

The Big Heat: Chicago's Food and Drink Fifty 2015

Posted by [Jan Hieggelke](#)



Newcity's Big Heat 2015 represents a thick slice of Chicago's culinary culture: butchers and cheese mongers, restaurateurs, critics, even some sommeliers and chefs. This year, however, we're focusing less on people at the stove and more on the people behind the stove. These are the men and women who set the standard, change the game, initiate food movements, re-imagine what it means to have dinner in Chicago—and perhaps most importantly, help fill our lives with exponentially more deliciousness. Some of their names will be very familiar, others will be entirely unfamiliar, and they're all just some of the personalities who are critically shaping the way we eat in Chicago. Just some. Just a slice of a large and growing community of leaders in Chicago food culture. Apologies if we missed a few of your favorites, which we undoubtedly have. There are many more who could easily have been on this list, which only overviews the immense range of enthusiasm, creativity and talent that decisively influences the food served to us in restaurants, in retail stores and on the streets of Chicago, which stands among the major food capitals of the world, thanks in good measure to the following fifty. (David Hammond)

Big Heat 2015 was written by David Hammond, J'nai Gaither, Rebecca Holland, Lauren Knight, Rosemary Lane and Anthony Todd

Cover and interior photos by Joe Mazza/Brave Lux on location at Seven Lions



Alpana Singh/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

1

Alpana Singh

Master Sommelier and Owner, The Boarding House and Seven Lions

After receiving Master Sommelier certification, Alpana Singh led wine seminars at a California wine store, an experience she credits with giving her the composure and focus to speak to audiences of both professionals and laypeople. After a stint at Everest with Chef Jean Joho, Singh hosted ten seasons of spirited discussions with citizen-reviewers on “Check, Please!” After she retired from the show, she went on to head up two major Chicago restaurants: The Boarding House and Seven Lions. She’s a single female, a voice of authority and a strong leader, telling us that “Leaders are stubborn; they don’t move their compass; they listen to their soul; and when they worry too much about what others think of them, they lose course, and they lose themselves. Leaders stay true to their path.” Singh’s path, for some years now, has been straight up. (See a feature interview in this issue.)

2

Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz

Owners, Boka Restaurant Group

Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz, co-founders of the Boka Restaurant Group, opened their Boka restaurant in 2003. Since then, they’ve launched many others, including GT Fish & Oyster, Balena, Girl and the Goat and most recently, Momotaro. Avoiding missteps, Boehm and Katz have made a point of recruiting superb chefs, including Paul Virant and Stephanie Izard, and then giving them latitude to be themselves in restaurant environments characterized by their lack of similarity. Each BRG joint has unique and powerful design and atmosphere. Despite that variety, what holds them all together, according to Boehm, is “hospitality: it starts with great chefs and food, and it’s enhanced and heightened by emotional service.” Boka restaurants are the kind of places you feel comfortable recommending to any out-of-town visitor.

3

Brendan Sodikoff

Owner, Hogsalt

The culinary world's *enfant terrible* shows no signs of slowing down on his way to Chicago dining (if not global) domination. Sodikoff owns and operates some of the hottest restaurants the Midwest has ever seen, including Au Cheval (that BURGER!), Maude's Liquor Bar, Bavette's, Green Street Smoked Meats, Cocello, The Doughnut Vault, High Five Ramen, California Clipper, Roxie's by the Slice and the original that started it all, Gilt Bar. One would think that with so many restaurants in the mix, service or food quality would inevitably suffer, and that the city would tire of Sodikoff-saturation. But no. Sodikoff has apparently figured out the magic recipe for success and staying power. Just don't expect him to reveal it anytime soon.

4

The Melman Family

Founder and Partners, Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises

The royal family of the Chicago restaurant world is his majesty Richard Melman, his throne flanked by RJ, Jerrod and Molly. Together, they rule the hugely successful Lettuce Entertain You restaurant empire. A dish from a LEYE restaurant is on just about everyone's guilty pleasure list, whether it's oysters at Shaw's, steak frites at Mon Ami Gabi or tiki drinks at Three Dots and a Dash. Their domain now spans more than 100 restaurants in seven states. RPM Italian, one of their most popular ventures, is heading to Washington D.C., while Intro (which replaced Michelin-starred L20) is the first restaurant in Chicago with rotating chefs and ticketed dining.

