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Serious Eats City Guide: Chicago

Posted by Michael Nagrant, September 11, 2008 at 7:30 PM

Editor's Note: Back again with another Serious Eats City Guide, this time we check in with Michael Nagrant, our normal Chicago go-to guy. As you probably know already, he checks in with us regularly, and also publishes Hungry magazine. Michael has still never met an organ meat he didn't like, and hopes to meet many more. As always, chime in with agreement, or feel free to alert us to any Chicago eats we've overlooked.

Best Deep-Dish Pizza

Burt's Place. Photograph by santheo on Flickr

The butter crust deep dish at Pizano's has less heft and more flavor than gut bomb tourist attractions like Gino's and Giordano's, and you won't throw your back out lifting a slice. Burt's Place and Pequod's Pizzeria Sicilian bakery style pies with their airy bread crust and caramelized cheese haloes also match up.

Pizano's: three locations. Burt's Place: 8541 North Ferris Avenue, Morton Grove IL 60053 (map)
Best Non-Deep-Dish Pizza

Salmon and basil pizza from Spacca Napoli. Photograph by Andrew Huff on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/deadhorse/141374869/]

For Neapolitan style, the bubbly crust and fresh ingredients at Spacca Napoli. For crackly Chicago-style thin cracker crust cut up into little squares and topped with thick knobs of fresh Italian sausage: Vito & Nick's Pizzeria.


Best Burger
Iron Maiden burger from Kuma's Corner. Photograph by sgt fun on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/sgtfun/1140386522/]

If you like World War II era style freshly ground and griddled thin patties, try Top-Notch Beefburgers or Grant's Wonderburger Grill. If you like big thick fatties with fried eggs and bacon and the like, try Kuma's Corner. For high end, it's tough to beat the grass-fed sirloin burger on brioche at North Pond.


Best Ice Cream

Chocolate bourbon ice cream from Bobtail. Photograph by Knile on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/knile/876426550/]

For crazy fancy concoctions like Merlot or Jack Daniel's, check out Bobtail. For seasonal fresh fruit infused ice cream including peach and blueberries, you'll want Cunis Candies. If you like creamy custard instead, try Scooter's.


**Best Late Night Eats**

Check out Hai Woon Dae for smoky Korean barbecue and enough free panchan to purge the alcohol from your bloodstream. On the high end, it’s tough to beat Avec—nothing says late night comfort like chorizo-stuffed madjool dates with smoked bacon and piquillo pepper-tomato sauce.


**Best Bakery**
Pasticceria Natalina. Photograph by finalgirl on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/finalgirl/2369602379/]

If you like your authentic Sicilian pastry served with a side of magical realism, the fantastic hand-made, dreamlike confections of Pasticceria Natalina, including maybe the best cannoli in America, are worth the calories.


Best "Date Night" Spot

Double Li or Khan BBQ. Sure, you could take your future significant other to NoMI, L20, or Alinea, but if they are so pretentious or coddled that they can't get past the storefront vibe, the hardcore ethnic crowds, and the no-nonsense preparations to enjoy what are arguably some of the best examples of Chinese and Pakistani cooking in Chicago, you definitely don't want to be dating them for long. Think of these spots as "weeder" date spots, so you don't have to mess around wasting large bucks on someone at the high-end places you were going to break up with anyway. Even if the date sucks, the food won't.

**Best Japanese Food and Sushi**

I find that once you get past impeccable ingredients, sushi really comes down to a cult of personality of a great chef thing, and Chef Byung Kyu Park (or just BK) at Aria bar is a master sushi-dude. From light to heavy to, yes dessert sushi, BK courses out raw fish like a master chef constructing the perfect tasting menu.


**Best Non-Japanese Asian Food**

![Pad woon sen from Spoon Thai.](http://flickr.com/photos/mmchicago/2389931002/)

Funky fish paste laden porky balls of issan sausage, lemongrass and pepper flecked Kai Thawt or Thai fried chicken, not to mention killer jungle curries are yours at **Spoon Thai**.


**Best Cocktail Lounge**

The pomp and circumstance of pre-prohibition era dressed bartenders spanking the hell out of herbs and muddling like mad, furiously serving up seasonal spirits filled with homemade bitters and fresh liquor infusions at **Violet Hour** is a liquid period piece. If you prefer a one-man show and a bit of Latin music, try Adam Seger's seasonal farmers market inspired bar stand at **Nacional 27**.

*Violet Hour*: 1247 North Damen Avenue, Chicago IL 60622 ([map](http://maps.google.com/maps?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=r0F&um=1&ie=UTF-8&q=violet+hour+chicago+il&sa=X&oi=local_result&resnum=1&ct=image)); 773-338-2800.
For family-owned and operated mom-and-pop honest red sauce and handmade pasta, try Gennaro’s. If you want to gourmet it up, Tony Mantuano at Spiaggia has been the man for years, and he continues to be.

