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The Wonderful Windy City

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Best hot chocolate with homemade marshmallows: HotChocolate, highly-rated restaurant owned by James Beard-winning pastry chef. 1747 N. Damen Ave. 773-489-1747. www.hotchocolatechicago.com.

Best place for Christmas shopping: Upper Michigan Avenue, otherwise known as "The Magnificent Mile," that stretch of Michigan Avenue between the Chicago River and Oak Street, which is home to Bloomingdales, American Girl Place, Neiman Marcus, the Disney Store, Nordstrom, Tiffany & Co., Ralph Lauren and other big-name retailers. 312-409-5560. www.themagnificentmile.com.

Scariest view through your shoes: The Ledge, glass box protruding from observation deck of the Willis (Sears) Tower; way more intense than the CN Tower. Jackson Boulevard between Franklin Street and Wacker Drive. 312-875-9447. www.theskydeck.com

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, ever, with ketchup. 1876 N. Damen Ave. 773-227-4034. www.georgeshotdogs.com

Best East Coast pizza joint with naughty beer names: Piece serving New Haven-style pizza (take that, Chicago pizza fans) and craft brews with names such as Fornicator bock and Full Frontal ale. 1927 W. North Ave. 773-772-4422. www.Piecechicago.com

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-theme cocktails cost \$20. Reopens in the spring. 401 N. Wabash Ave.. www.trumpchicagohotel.com

Best \$2 boat ride: Chicago Water Taxi passes some of city's best architecture along the Chicago River. Resumes service in March from docks on the Chicago River at Michigan and Madison Avenues. 312-337-1446. www.Chicagowatertaxi.com

Best place to buy a toilet plunger for your trombone: a South Side hardware store that was once a nightclub where Louis Armstrong played and Al Capone "managed" (historic marker on the wall). Store can't keep plungers in stock because so many musicians from around the world come in to buy them to muffle their instruments. 315 E. 35th St. 312-225-5687. <http://explorechicago.org/>

Best burger with "Saturday Night Live" shtick: Billy Goat Tavern made famous by John Belushi's funny refrain: "Cheezborger! Cheezborger! No fries, cheeps! No Pepsi, Coke!" Located in the gritty underbelly of Lower Michigan Avenue at 430 N. Michigan Ave. 312-222-1525. www.billygoattavern.com

Best bar scene for hipsters and wanna-be hipsters: Roof, on the 27th floor of the Wit hotel; indoor and outdoor seating jammed with young urban professionals and fashionistas and those who aspire to be. 201 N. State St., 312-239-9501. www.roofonthewit.com

Best place to buy a menorah in Chinatown: Hoypoloi gallery specializes in art glass, including menorahs made by an artist who lived in Israel; oddly located in the heart of Chicago's Chinatown. 2235 S. Wentworth Ave. 312-225-6477. www.hoypoloi.com

Best DIY handbag shop: 1154 Lill Studio. Pick out the fabric and style from in-store samples to custom-make your own bag. 904 W. Armitage Ave. 773-477-5455. www.1154lill.com



The Water Tower is one of many top architectural attractions in Chicago.

Dreamstime photo

Most historic sports venue: Wrigley Field, home of Chicago Cubs, open for tours. NOT Soldier Field where the Bears play, which looks like a spaceship that landed on top of the Parthenon. 1060 W. Addison St.. <http://chicago.cubs.mlb.com>

Best place to “see” a radio show: NPR’s “Wait, Wait Don’t Tell Me” has live studio tapings downtown. Chase Auditorium. 10 S. Dearborn St.. www.npr.org/2011/07/16/110997820/see-the-show-live

Best shopping under a Tiffany Dome: Macy’s, in the original Marshall Field State Street store, noteworthy for its architecture, specifically a Tiffany dome in the atrium. 111 N. State St., 312-781-1000. www.visitmacyschicago.com