5

Matt Maloney

Co-Founder and CEO, GrubHub

If you haven't ordered from GrubHub, you probably eat out a lot. This online service lets you order delivery from many local restaurants, but you probably knew that. What you may not know is that Forbes judged GrubHub to be "the leader in mobile food delivery and pick-up in the United States." Matt Maloney is the leader of GrubHub. In the seventy-billion-dollar home delivery market, only five percent of ordering is done online, so there's immense upside potential. And there's revenue to be generated beyond commission on delivery sales. "GrubHub's platform is constantly evolving to bring Chicago diners better food faster," Maloney says. "We recently acquired the top two restaurant delivery companies and are now physically ensuring the quality of many of our orders as well as decreasing delivery times. Through our massive transactional data, we can tell you exactly what dishes your neighbors love."

6

Bob Mariano

CEO and Chairman, Roundy's

Mariano's is an unstoppable machine, in a good way. The grocery chain that began with one humble, 68,000-square-foot Arlington Heights store has hatched twenty-nine more locations in five years—gobbling up defunct Dominick's stores along the way. Bob Mariano, the sixty-five-year-old at the wheel, is a hands-on CEO sometimes spotted behind the deli counter or bagging groceries. The Chicago native and former Dominick's CEO came up with a slam-dunk formula: combine Costco, Whole Foods and Jewel, and sprinkle in plenty of on-site experiences: oyster bars, smoothie stations, roving dietitians, piano players. Mariano isn't slowing his cart wheels any time soon—he's opening four more stores in 2015, five in 2016, including one slated for Bronzeville, with plans for a total of fifty stores in Chicago.

7

Chris Dexter

Partner, Element Collective

In the seven years since starting the restaurant group Element Collective, Chris Dexter—along with partners Chris Freeman, Jared Van Camp and John Warken—has found great success with restaurants like Nellcote, Kinmont, and Leghorn Chicken. He's also earned himself and his team a respected spot in the Chicago dining community. "Chicago has

an amazingly inclusive [dining] scene,” says Dexter. “It’s a great marketplace with a like-minded community of chefs and restaurateurs.” Dexter intends to continue with more singular concepts and an eye toward a chef-driven approach to vegetable- and plant-based menus. As with his more retail-focused Owen + Alchemy, Dexter would like to “show vegetables the same respect, level of technique, and affection as meats.”

8

Peter Toalson, Cody Hudson, Jon Martin and Robert McAdams

Principals and Owners, Land and Sea Dept.

Peter Toalson, Cody Hudson, Jon Martin and Robert McAdams aren’t much interested in trends: they’re too busy pursuing their own passions and producing game-changing concepts in the Chicago dining community. Starting with the Logan Square favorite Longman & Eagle, their first collective effort, Land and Sea Dept. has continued to create restaurants and bars that deliver what Toalson explains are “creative, fresh takes on how drinking and eating can be done.” They take particular pride in finding the right local talent to further their creative and distinctive presence in Chicago. “We have created some really great opportunities and work environments for our folks,” says Toalson. With new projects in 2015 like the Chicago Athletic Association and more developments sprouting in Logan Square, Land and Sea Dept. will no doubt continue to buck trends and start new ones.

9

Michael Ellis

Director, Michelin Guide

Michael Ellis has one seriously cool job: eating at great restaurants around the world. Nice work if you can get it. As international director of the Michelin Guide, the polyglot New York City-born, France-based Ellis has much love for the Chicago culinary scene, giving us our first Red Guide in 2010. He says that Chicago “year after year affirms its position as one of the most exciting and dynamic dining destinations in the world today.” We wholeheartedly agree. Though the guides often come under fire for their choices of inclusion (or not) and their undeniable focus on fine, white tablecloth dining, the guides are pretty much the Oprah of the restaurant world: they giveth and taketh away fame with a few words.

