

Eating in The Windy City

I love Chicago. Even though it has been dubbed the 'Second City' by some jealous New Yorkers, nothing could be further from the truth. Having taught there for the past six years, I have developed an affinity for its architecture, atmosphere, culture and food. It has even been described as a cleaner and politer version of the Big Apple. Chicago is definitely a foodies paradise, and, in this regard, I believe it to be the superior choice over its east coast rival. The roll call of great restaurants is legion. Charlie Trotter's, Spiagia, L2O, Blackbird, Avenues at the Peninsula Hotel, and of course, the USA's best restaurant, Alinea, and its superstar chef Grant Achatz.

Then again, not everyone can afford to pull out the gold card for every meal. And why would you want to with a myriad of food offerings and styles. So, on my latest jaunt to the Windy City, I spent a couple of extra days, devouring the town, with Lipitor in hand. Here is a list of eight venues you must check out when you next find yourself in the "Second City".

Hot Doug's

The motto on the wall says it all, 'There are no other two finer words in the English language than "encased meats", my friend.' Yes, Chicago is famous for its huge hot dogs that are topped with neon green relish, mustard, tomatoes, onions, pickles, sport peppers and celery salt.

What this place is known for, and the reason why people line up well before the doors even open, is their gourmet sausages and hot dogs. My favorite? The epiphany known as The Foie Gras Dog- a foie gras and Sauternes duck sausage with truffle aioli, foie gras mousse and sel gris. My lunch partner took advantage of the Brown Ale Buffalo Sausage with bacon-garlic mayonnaise and apple wood smoked cheddar cheese. Of course, these hedonistic creations would not be complete without a side order of their signature duck fat fries.

Still not convinced of its greatness? Well, just ask Norm. On the day of our visit, George Wendt (aka Norm), of Cheers fame, was on hand, filming a piece for a show he was doing. Obviously, he knows his sausage as well as his beer.

Kuma's Corner

So what do you eat after the best hot dog? Well, how about the best hamburger? Just a few blocks away from Doug's, is one of Chi Town's top burger joints: Kuma's Corner, where people also line up in anticipation of the doors opening. When we arrived they were already 50 people in line. My first instinct was to leave. After all it is only a hamburger. Luckily, I was convinced otherwise by my cohorts.

First, a word of warning. This place used to be a metal (as in heavy) bar. The music is always hard hitting, the décor is dark with rather interesting leather/female art, and there are enough tattoos and piercings

on the service staff to make you believe you are at a Metallica concert. Once you get past that, you will also realize that the clientele is a cross section of demographics-suits, students, families, 60+, Gen Xrs, all come to scoff the awesome burgers. And yes, it is totally safe and friendly.

Even though the prime feature, the colorfully named 'Affliction of Swine' –a burger topped with braised pork belly sounded delicious, I went for the 'Famous Kuma Burger'- a mammoth pattie loaded with bacon, cheddar and fried egg. My partner chose the 'Slayer'- a base of fries stacked with a half pound burger, chili, cherry peppers, andouille sausage, onions, jack cheese and anger. Yes, anger. Other colorful burgers include the Iron Maiden, Led Zeppelin, Motorhead, Black Sabbath and Judas Priest. If you haven't guessed by now, all the burgers are named after famous head banging bands. Turn it up to eleven and enjoy the amazing beer list also.

Czerwone Jabluszko (Red Apple)

Outside of Poland, Chicago has the largest concentration of Poles in the world. Head down certain parts of Milwaukee Avenue and you would swear that you were walking the streets of Krakow. Red Apple is a Polish buffet that caters to all Chicagoans. This is the real deal, stick to your ribs, hearty fair, made for the working class- cabbage rolls, kielbasa, dumplings, pirogies, cutlets, varied meats sautéed and stewed in thick cream sauces, cabbage and potatoes in various forms and beets are but a few of the options. Add an oversized Okocim beer to the tab and you can walk out of here for under \$20, tip included. This is the real deal-my Polish wife swears by it!

Avec

Chef Paul Kahn rose to acclaim with his first restaurant, Blackbird, garnering many accolades from the James Beard Society, including best mid west Chef. In 2004, he opened a sister restaurant, Avec, a buttoned down version, just next door.

We were lucky enough to snag the chef's table, or rather counter, giving us a bird's eye view of the action. Our meal started with the savory and pungent tallegio cheese, truffle oil and herb stuffed foccacia. This was followed by the hit of the night- chorizo stuffed medjool dates with smoked bacon and piquillo pepper, tomato sauce. The sublime third course was crispy sweetbreads with roasted beets, watercress and goat cheese béchamel. For the finale, pan roasted cobia with mint-cured bacon, garbanzo beans, preserved lemon and nicoise olives was served. The firm textured fish handled the Mediterranean flavors well.

The wine list is creatively dedicated to the old world, notably the lesser know regions of Spain, Portugal, France and Italy.

The Publican

This place has become a regular stop for me while in town and is Chicago's answer to Au Pied du Cochon in Montreal. Located in the meat packing district, it is the latest addition to Paul Kahn's empire – a blue collar casual eatery that is the Mecca for all things meat (notably swine) and beer. The seating, for the most part, is communal-long tables and sitting beside complete strangers is the norm. It only adds to the

ambience. Our meal started with an array of fresh shucked oysters and potted rillettes with preserved cherries. The latter being the best I have ever tasted. Our main course consisted of suckling pig, sautéed brussels sprouts with bacon and chestnuts, and french fries topped with fried eggs and aioli.

On my previous visit, I also enjoyed the home made charcuterie, sweetbreads, boudin blanc and country ribs. They were all fabulous. By the way, this place belies the thought that beer isn't meant to pair with food. The Publican will convert you.

Al's Italian Beef

Often imitated, but never duplicated, the original Italian Beef is and one of "America's top 10 sandwiches," according to Travel and Leisure magazine. Thinly sliced roast beef is soaked in a savory jus for hours. When ordered, a fork is used to remove the meat from its bath and it is then placed on an Italian bun and topped with either a crunchy hot giardinera, which is mostly celery, or sweet peppers. Personally, I prefer a combination of both. Make sure to have them dip the sandwich in the jus and order a side of Chicago's best french fries.

So popular are these creations, they even have their own eating technique called the Italian stance. Grab some counter space, then stand back two and half feet, lean forward on your elbows and open mouth. This is what real Chicagoans do.

Smoque BBQ

BBQ in Chicago? Believe it or not, this is the real deal. I have eaten the best that Memphis, St Louis, the Carolinas and Austin have to offer, and Smoque has nothing to be ashamed of. Smoked over a combination of apple wood and oak, all the staples are here, including pulled pork, ribs and my personal favorites, sausage and brisket. The classic southern sides also don't slouch-coleslaw, baked beans, mac and cheese and cornbread. So grab yourself a sweet tea, or better yet, bring your favorite brew, as the location has a BYO policy.

Lou Malnati's Pizzeria

No piece about Chicago food would be complete without the ubiquitous deep dish pizza. Everyone seems to have their preference-Uno, Giordanos, Ginos East and Due are but some of the options. My favorite is Lou's. Why? Three items: butter crust, a fabulous hot giardinera and spinach (enhanced with garlic, basil and onion). Pair these three with the fresh sausage and you have pizza nirvana.