Best place to dine by a Christmas tree: The Walnut Room, on the seventh floor of Macy’s flagship store, 111 N. State St., serves breakfast, lunch, dinner around a 45-foot-tall Christmas tree decorated with 15,000 LED lights and 1,200 ornaments. No reservations; pick up a pager, which works throughout the store. 111 N. State St.. www.visitmacyschicago.com

Where to drink in a bank vault: The Bedford restaurant in the trendy Wicker Park neighbourhood is housed in a former bank and the bar is in the vault. 1612 W. Division St. 773-235-8800. www.bedfordchicago.com

Best place to commune with famous Chicago ghosts: Graceland Cemetery , burial spot for Chicago architects and 18th- and 19th-century entrepreneurs and industrialists. 4001 N. Clark St. 773-525-1150. www.Gracelandcemetery.org

Best place to see Marilyn Monroe’s underwear: a 26-foot statue of Marilyn Monroe in her iconic subway-grate post from “The Seven Year Itch” went up a few weeks ago and has caused a stir from some who say it is in poor taste. North Michigan Avenue at the Chicago River.

Best place to spice up your life: Spice House, selling spices from around the world. 1512 N. Wells St., 773-274-0378. www.thespicehouse.com

Best restaurant for indecisive martini lovers: Wildfire offers a martini flight: four mini martinis in a rainbow of colors. 159 W. Erie St. 312-787-9000. www.wildfirerestaurant.com/Chicago

Best place to lift your pinkie finger: High tea at the Peninsula Hotel; 16 varieties of tea, finger foods from three-tier tray, served on Wedgewood in elegant Lobby with 20-foot windows overlooking the Magnificent Mile. 108 E. Superior St. 312-573-6695. www.peninsula.com

Busy brunch spot: Big Jones in the gay-friendly Andersonville neighbourhood specializes in Southern cooking with gratis beignets for patrons. 5347 N. Clark St. 773-275-5725. www.Bigjoneschicago.com,

Best foodie tour: Food Planet’s Wicker Park/Bucktown tour combines a walking tour of the neighbourhoods with stops at six eateries for samples. Closed for winter, resumes March 29. 212-209-3370. www.chicagofoodplanet.com

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 (price varies like a theatre ticket with Saturday night the highest). Menu changes quarterly and tickets go fast. 953 W. Fulton Market. 312-226-0858. www.Nextrestaurant.com

Newest comedy club: In November Chicago ’s famous Second City theatre is opening a cabaret-style club showcasing stand-up comedy. One of the banquettes in the club is the famous Booth One frequented by celebrities in the now shuttered Pump Room. 1616 N. Wells St. 312-337-3992. <http://upcomedyclub.com/index.cfm>,

Best restaurant for uncertain wine drinkers: Can’t decide what wine to order with dinner? Bin 36 serves wine flights, four sample sizes in themes such as Sexy Reds, Bubbles and Low Down Dirty Reds. 339 N. Dearborn St. 312-755-9463. www.Bin36.com.

Best make-up martini: Cloudgate, served at Tavern on 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 favourite luxury” jewelry store (a pendant in the shape of the “Cloud Gate” sculpture, the “Bean” from Tiffany). Men in the doghouse usually order it for wives or girlfriends. 130 E. Randolph St. 312-522-0070. www.Tavernatthepark.com

Closest casino to O’Hare airport: Rivers Casino opened in July and was so mobbed on opening day the owners publicly asked the public to postpone their visit. It has the highest table limits in the state and double the number of table games at most local casinos. Located in suburban Des Plaines, Ill., at 3000 S. River Rd. 847-795-0777. <http://playrivers.com>

Best place to sip gluhwein at Christmastime: The Christkindlmarket at Daley Plaza, where vendors from Germany staff booths set up around Chicago’s official Christmas tree to sell ornaments, classic German products like cuckoo clocks, German foods and hot and cold drinks. (through Dec. 24). On Washington Street between Clark and Dearborn. 312-494-2175. www.christkindlmarket.com/en

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