10

Phil Vettel

Food Critic, Chicago Tribune

A few minutes with Phil Vettel, and it’s easy to see how his love of Chicago and passion for its food have helped him remain one of the city’s most revered and beloved food critics. It’ll be twenty-six years this fall, and he’s loving it. “Chicago, more than most cities,” he says, “is willing to embrace new food.” He cites fine-dining Mexican and Thai as concepts that could have easily failed in other cities. As a critic, he gives credit and criticism, saying “I always want to be fair and accurate,” which explains why in a world of increasing Yelpers and food bloggers, Vettel hasn’t lost his voice. “There are so many restaurants that make me proud to be in Chicago,” he says, “and they’re the ones that in one way or another break new ground and bring a certain level of excellence.”

11

Rick Bayless

Chef and Owner, Frontera Grill, Topolobampo, XOCO, Frontera Fresco and Tortas Frontera, Cookbook Author and Television Host

Rick Bayless changed American perceptions of Mexican restaurant food by giving many their first taste of classics like mole and huitlacoche. His new book “More Mexican Everyday: Simple, Seasonal, Celebratory” focuses on home cooks, who he encourages to be less dependent on recipes. “That might sound like a strange way to describe a cookbook,” Bayless says, “but cooking well at home requires only confidence, an eye for good ingredients and a solid understanding

of flavor.” Bayless hopes his book helps guide farmers’ market shoppers, which makes sense coming from a Green City Market board member.

12

Paul Kahan

Owner and Chef, One Off Hospitality

The restaurants of Paul Kahan (Blackbird, Dove’s Luncheonette, Nico Osteria, etc.) and his partners are always on the lips of Chicago’s fooderati. They’ve been in the news for so long that even Chicago’s grandmas and grandpas have heard of Kahan and his wildly successful One Off Hospitality restaurant group. The culinary prowess, sleek spaces and effusive service of his restaurants keep hungry Chicagoans coming back for more. He’s brainy, that one, having started out in tech, before realizing his true calling to the kitchen. We’re all glad he did.

13

Tony Mantuano

Chef and Partner, Spiaggia, Cafe Spiaggia, Bar Toma, Terzo Piano, River Roast, and Mangia Wine Bar and Partner, The Purple Pig

Sure, Chicago has long had its neighborhood red-sauce joints, and thanks to chef Tony Mantuano, higher-end-yet-traditional Italian cuisine gained a foothold in the Windy City. He opened Spiaggia in 1984, after spending a year staging in some of Italy’s great restaurants. In a time when only French restaurants were considered worthy of distinction, Mantuano earned a Michelin star for his true-to-basics Italian fare that reflected a fine dining attention to detail. He has since opened restaurants across the city, including Terzo Piano at the Art Institute, Bar Toma and River Roast. He tells us his goals are “to affect every level of diner” and “really showcase Chicago and what we can do.”



Catherine DeOrio/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

14

David Manilow and Catherine DeOrio

Creator of “Check, Please!” and Host of “Check, Please!” and Executive Director of Kendall College Trust

When David Manilow got the idea for “Check, Please!” from a weekly dinner club with friends, he probably didn’t realize

he'd be creating an Emmy-winning and pioneering food program that would still be going strong fifteen years later. Currently hosted by Catherine DeOrio, a respected food writer with her own culinary background, "Check, Please!" continues to be an accessible resource for Chicago food lovers. "[The show] is a great champion of restaurants, and not just ones with publicists," says Cat. "It really opened up the landscape." With suggestions for featured restaurants coming from the "everyday" guests, Cat notes that "people really trust it... we get to hear what the diners have to say."



Steve Dolinsky/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

15

Steve Dolinsky

Food Reporter, Hungry Hound and The Feed Podcast

"When I first started out, I just had a broadcast background and a love for food," says Steve Dolinsky, food reporter and twelve-time James Beard Award-winner says. Being a TV food reporter was a novel concept when he landed the gig of hosting "Good Eating" in 1995. Fast-forward twenty years, and there's an entire network devoted to the profession he helped kickstart. Dolinsky has adapted with the times. In the early years, his job was simple. "I produced, reported and edited. I did one thing," Dolinsky says. "Now, I edit, report, video, blog, I'm constantly reassessing my website, I do TV and radio, I started a podcast. I don't do just one thing." While his roles and talents have expanded, the fundamentals of reporting are in everything he does, keeping viewers, listeners, and readers entertained and informed.



