

# EATING

## top picks

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# EATING

For years epicures wrote off Chicago as a culinary backwater. Then a funny thing happened: the city won a heap of James Beard awards, and foodie magazines like *Saveur* ranked it as the nation's top restaurant scene.

So get ready: from \$225, 24-course meals of 'molecular gastronomy' (more on that later) to \$3 pizza slices, from Nepalese dumplings to Cuban sandwiches, from porterhouse steaks to locavore salads, Chicago serves up a plateful.

Perhaps no restaurant sums up the city's whimsical, unpretentious culinary identity as well as Hot Doug's. A humble place located in an out-of-the-way neighborhood, it serves that most quintessential of Chicago dishes: the hot dog. But in this case it's a foie gras and sauternes duck sausage 'dog' with truffle-sauce mustard and foie gras mousse – a tasty, deliriously rich clash of high culture and low, at once traditional and visionary. That's Chicago dining.

Plenty of meat gets carved in the city, a lasting legacy from when Chicago was 'hog butcher for the world.' Steak houses are a dime a dozen downtown, and new restaurants with charcuterie menus seem to open weekly. That's not to say vegetarians don't get their due. Several restaurants in town are exclusively veggie, including an increasing number of upscale options (see our top veg picks on p161). Locavore fare has come into its own too, and many places source from nearby Midwestern farms and Chicago's Green City Market (p157).

'Molecular gastronomy' is the thing that really weakens foodies' knees, though. A dynamic vanguard of Chicago chefs has helmed the growing trend – a catch-all term for an exciting approach to meal preparation that's more like a science experiment. (What exactly does a 'pillow of lavender air' taste like?) The refined tasting menu at Alinea (p156) is the premier example, and it is often shortlisted as North America's best restaurant.

If getting an authentic taste of the city ranks high on your agenda, break out of the Loop. Restaurant-rich neighborhoods in the Near North, Gold Coast and Wicker Park have a concentration of great eateries at their cores. Logan Square is off the beaten path, but delivers perhaps the most inventive fare of all (Hot Doug's is here, as are several other hot spots). If you're willing to trek further still, immigrant enclaves dish out Vietnamese *banh mi* (baguette sandwiches; Uptown), Mexican *mole* (sauce; Pilsen), Swedish pastries (Andersonville) and much more of the most affordable, genuine fare Chicago has to offer.

Also, if you're interested in bringing along that dusty bottle of Bordeaux – or washing down your pizza with something other than Old Style suds – you're in luck. Many Chicago restaurants have a bring your own beverage (BYOB) policy.

## SPECIALTIES

Chicago cooks up three beloved specialties. Deep-dish pizza is foremost. These behemoths are nothing like the flat circular disks known by the same name in the rest of the world. Here they're made in a special pan – kind of like a frying pan without a handle – so the dough, which encases a molten bed of American-style mozzarella cheese and other typical ingredients, is oven fried. The flagship Pizzeria Uno (p152) claims to have invented it in the '40s, but this, like many other fanatical conversations about pizza in the Windy City, will inspire debate. See p152 for suggestions on where to try a slice.

No less iconic is the Chicago-style hot dog, a wiener that's been 'dragged through the garden.' See p154 for the hallmark ingredients

of a true dog. And remember rule number one: no ketchup!

The third renowned Chicago specialty is the Italian beef sandwich, and it stacks up like this: thin-sliced, slow-cooked roast beef that's sopped in natural gravy and *giardiniera* (spicy pickled vegetables), then heaped on a hoagie roll. Local immigrants invented it as a low-budget way to feed factory workers in the late 1930s. Try it while you're here – Mr Beef (p153) makes a winner – because you'll be hard-pressed to find one elsewhere on the planet.

Less well known, but equally messy and delicious, is the *jibarito* sandwich, developed at a local Puerto Rican restaurant called Borinquen (p169). It consists of steak covered in garlicky mayo and served between thick, crispy-fried plantain slices, which form the