Gennaro’s: 1352 West Taylor Street, Chicago IL 60607 (map); 312-243-1035. Spiaggia: 980 North Michigan Avenue #2, Chicago IL 60611 (map); 312-280-2750.

For Oaxacan style eats, including the artery clogging Cemita Atomico and the well-seasoned smoky chipotle-topped Tacos Arabe, don’t miss Cemitas Puebla. If you’re looking to make a transition from Chipotle to more Mexico City style fare, hit up Taqueria Moran and check out their adobado. If you like to keep it straight pig, the carnitas at Carnitas Uruapan will make you squeal.

Cemitas Puebla: 3619 West North Avenue, Chicago IL (map); 773-772-8435. Taqueria Moran: 2226 North California Avenue, Chicago IL 60647 (map); 773-235-2663. Carnitas Uruapan: 1725 West 18th Street, Chicago IL 60608 (map).
**Best Bargain Lunch**

For $3.95, you get to choose two killer Szechuan options from a laundry list of awesome choices (don't miss the Ma Po Tofu and Kung Pao chicken), plus a mountain of rice, and a bowl of soup at **Spring World**.


**Most Worth a Splurge**

![Alinea kitchen](http://flickr.com/photos/chesh2000/78339413/)

**Alinea**. You can argue whether that, El Bulli, Fat Duck, or Per Se is the best in the world, but one thing's for sure: considering the custom service ware, maybe the best wine program in the world, not to mention the imaginative food, there's nothing like Alinea anywhere else.

Best Ethnic Market

If you're looking for a one stop spot for cheap rice cookers, crab candy, jackfruit, kalbi, and a quick bibimbap lunch snack, Joong Boo is the place.


Best Hot Dog

Hot Doug's. Photograph by Vidiot on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/vidiot/2591093451/]

Though it's totally predictable, we're not ashamed to crown Hot Doug's. Even his windy city salad dog with caramelized onion and a bit of a grill char is the best. Though, for a Maxwell Street polish, you shouldn't miss a late night visit to Jim's Original.


Best Eastern European Butcher

I imagine many folks will say Paulina and it's hard to argue with their custom sausage selection...
(check the turducken and brats), but like a good drug dealer, the crew at Gepperth's, will get you anything you need, whenever you need it. Not to mention, their house-cured bacon is awesome.


Best Barbecue

Ribtips from Honey 1. Photograph by andrewc on Flickr [http://flickr.com/photos/andrewc/160539874/]

If you want great cue with a culinary point of view, Chicago's best brisket, and great sides try Smoque BBQ. If you want handcrafted aquarium smoked ribs with a touch of sweet and spice sauce, it's Honey 1.

Best Brunch

The non-rolling cart dim sum at Shui Wah. Best chicken feet on the planet.


Best Bar Food

Though this will likely change with the opening of The Publican and The Bristol, the duck pastrami reuben and Belgian steamed mussels and frites at Hopleaf are the way to go.


Go-To Restaurant for an Evening Out

Hangar steak with frites, grilled onions, capers, and a cup of bernaise sauce from Blackbird.
On the high end, **L20**, where Laurent Gras brings a culinary sensibility and a ridiculous Versailles-type luxury to raw and cured fish preparations, including meyer lemon cured fluke weighted down with a golf ball-sized dome of osetra caviar. On the mid-upscale end, you'll never be disappointed by **Blackbird**.


**Best Neighborhood Pub**

With plenty of velvet Elives, collages made from H.W. Bush bumper stickers, and Clark bar wrappers, **Innertown Pub**'s kitsch rules. Of course, if you're downtown, the wainscoted womb of the **Berghoff** will keep ya too. For bourbon and beer and punk rock and porn, **Delilah's** in Lakeview.


**Best Wine Bar**

If it's strictly about the wine and charcuterie, **Juicy Wine Company**. If it's also about a full hot food selection, then check out the grapes and the bone marrow appetizer at **Volo**.

Best Italian Beef

As Detroit’s sage poet, Eminem, once said, “All you other Slim Shadys are just imitating, so won’t the real Slim Shady please stand up.” The Italian beef world is crowded with thousands of corner shacks serving up indiscriminate reheated pre-packaged beef from Scala or Vienna on a thick roll. As a result, a great beef rises when it has a few simple outlying qualities. In the case of the original Taylor Street location of Al’s, those qualities include freshly roasted meat with 11 herbs and spices, including a definite sweet nutmeg warmth, as well as hot fennel giardiniera. Though, a close second is Chickie’s hot pepper topped beef version featuring wafer thin sliced green pepper and onion that offers a tongue satisfying crunchy textural counterpoint to the soft layers of meat. Though sometimes, beef needs a buddy, and the “combo” featuring a hunk of Italian sausage is best at Johnnie’s in Elmwood Park where the links are hardwood charcoaled fired and the beef is so thin, it’s almost translucent.