Billy Lawless/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

16

Billy Lawless

Restaurateur, Acanto, The Gage and The Dawson

Just when the dust began to settle, Billy Lawless kicked it up again. In 2014, the Irishman had ironed out the kinks of The Dawson, his year-old, half-a-block restaurant in West Town whose chef had left a month in. He had successes like The Gage and Henri under his belt, but the latter, his formal French restaurant, wasn't drawing the crowds he wanted. So Lawless rebooted it as a casual Italian space that he describes as more "an impulse than a special occasion restaurant." Acanto has now tripled its bar business. Lawless—who started out as a pot scrubber in his father's Galway restaurant—is now working out a lease for a new space, which he hinted may be on the river and fish-themed.



Bruce Finkelman/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Bruce Finkelman

Partner, Bite Café, Beauty Bar, Longman & Eagle, Thalia Hall, Dusek's, Punch House and The Promontory

Bruce Finkelman is one of those guys who makes all of us feel like we're under-achievers. He has his fingers in so many pots, he ran out of fingers long ago. In addition to his many eating and drinking venues, he's working with his partner Craig Golden on The National, a chef-driven market in Chicago's business district scheduled to open December, 2015. It all started with the Empty Bottle, his self-described "cat-ridden hole in the wall," one of only two Chicago venues to make the Rolling Stone list of nation's twenty best rock clubs. All his bars and restaurants follow his simple maxim: "Create a place where you would want to be, and there are sure to be some others who will like it as well."

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Stephanie Izard

Chef and Partner, Girl & the Goat and Little Goat

After Stephanie Izard won Bravo's Top Chef competition, she went on to score a hugely successful deal with Boka Restaurant Group to open the Girl & the Goat, a sleek, dimly lit West Loop spot that's been hot since Day One. Little Goat Diner followed, and in 2013, a James Beard Award. Her latest Chinese-inspired Duck Duck Goat is due in September. Man, this girl is BUSY, saying she owes it all to "my Olympic Champion Syndrome. Growing up doing sports and always wanting to win pushed me to work to be the best I can be in things I do."



Christopher Koetke/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

19

Christopher Koetke

Vice President, Kendall School and Host, Let's Dish, Live Well Network

When Christopher Koetke joined the Kendall School of Culinary Arts as a faculty member seventeen years ago, he didn't expect to teach forever. "But I fell in love with teaching," he remembers. "I love teaching our students, watching them turn their dreams into reality." This passion has helped make him one of the most revered chefs and food educators in

Chicago and internationally. In 2005, Koetke was at the forefront of the sustainability movement, leading Kendall's program in sustainability, which he calls a "megatrend" that continues to shape the food industry. "We're really proud of what we've done and humbled to know there's lots more to do." The restaurant industry is constantly changing, and with it Koetke's curriculum. "This is a special environment," he says, "that's totally committed to the absolute highest level of education."



Rich Labriola/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Rich Labriola

Labriola Café, Labriola and Stan's Donuts & Coffee

You know the name from the bread, right? Well, Rich Labriola is no longer into crusty carbs, saying "I left the bread business because I felt it had gotten much bigger than I had ever wanted." He's now a restaurateur, building on the proceeds from the sale of his bread business. There was Labriola Café in Oak Brook, and soon Labriola downtown—Italian-themed and headed by veteran chef John Caputo—on Grand near Michigan. "I've wanted to own an Italian restaurant from the time I was making pizza with my dad in his restaurant when I was ten years old." Now that he's solidly in the restaurant biz, there's no stopping him: in the works is a new location for Stan's Donuts & Coffee (the LA icon that Labriola brought to Wicker Park) and a new pizza concept coming to Oak Brook in the next month or so.

