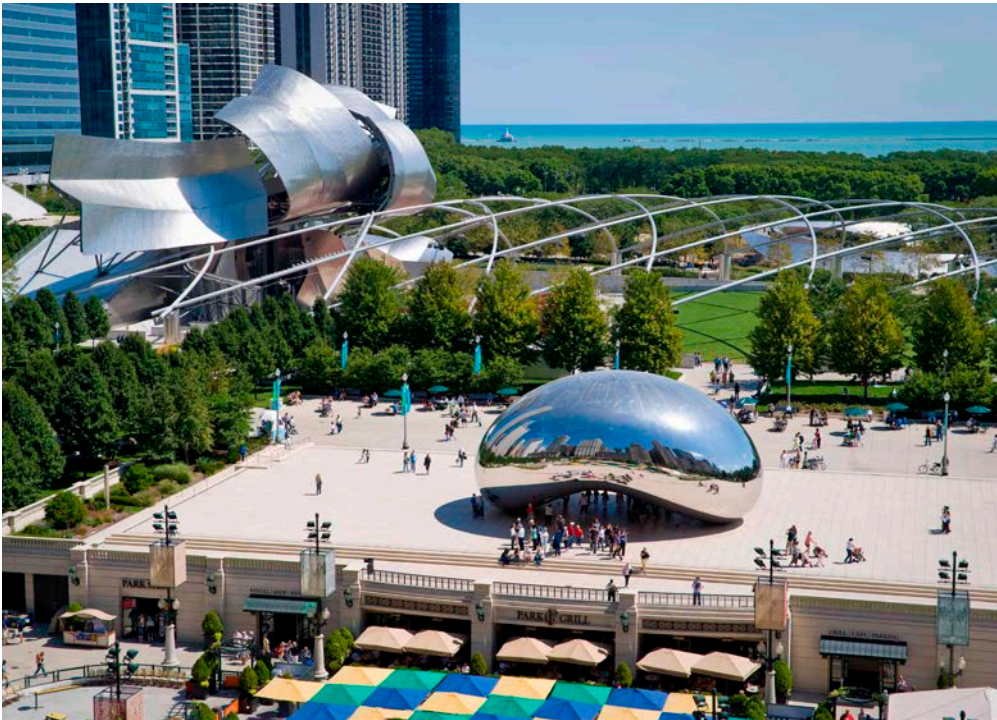
Clockwise from top left: The first of Kiwi coffee company Mojo's three Chicago cafes; Tony Mantuano (left) and Joe Flamm from Cafe Spiaggia; seasonal risotto from the cafe; Cozy Dog Drive In, at Springfield on Route 66.

BEYOND CHICAGO

At the corner of Adams Street and Michigan Avenue, in an unremarkable section of the Loop, is the sign marking the start of Route 66, probably the most famous highway on Earth. From this spot, the route can take you all the way to Los Angeles, but you don't have to travel the entire road to get a feel for this legendary American journey.

Don't expect high-end dining on the 320km Chicago-to-Springfield stretch, but look out for diners and drive-ins that remain largely unchanged from the route's mid-century heyday.





A good first stop is the Launching Pad Drive-In in the small town of Wilmington. Its sandwiches and snacks are well done, but the main draw is its famous carpark mascot. The Gemini Giant is a 9m-high fibreglass astronaut that has been a Route 66 landmark since 1965.

Another couple of hours' driving through Illinois cornfields and you'll come to Springfield, the state capital, where the Route 66 connections are still strong.

The Cozy Dog Drive In opened here in 1949 and today boasts an eclectic memorabilia collection (it seems you can't be a Route 66 diner without one) and a claim to fame as the birthplace of the Cozy Dog, more commonly known as the corn dog. This staple of rural America is similar to the Kiwi fish 'n' chip shop favourite, the hot dog on a stick, but consists of a frankfurter encased in an almost bread-like cornmeal batter.

Sound a bit too low-cal? Up the ante with Springfield's beloved local dish, the horseshoe: two hamburger patties on toasted bread heaped with French fries and doused in beer-infused cheese sauce. Wash your horseshoe down with local craft brews at Obed & Isaac's Microbrewery.

You could also try the award-winning Charlie Parker's Diner, a popular 50s-themed joint on the outskirts of town. You might not be able to walk far afterwards, so it's a good thing you're driving. Tell yourself you'll order salad when you get back to Chicago, and then dig in. choosechicago.com

Millennium Park with its famous *Cloud Gate* (aka *The Bean*) sculpture and Lake Michigan in the distance.

Play

HOT TICKETS

As befits a city which gave its name to a great American musical, Chicago's theatreland is one of the biggest and best in the country. Opulent auditoriums host direct-from-Broadway hits including the sensational *Hamilton*, which has been playing here almost as long as in its home city of New York. broadwayinchicago.com

LAUGH LINES

What do Tina Fey, Bill Murray, Stephen Colbert and Joan Rivers have in common, apart from being very, very funny? They all got their

start in The Second City, Chicago's legendary comedy company. Go there to see virtuoso improv and sketches performed by the comedy stars of tomorrow. secondcity.com

DESIGN TIME

Chicago is justifiably proud of its architectural heritage, from the pioneering work of Frank Lloyd Wright to the modernist masterpieces of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Learn more on one of the tours run by the Chicago Architecture Center, and then visit the centre's new exhibition galleries (entry is free with any tour). architecture.org

Sleep

CHICAGO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION HOTEL

It's not only guests who rave about the magnificent Chicago Athletic Association Hotel. Architecture buffs have nothing but praise for the way this landmark 1893 building, once the city's most exclusive sporting club, has been sensitively restored. Today the hotel serves as both beautiful lodgings and a social hub for a new era, welcoming locals to shoot pool in the original games room or watch movies in the (now empty) swimming pool where Johnny Weissmuller, Hollywood's original Tarzan, once swam. chicagoathletichotel.com

Eat

CAFE TOLA

With Cafe Tola's new opening at the Ohio House Motel a few blocks west of Mag Mile, downtown types no longer need to head north for some of the best Mexican food in the city – though the incredible green spicy pork empanadas at this cheerful chain of eateries are worth the journey. cafetola.com

Getting there

Air New Zealand operates non-stop flights to Chicago from Auckland, with connections across the domestic network.



- Contact Centre
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- Holidays Travel Brokers
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