Al’s: 1079 W Taylor Street, Chicago IL 60607 (map); 312-226-4017. Chickie’s: 2839 South Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60623 (map); 773-277-2333. Johnnie’s: 7500 West North Avenue, Elmwood Park IL 60707 (map); 708-452-6000.
Must Eat Before Leaving

Mario's Italian Lemonade. Photograph by kevin.roberts on Flickr

Mario's Italian Lemonade. Italian ice with a lemonade base, featuring tons of zest and fat chunks of seasonal fruit served with a side of history and community is hands down one of the most exciting and emblematic chow experiences in Chicago.

Mario's Italian Lemonade: 1068 West Taylor Street, Chicago IL 60686 (map).

Previous Serious Eats City Guides

New York
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26 Comments: (3)
Tags: Chicago, Flavor Guides, Serious Eats City Guides

26 Comments:

No Best Steak?!?!
codasco at 8:02PM on 09/11/08
Italian beef, please.
anysuchname at 9:21PM on 09/11/08

Best Italian Beef (also an Ed Levine favorite): Johnny's Beef. The combo sandwich is killer, but you'll be plenty happy if you just want the beef.
Restaurant Info (copied from Ed's list):
Address: 7500 West North Avenue, Elmwood Park IL 60707
Phone: 708-452-6000
capndesign at 12:09AM on 09/12/08

er, make that Johnnie's. Time for bed.
capndesign at 12:12AM on 09/12/08

Is the Come Back Inn still open? Used to be good burgers there...and there was an Italian place sort of behind it that was interesting, as well.
dbcurrie at 1:31AM on 09/12/08

Ah! Just had Honey 1 Ribs last night. Those are definitely worth it.
Great article, this has given me a lot of ideas.
Thanks Michael!
Pauper Nick at 7:22AM on 09/12/08

How do I take any guide to Chicago that does not include Italian Beef seriously?
ags99 at 10:15AM on 09/12/08

I'm sorry, but to write a Chicago food guide and omit Italian Beef, as well as endorsing Deep Dish over true Chicago Stuffed, you are leaving out a good helping of the indigenous food culture of this city. And Shui Wah over Phoenix? A travesty!
Also, although my first experience at Alinea was transcendent, my second visit fell a little flat with overly gadget-y, low flavor food. I'm still teetering on the border as to whether to endorse the place as a destination restaurant.
banks at 11:39AM on 09/12/08

@codasco: We could argue "best steak" till the cows come back to life, but there's ultimately just not much difference between spots. I'm fine leaving it off; tourists will probably be happy with whichever place they go to.
@banks: Deep dish is a lot more common than stuffed, unless you count each and every Giordano's in town.
I agree with everyone that leaving out Italian Beef is a mistake. My personal pick would be the original Al's #1 on Taylor.
I'm not a fan of Hot Doug's Chicago dog -- it's average at best. Put me down for U Lucky Dog (aka the original Fluky's). And seriously, Aria Bar for sushi? Not Katsu?
me3dia at 12:15PM on 09/12/08

Regardless of whether Deep Dish is more common than Stuffed, Stuffed is indisputably a Chicago "thing", whereas Deep Dish is not. It feels akin to writing a food guide to Memphis and endorsing a Texas-style barbecue joint.
banks at 12:36PM on 09/12/08

Here's my response to the list, following my earlier response to the idea of the list. Or you can just follow the link to see a picture of what Chicago pizza really is.

Sky Full of Bacon at 1:04PM on 09/12/08

@banks What the hell are you talking about? Unless you're using some alternative definition of "deep dish," that style of pizza is most certainly a Chicago invention, and predates stuffed by 30 years. Stuffed is a subgenre of deep dish. I don't know a single person who, when asked what Chicago's signature pizza is, tells me "stuffed." Well, now I guess I know one.

me3dia at 1:22PM on 09/12/08

I'm not here for an internet argument. I don't know a single Chicagoan under 30 who uses the term Deep Dish to refer to anything other than Dominos or Pizza Hut thick crust, thin topping travesties. I think if you did a man-on-the-street poll, you'd find that regardless of the extra crust layer at Nancy's or Giordano's, Chicago pizza is called Stuffed by more people than me.

banks at 1:34PM on 09/12/08

Great list. I totally agree with Johnny's Beef as the best Italian Beef. I lived in Chicago for a few years and had my fair share of it all. Spoon Thai is solid. Moody's Pub at Thorndale and Broadway makes an awesome burger, and Piece on North Ave (@ Damen) makes the best pie a east coaster like me could find while I was out there. Now back in NYC, I just went back to Chi for the 1st time in more than a year... Here's how I felt about hitting some old favorite spots...