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Tony Magee

Founder, Lagunitas Brewing Company

Lagunitas Brewery is officially based in Petaluma, California. Since opening a huge brewing facility and taproom in Chicago in 2013, however, they've become a part of our city and all those of us who love a good beer. The whole operation started when Magee, whose previous job was selling printers, got a homebrew kit for Christmas. "I brewed my first beer in January, and the brewery was open by the following December," Magee remembers. "Something about brewing just clicked with me." Magee is from Chicago, and he insists that there was never a question about where the second outpost of the company would be located. Now, Lagunitas is one of the largest craft breweries in America—and it's getting even bigger: the Chicago brewery is set to double in size (and outpace the Petaluma operation). It's projected that Chicago's Lagunitas brewery will produce 1.2 million barrels annually.



Marc Malnati/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Marc Malnati

CEO, Lou Malnati's

At twenty-two, Marc Malnati took over his father's pizza empire. Since then, the younger Malnati has extended the family name to more than forty locations. His secret: team meetings where employees vent and expose their emotions about the way their jobs—and their lives—are going. "I take care of my team," Malnati says. "It seems counter-cultural to be talking about your feelings in a business meeting, but I can't imagine working any other way. Once they're good, then and only then will customers get the treatment they deserve." It may seem New Age-y, but it's tough to argue with Malnati's success.

23

Jim Slama

President, FamilyFarmed and Founder, Good Food Festival

"We launched the first sustainable, local food trade show in America in 2004," says Jim Slama. Now it's a three-day event with more than 5,000 attendees. As a result of these annual events, Whole Foods, Chipotle, Lettuce Entertain You, and others have developed new relationships with producers and consumers. "Our Good Food Financing and Innovation Conference," says Slama, "has helped farm and food businesses receive over \$11 million in debt and equity financing in the past three years. As a result, we launched the Good Food Business Accelerator, the first program of its type in America to support food and farm entrepreneurs by building a supply chain for sustainable local food." Slama is helping all of us eat better, and he's making it possible for farmers to make a better living.

24

Grant Achatz and Nick Kokonas

Chef and Restaurateur and Restaurateur, Alinea, Next, The Aviary

Reading through "Life, on the Line," a kind of culinary autobiography co-written by chef Grant Achatz and his BFF/fellow restaurateur Nick Kokonas, you see a chef who's uncomfortable with authority. During his first trip to Europe, he meets with disappointment at temples of gastronomy; he's too cool for cooking school; he walks out on Charlie Trotter. That rebellious impulse feeds this creative artist who has done as much as Trotter to make Chicago a culinary capital. Kokonas must be given much credit for recognizing Achatz's early work at Trio and providing the capital and business savvy that lead to their shared success. Kokonas also developed a game-changing online ticketing system that enables diners to put their money down and reserve a seat, just like at a theater... which Achatz's places usually are.



Chandra Ram/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Chandra Ram

Editor, Plate Magazine

A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Chandra Ram oversees the pages of Plate magazine, one of the smarter industry publications (more than two-thirds of subscribers are chefs), and growing in popularity (subscriptions are up more than sixty percent in the past six years). The reason for that growth is due, at least in part, to Ram's guidance. She tells us her goals are "to connect with the chefs and food people who revere food and drink; restaurants put their stories in Plate and on our website. I absolutely love the restaurant industry, and never get tired of telling the stories behind it." Awards are important, but to Ram, what means the most "is when a chef tells me that he or she loved a particular article or issue, and appreciates what we're doing."



Ken Miller and Greg O'Neill/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

Greg O'Neill and Ken Miller**Owners, Pastoral Artisan Cheese, Bread & Wine**

Greg O'Neill and Ken Miller are business and life partners who opened Pastoral in 2004, at a time when there were few neighborhood specialty cheese retailers. "We had a world class restaurant scene but under-developed gourmet retail," O'Neill says. The guys chose cheese because, as former corporate marketing professional O'Neill explains, "artisan cheese was experiencing a renaissance with consumers; there were more producers in America making amazing cheeses, and consumers told us that cheese was the most appealing and differentiating of our categories. That's why it's Pastoral Artisan CHEESE, Bread & Wine!" So where do they go from here? According to Miller, "we're preparing to open our largest project yet in the thriving Andersonville market late this summer...a hybrid retail and wine bistro space that's a bit larger but still intimate. We're taking the best of what we've learned over time."



