

Here's your key the 'Windy City': A visitor's guide to some of Chicago's best

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Katherine Rodeghier

A hardware store on the South Side was once a nightclub where Louis Armstrong played. The store can't keep toilet plungers in stock.

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Special Contributor

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Chicago continues to surprise even repeat visitors with the new, the quirky and little-known insider

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secrets, including the fact that the nickname Windy City has nothing to do with the weather.

The term originated from the city's talkative — or long-winded — 19th-century boosters who boasted about it in rivalries with Cincinnati as the nation's meatpacking capital and later with other Eastern cities as the site for the World's Columbian Exposition.

Some superlatives found in America's third-largest city today:

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Best place to lift your pinkie finger

High tea at the Peninsula Hotel can involve 16 varieties of tea, finger foods from a three-tier tray, all served on Wedgwood in an elegant lobby with 20-foot windows overlooking the Magnificent Mile.

Info: 108 E. Superior St., 312-573-6695 and peninsula.com.

Best make-up martini

Cloudgate, served at Tavern at the Park next to Millennium Park, costs \$175. It is Grey Goose La Poire and Champagne served in a silver-rimmed martini glass and garnished with "a little something special from your favorite luxury" jewelry store (a pendant in the shape of the park's "Cloud Gate" sculpture, i.e. the "Bean," from Tiffany). Men in the doghouse usually order it for wives or girlfriends.

Info: 130 E. Randolph St., tavernatthepark.com, 312-522-0070

Scariest view through your shoes

The Ledge, which is essentially a glass box protruding from the observation deck of the Willis (formerly the Sears) Tower.

Info: Jackson Boulevard between Franklin Street and Wacker Drive, theskydeck.com, 312-875-9447

Best view of Chicago architecture from a pricey outdoor bar

The Terrace at Trump Tower has magnificent views of Wrigley Building, Tribune Tower and other noteworthy buildings along the Chicago River, but you pay for the view. Tropical-themed cocktails cost \$20. It reopened for the season in mid-May.

Info: 401 N. Wabash Ave., trumpchicagohotel.com/food_wine/the_terrace_at_trump.asp, 312-588-8000

Best \$3 boat ride

The Chicago Water Taxi passes some of city's best architecture along the Chicago River. It leaves from the docks on the Chicago River at Michigan Avenue and at Madison Avenue, a short walk from Amtrak trains at Union Station.

Info: chicagowatertaxi.com, 312-337-1446

Best hot chocolate with homemade marshmallows

Check out Mindy's HotChocolate Restaurant and Dessert Bar, owned by James Beard-winning pastry chef Mindy Segal. In warm weather, the marshmallows come with iced chocolate.

Info: 1747 N. Damen Ave., hotchocolatechicago.com, 773-489-1747

Best place to buy a toilet plunger for your trombone

Meyers Ace Hardware was once a nightclub where Louis Armstrong played and Al Capone "managed" (historic marker on the wall). The South Side store can't keep plungers in stock because so many musicians from around the world come in to buy them to muffle their instruments.

Info: 315 E. 35th St., explorechicago.org and click on "Things to See & Do", 312-225-5687

Best burger with 'Saturday Night Live' shtick

This is the original Billy Goat Tavern, which was made famous by John Belushi's funny refrain: "Cheezborger! Cheezborger! No fries, cheeps! No Pepsi, Coke!"

Info: 430 N. Michigan Ave., billygoattavern.com, 312-222-1525

Best bar scene for hipsters and wanna-be hipsters

Roof, on the 27th floor of the Wit hotel, has indoor and outdoor seating jammed with young urban professionals and fashionistas — and those who aspire to be.

Info: 201 N. State St., roofonthewit.com, 312-239-9501

Hardest restaurant to get into

Next, by celebrity chef Grant Achatz, doesn't take reservations. Buy a ticket online for \$65 to \$110 plus drinks, tax and service charge; the price varies, with Saturday night the highest), and the menu changes quarterly. Tickets go fast.

Info: 953 W. Fulton Market, nextrestaurant.com, 312-226-0858

Best DIY handbag shop

Pick out the fabric and style from in-store samples to custom-make your own bag at 1154 Lill Studio.

Info: 904 W. Armitage Ave., 1154lill.com, 773-477-5455

Best place to see a radio show

NPR's *Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me* has live studio tapings in downtown Chicago at Chase Auditorium.

Info: 10 S. Dearborn St., npr.org/2011/07/16/110997820/see-the-show-live

Best shopping under a Tiffany dome

Go to Macy's, in the original Marshall Field's State Street store, which is noteworthy for its architecture, specifically a Tiffany dome in the atrium.

Info: 111 N. State St., visitmacyschicago.com, 312-781-1000

Best place to commune with famous Chicago ghosts

Walk around Graceland Cemetery, the burial spot for many Chicago architects and 18th- and 19th-century entrepreneurs and industrialists.

Info: 4001 N. Clark St., gracelandcemetery.org, 773-525-1150

Best upside-down pizza

Chicago Pizza and Oven Grinder Co. makes a pot pie that oven-mitted servers present to diners upside-down. While you wait for a table, which can be a long wait, reflect on the location across the street from where the St. Valentine's Day Massacre occurred in 1929. Rumor has it that the building now housing the restaurant was the lookout point for the perpetrators.

Info: 2121 N. Clark St., chicagopizzaandovengrinder.com, 773-248-2570

Best place to spice up your life

Spice House sells spices from around the world.

Info: 1512 N. Wells St., thespicehouse.com, 773-274-0378

Best spot for indecisive martini lovers

Wildfire offers a martini flight: four mini martinis in a rainbow of colors.

Info: 159 W. Erie St., wildfirerestaurant.com/chicago, 312-787-9000

Best foodie tour

Food Planet's Wicker Park/Bucktown tour combines a walking tour of the neighborhoods with stops at six eateries for samples. **Info:** chicagofoodplanet.com, 212-209-3370

Best restaurant for uncertain wine drinkers

If you can't decide what wine to order with dinner, try Bin. It serves wine flights: four sample sizes in themes such as Sexy Reds, Bubbles and Low Down Dirty Reds.

Info: 339 N. Dearborn St., bin36.com, 312-755-9463

Best place to drink in a bank vault

The Bedford restaurant in the trendy Wicker Park neighborhood is housed in a former bank, and the bar is in the vault.

Info: 1612 W. Division St., bedfordchicago.com, 773-235-8800

Best hot dog where ketchup could be a criminal offense

George's in Bucktown serves real Chicago hot dogs with all seven traditional ingredients, but never with ketchup.

Info: 1876 N. Damen Ave., georgeshotdogs.com, 773-227-4034

Best historic sports venue

Wrigley Field, home of Major League Baseball's Chicago Cubs, is open for tours. In case you're wondering, *not* Soldier Field where the Bears play, which looks like a spaceship that landed on top of the Parthenon.

Info: 1060 W. Addison St., chicago.cubs.mlb.com, 773-404-4734

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