The Ubereater

www.ubereater.com

Ubereater at 2:27PM on 09/12/08

@banks: Haha I know a whole hell of a lot of Chicagoans under 30 who don't use the term "stuffed". I'd actually go so far as to say I don't know ANY Chicagoans under 30 who DO use the term "stuffed". "Deep dish" is Chicago, plain and simple.

njgood at 4:34PM on 09/12/08

please check out my site if you want serious eats in Chicago..just be ready to leave downtown.

http://chibbqking.blogspot.com/

KingT at 6:52PM on 09/12/08

Nice to see that two Southwest Side places are on the list ... but nothing for the prime rib at Richie's?? It has got to be the best prime rib on the South Side - if not the city.

The Southwest Observer at 11:41PM on 09/12/08

How about Eastern European restaurants? For me, the whole reason to make the trip from Indy is for some rockin' pierogi, borscht, and paczki! Any recs?

shalomblack at 12:58AM on 09/13/08

Italian Beef:
As Detroit’s sage poet, Eminem, once said, “All you other Slim Shadys are just imitating, so won’t the real Slim Shady please stand up.” The Italian beef world is crowded with thousands of corner shacks serving up indiscriminate reheated pre-packaged beef from Scala or Vienna on a thick roll. As a result, a great beef rises when it has a few simple outlying qualities. In the case of the original Taylor St. location of Al’s, those qualities include freshly roasted meat with 11 herbs and spices, including a definite sweet nutmeg warmth, as well as hot fennel giardinara. Though, a close second is Chickie’s hot pepper topped beef version featuring wafer thin sliced green pepper and onion that offers a tongue satisfying crunchy textural counterpoint to the soft layers of meat. Though sometimes, beef needs a buddy, and the “combo” featuring a hunk of Italian sausage is best at Johnnie’s in Elmwood Park where the links are hardwood charcoaled fired and the beef is so thin, it’s almost translucent.

Michael Nagrant at 12:08PM on 09/13/08

I'd say the single best overall Polish restaurant in the city is Smak-Tak. It's like a little wood chalet cabin inside, and after tasting 13 pierogies in one afternoon, their's were the best. Likewise, someone asked about steak....everyone's mileage may vary based on the kind of cut they like, the ambiance etc....and there are many contenders, but the dry aged prime bone-in ribeye from Primehouse is my favorite cut.

Michael Nagrant at 12:13PM on 09/13/08

I've gotta say I've always called Chicago pizza deep dish not stuffed, too. I've always heard it called deep dish too. Then again, we canucks tend to be viewed as backwards. :P

lexophile at 4:48PM on 09/13/08

Shalom--if you're coming in from Indy, hit Mabenka's at 79th and Cicero. Ask for an end cut of kugele. The veal cutlets are quite good too, but skip the latkes.

maered at 10:23PM on 09/15/08

Oh, this is great! I'd love to see these city guides Google-mapped.

Tam Ngo at 12:16PM on 09/16/08

Spacca Napoli. Got it, I'm on my way! We've been searching high and low for Neapolitan pizza and keep getting that cracker crust which as a true New Yorker means sacrelidge! And pan style makes me full and bloated just looking at it.

danipal at 1:27AM on 01/16/09

I GREW UP AROUND 18TH AND ASHLAND
THERE USE TO BE AN ITALIAN RESTAURANT ON THE NORTH/EAST CORNER OF ASHLAND AND 18TH NAMED DV'S PIZZA ATTACHED TO FOREMOST LIQUORS ON THAT CORNER.
THIS WAS DURING THE 50'S AND EARLY 60'.
DOES ANY ONE KNOW WHEN IT CLOSED DOWN OR IF IT RELOCATED.

A MUST PLACE TO EAT IS ON 1079 TAYLOR AL'S BEEF.
THE COMBO BEEF/ITALIAN SAUSAGE IS A MUST WITH GREEN PEPPERS/GIADANER AND DIPPED IN THE GRAVY. A MUST PLACE TO EAT.
U MUST GO TO HALSTED AND 12TH STREET MAXWELL FOR THE OUTSIDE
EATERIES ON A SUNDAY. ALL KINDS OF GOODIES AND GREAT BLUES MUSIC ON THE STREETS
I AM NOW IN SAN ANTONIO TEXAS, BUT STILL SEE MY CUBS ON CABLE TV WGN.
BEST EATS CHICAGO
mugsy at 7:21PM on 04/05/09

I am still looking for top steakhouses. What comes to mind is Smith and Wollensky, Chicago Chophouse, Gibsons, and Gene and Georgetti. Any others that I should consider?
douglassteven at 12:58PM on 07/16/09