Rodrick Markus/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

Rodrick Markus**Founder and President, Rare Tea Cellar Inc.**

Rodrick Markus traffics in hard-to-source teas and ingredients. A master tea blender, Markus specializes in rare teas—particularly pu-erh—but he also carries a vast range of spices, herbs and exotica like white truffles. His inventory and influence go far beyond the teacup. At many of Chicago's most respected restos, you're likely to see an offering from Rare Tea Cellar, his import and wholesale business. Markus has helped chefs develop menus and one-of-a-kind menu items, acting as go-to guy for their every whim ("I need Sicilian blood orange rinds... now!"). Many drinks and dishes wouldn't exist without his help. His passion lies in the difficult-to-obtain, and his efforts have enriched the options in Chicago's rich dining scene.



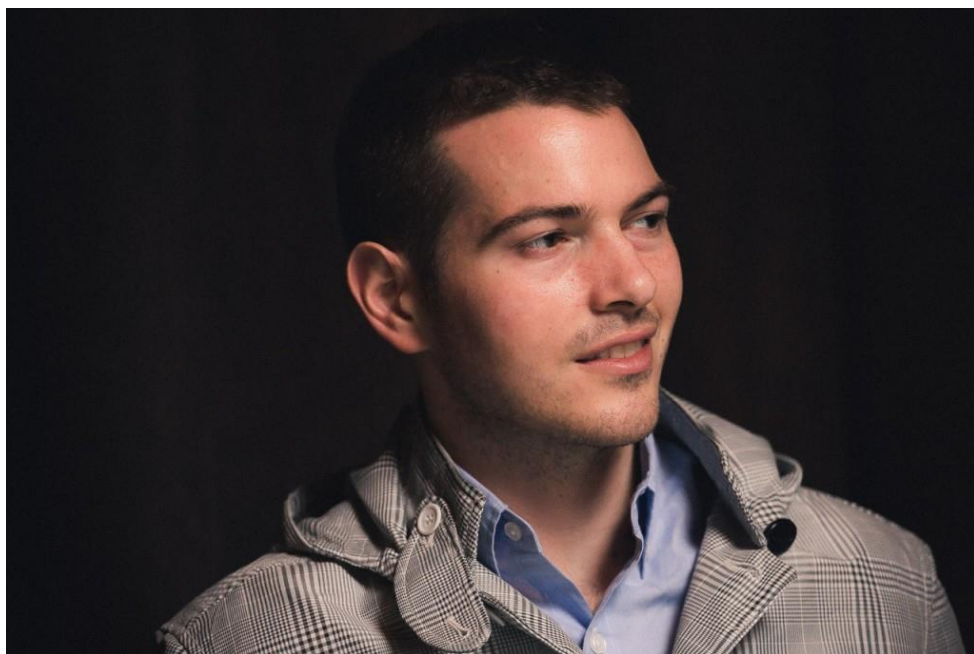
Adam Seger/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Adam Seger

Co-founder, Balsam Spirit

Adam Seger isn't just trending—he's heading up some major trends. Years before Chicago's cocktail craze, the "Charlie Trotter of Cocktails" pioneered a chef-driven approach to drinks at Nacional 27. He grew herbs and created aromatic bitters and infusions before anyone knew it was a trend. Now, Seger is shaking up a whole new industry: reinventing a 200-year-old vermouth recipe. His Balsam American Amaro, a botanical-infused spirit that helps create vermouth on-demand (just add wine!), sold out two hours after hitting the shelves. These days Seger is busy filling orders for Singapore, Calgary and Panama. Expect even greater things from this mixologist-turned entrepreneur.



Greg Laketek/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

Greg Laketek**Founder and President, West Loop Salumi**

Ten years ago, salumi was salami, shrink-wrapped on your grocery shelves. Now, excellent charcuterie plates are standard at practically every good restaurant, and Greg Laketek is one of the driving forces behind that trend. The owner of West Loop Salumi, the first USDA-certified salumeria in Illinois, Laketek was inspired by his journeys through Italy, where he realized he “missed having real salumi.” Open since 2013, West Loop Salumi is now in over 150 locations, with distribution expanding nationwide. They’re quadrupling in size with the upcoming opening of a large drying facility—but don’t worry, the West Loop store will remain open for business.



