

## From the South Side to the Loop, Chicago's Innovative Spirit Thrives

Theater, art and music are flourishing, and on the culinary scene, a 13-course Filipino tasting menu and a sleek Black-owned winery in Bronzeville are just a few of the city's new offerings.



The South Side's new [Bronzeville Winery](#) is in Bronzeville, Chicago's historically Black business and cultural district.

**By Elaine Glusac** June 9, 2022 NYTimes

Lacey Irby and her business partner, Ryan Brosseau, a chef, were planning to open a restaurant when the pandemic hit. It delayed them, but eventually, in early 2021, they opened [Dear Margaret](#), a homey tribute to Mr. Brosseau's Canadian grandmother in the Lakeview neighborhood, with takeout only, gradually adding patio dining and finally, last June, the snug dining room. It recently earned a Bib Gourmand award from Michelin — signaling quality and value — and reservations are scarce.

“For those of us left standing, it's a testament to that willpower that's inherently part of this city,” Ms. Irby said.

Resilience is a point of pride in Chicago, which was nearly erased by the Great Fire in 1871. In 2020, the pandemic chased residents out of the downtown Loop and into their homes, and though many offices remain dark, locals are now returning to reopened clubs, theaters, restaurants and cultural attractions.

For those making the art, the food and the entertainment, introspection mingles with celebration.

“During the pandemic, artists couldn’t help but create and we’re seeing new, exciting shows,” said Katie Tuten, a co-owner of the eclectic performance space [Hideout](#), fresh from a weekend of back-to-back sellout shows. “Plus, who wants to come out of the pandemic and not have a place to dance?”

Back on stage

Watching a performance, let alone dancing, was of course forbidden indoors for at least a year at independent music clubs that form the backbone of the Chicago music scene. Thanks to \$16 billion in federal Covid [relief](#) distributed to venues nationwide, no local clubs closed permanently, according to the [Chicago Independent Venue League](#), an industry group of nearly 50 performance spaces. Members of the league represent the spectrum of Chicago-made music, from [the Promontory](#) in Hyde Park, with everything from jazz concerts to soca dance parties; to [Martyrs](#)’ on the North Side, welcoming emerging garage bands, arty collectives like the marching band Mucca Pazza and free Sunday afternoon country shows. “Each are anchors to neighborhoods with restaurants and bars and experiences,” said Chris Bauman, a C.I.V.L. board member and the owner of two North Side venues, [Avondale Music Hall](#) and the [Patio Theater](#), who credits locally owned clubs as economic engines and talent incubators. “In Chicago, we do it for the love of art and music and creating and retaining this culture,” he added. Theater, too, is back, requiring masks at major companies, including the [Goodman](#), [Steppenwolf](#) and [Chicago Shakespeare](#). The latter two also require vaccine cards.

In Lincoln Park, Steppenwolf has recently opened its new in-the-round Ensemble Theater, where the furthest seat is 20 feet from the stage, with “Seagull” by Anton Chekov, through June 12. An adaptation of Eve Ewing’s poetry collection, “1919,” about the racist murder of a young Black swimmer in Lake Michigan in 1919, intended for young adult audiences, will follow Oct. 4 to 29.

Harder hit were the hundreds of small theater companies, often occupying storefronts, that have historically set the bar for originality. During Theater Week

in February, which promotes productions with discount tickets, the sponsoring alliance [League of Chicago Theaters](#) had about half of the entries from small theaters compared to prepandemic festivals, but 80 percent of 2019 sales.

“Audiences were eager to come out,” said Deb Clapp, the executive director of the League, who noted the late spring return of several companies producing plays with social justice themes, such as Story Theatre’s “[Marie Antoinette and the Magical Negroes](#),” which mingles race history and the French Revolution (June 30 to July 17).

### Dining and drinking

With pandemic mandates dropped, restaurateurs are still struggling to hire adequate staff, leading to more dark nights than before the pandemic.