Leana Salamah/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

Leana Salamah**Senior Director, National Restaurant Association**

The National Restaurant Association Show brings to Chicago more than 65,000 people from around the world who know the industry better than anyone. “The ones I talk to,” explains Leana Salamah, “will try three-to-four restaurants every day they’re in town, even if it’s just for a quick drink or an appetizer. And they bring their Chicago experiences back home with them to the restaurants that they create and operate around the world. In that way, the Chicago restaurant scene influences the rest of the world’s restaurant scenes in a very unique and hands-on way.” Says Salamah, “having the NRA Show in their backyard gives local restaurants unparalleled access to all of the resources we provide without having to make significant travel plans or leave their operations.” And the benefits, according to Salamah, go way beyond the bottom line: “Our exhibitors over the years have donated more than one-million pounds of food—or 650,000 meals—to the Greater Chicago Food Depository.”



Michael Kornick/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Michael Kornick

Chef and Co-owner, mk and DMK Restaurants

Since forming DMK Restaurants in 2009, veteran chef Michael Kornick has been a major force in the Chicago restaurant scene. After opening DMK Burger Bar, DMK Burger and Fish, Fish Bar, Ada Street, County Barbeque and, last year, Henry's Swing Club, the mk chef still plans to add a steady stream of two restaurants per year, starting with a new DMK Burger Bar and Fish Bar at Navy Pier this summer. Kornick, a five-time James Beard nominee, was inducted into the Chicago Culinary Museum & Chefs Hall of Fame last year, and even got his own day (October 14, mark your calendars). With his County BBQ sauce now hitting Mariano's shops, the Kornick juggernaut shows no signs of slowing down.

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Tony Hu

Chef, Tony Gourmet Group

Tony Hu's army of Chinese restaurants took a few hits this past year. Lao 18, his fancy schmancy River North place, went dark after a few months. The FBI mysteriously raided three of his Chinatown restaurants (though no arrests were made). And in January, Hu sold Lao Beijing, a Northern-Chinese-style restaurant in Chinatown. But have no fear: this celebrity restaurateur recently opened his fifth, award-winning Lao Sze Chuan outpost on Michigan Avenue—a feat that took more than two years—along with a Vegas location in the Palms Casino Resort. Despite rumors, the “Mayor of Chinatown” doesn't seem like he'll be selling any more of his restaurants any time soon.



Janet Isabelli Wilkerson/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Janet Isabelli Wilkerson

Founder, Isabelli Media Relations

If there's anyone who has their finger on the pulse of the Chicago dining scene, it's Janet Isabelli Wilkerson. A hospitality PR vet of fifteen years, Wilkerson initially left agency life to consult independently while raising funds to start a restaurant with her husband. When the clients kept coming in, however, she thought the universe might be telling her something. She started Isabelli Media Relations and now represents huge players in Chicago dining such as the Illinois Restaurant Association, Chicago Gourmet, and Trump Tower. Wilkerson values her role as a storyteller for her clients. "It's a lot of responsibility to tell a client's story thoughtfully, carefully and creatively," she says. "The chance to promote these chefs and their stories translates to seminal moments that stay with you forever."

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Curtis Duffy

Chef and Owner, Grace Restaurant

Grace has won just about every restaurant award there is: three Michelin Stars, five AAA diamonds and trophies to fill a case. Those accolades are largely thanks to the extraordinary talent of chef Curtis Duffy. Duffy has an impressive culinary pedigree—he started in the kitchen at Charlie Trotter's, moved on to Trio and Alinea under Grant Achatz, and then got his own Michelin stars at Avenues. It's not often that when a chef leaves a restaurant that the place ceases to exist—but Avenues has never reopened post-Duffy. Grace has even inspired a documentary film, made in collaboration with Chicago Tribune writer Kevin Pang. And at a time when critics and pundits insist that white tablecloth places are dead (and when Michelin-starred restos like L20 do, indeed, die), Grace keeps breaking the rules and setting standards for fine dining in Chicago.