A few high-profile favorites did not survive, including Blackbird, a sophisticated West Loop hot spot with tables just inches apart, as well as Spiaggia and Everest. Still, some irrepressible entrepreneurs took the leap during the pandemic, including the chefs and spouses Genie Kwon and Timothy Flores, who opened [Kasama](#) in the summer of 2020 in Ukrainian Village as a takeaway cafe, with the goal of “making Filipino food mainstream,” Ms. Kwon said.

Last fall, the Filipino restaurant added a 13-course tasting menu at dinner — dishes have included oyster and green mango, and lamb belly with bagoong, a Filipino fish paste — available to just 40 diners a night (\$215 a person) as a way to guarantee income and ward against possible future capacity restrictions. The restaurant recently earned a Michelin star, and dinner there is one of the hardest reservations to score.

“For Filipinos, seeing rustic foods mom-and-pop served in a 13-course tasting menu is eye-opening,” said Mr. Flores.

The South Side’s new [Bronzeville Winery](#) has its own social mission, to catalyze the revival of Bronzeville, the historically Black business and cultural district. “I live in Bronzeville and I’m a foodie, but I’m always driving” to find fine food, said Eric Williams, a co-owner, who, as a retailer, helped spark the regeneration of the now trendy Wicker Park neighborhood on the North Side. “We should have something on our own block.”

Before the pandemic, the [Brewers Association](#), a national trade group, called the Chicago metro area tops for breweries, and beer fans will find tap rooms strewn across the city and suburbs.

To support a start-up, hit a brew hall with shared production facilities, including [District Brew Yards](#) in West Town, featuring the Mexican-accented [Casa Humilde](#), where a hazy I.P.A. might have pineapple notes, and the incubator [Pilot Project Brewing](#) in Logan Square, currently home to the Black-owned [Funkytown Brewery](#).

#### Cultural currency

Early on, museums were places of solace when little was open, offering quiet reflection to the vaccinated and masked. A few protocols remain, including advance ticket sales at the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) and the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#).

While it was closed during the pandemic, the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#) remained a vital member of the largely Latino community in Pilsen on the near South Side, serving as a vaccination center. Reopened, the lively showcase for Mexican art recently debuted “Frida Kahlo, Her Photos,” featuring images owned by the iconic painter that comprise what the museum calls a “photographic collage” of her life and times (through Aug. 7).

On the far South Side, the [Pullman National Monument](#) added a new visitor center in the 1880 clock tower of the first planned industrial town in the country, site of a factory producing Pullman train cars as well as hundreds of nearby worker’s homes, leafy parks and the shuttered Queen-Anne-style Hotel Florence. Exhibits examine a seminal worker’s strike and Black employment as Pullman porters. “The same conversations and debates they were having in the 1880s and 90s about what is a working wage, unionization and worker safety are still so relevant today,” said Teri Gage, the superintendent of the monument.

#### Festivals are back

As many workers remain remote, the downtown Loop district is quieter than before, though nearby [Navy Pier](#) is poised to keep visitors longer with the opening last year of its first hotel, [Sable at Navy Pier](#), a Curio Collection by Hilton, offering panoramic views of Lake Michigan and the skyline.

A full slate of summer events is poised to renew interest in the city center, including the [Chicago Blues Festival](#) (June 9 to 12) and the [Chicago Jazz](#)

[Festival](#) (Sept. 1 to 4). [Taste of Chicago](#) will take a hybrid approach with a downsized food event in Grant Park (July 8 to 10) along with a June series of neighborhood pop-ups.

At least one new festival is on the calendar, [Pizza City Fest](#) (July 23 to 24). Founded by the food journalist Steve Dolinsky, author of “The Ultimate Chicago Pizza Guide,” the event will bring 40 pizza makers to the Plumbers Union Hall in the West Loop to bake on site with additional discussions on topics like the perfect dough and pizza-making at home.

“I got tired of seeing people propagate myths about Chicago pizza that weren’t true anymore,” said Mr. Dolinsky, reeling off 10 styles of pizza, including the famous deep-dish, as evidence of the local appetite to experiment. “Chicago is a city of innovation.”

*Elaine Glusac writes the Frugal Traveler column.*