Paul Fehribach/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Paul Fehribach

Chef and Owner, Big Jones

In his “Big Jones Cookbook,” Paul Fehribach puts into writing the recipes he’s been using for years at his Big Jones restaurant. But Fehribach is more than just a chef: he’s a passionate and articulate crusader for locally sourced products. One of his primary goals is to move us beyond the massive factory farms that serve the global market. “Great progress was made in the twentieth century,” he tells us, “but one thing we really need to dial back is industrially processed foods. They simply aren’t good for us. It’s fine to want novelty and exotica, but one thing we know is that eating whole foods—whether grains, fruits, vegetables or, yes, animals—is good for you.” In an effort to “rethink this idea of food as a transnational industry,” Fehribach seeks inspiration in old-time recipes, most all from the American South, that leverage the goodness of the local farm—and also taste really good.

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Carrie Nahabedian

Chef and Owner, Naha and Brindille

Carrie Nahabedian took Chicago by storm with Naha, her first restaurant honoring her Mediterranean roots and garnering her a James Beard Award and four consecutive Michelin stars, along with induction into the Chicago Culinary Museum’s Hall of Fame. With Brindille, her French restaurant opened almost two years ago, she honors her roots in cooking. “My first love and passion is French cuisine,” she says, and “Brindille is refined Parisian cuisine, absolutely top-to-bottom French.” Nahabedian compares Brindille to a French jewel box, in that it’s sexy, intimate and upscale, with a much smaller menu and seating scale than Naha. This ability to open two very different restaurants and execute both concepts flawlessly is what makes Nahabedian—as well as her cousin and business partner Michael Nahabedian—stand out among Chicago’s many restaurateurs. Coming up: a Greek-inspired restaurant, opening date TBD.



Rob Levitt/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Rob and Allison Levitt

Owners, The Butcher & Larder and Partner, Local Foods

Since they closed Mado, their breakout Wicker Park head-to-tail restaurant, Rob and Allison Levitt have been putting local, custom-cut meats on the tables of Chicago home cooks from The Butcher and Larder, the Levitt's whole-animal butcher shop. This year, as they partner with and move to Local Foods in Bucktown, they'll introduce to a wider audience the excellent meats available from Midwestern farmers. "We opened Butcher and Larder because we wanted to offer high-quality meat for people to cook in their homes," Rob Levitt says, "and now we can extend our philosophy to the chef community, grocery stores and other commercial operations that want a whole animal program." Local Foods will open in late May or early June, and the Butcher & Larder's space will include a sixteen-seat café serving sandwiches, soups and charcuterie plates, as well as a USDA dry-curing program and private event space.



Ann Flood/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Ann Flood

Co-Founder and Editor, Edible Chicago

"Local food is not a fad," says Ann Flood. "It's taken root in our city and it's becoming more accessible and affordable." Her Edible Chicago magazine tells stories of people behind the food. "It's like they're meeting the farmer," she says, and she aims to inform, inspire and ultimately change the way readers think about their food choices. Through stories, recipes and events, she brings the mission of the magazine to life. This summer, look for new events featuring chefs and farmers, as well as Edible Chicago-sponsored cooking classes.

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Sarah Stegner and Vi Daley

Board of Directors Co-Chairs, Green City Market

No Chicago organization carries the spirit of local sourcing like Green City Market. This metropolitan farmers' market, established sixteen years ago, has become a seasonal focal point for Chicago chefs. "There are chefs who represent different ethnicities, backgrounds and styles, and they all shop at the market," says Sarah Stegner. She and Vi Daley co-chair the board of directors and work to further the market's mission of bringing farmers together to provide the best-tasting local food. For Stegner, Green City Market embodies the solidarity of the Chicago dining scene. "Chicago is a community of chefs that are supportive of each other, and it's growing," she says. "We all have the same purpose: to provide the best food possible."



Michael Griggs, Seth Zurer and Andre Pluess/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Seth Zurer, Michael Griggs and Andre Pluess

Founders, Baconfest

"We wanted to start Baconfest so we could go to Baconfest," says Seth Zurer, one of the founders—along with Michael Griggs and Andre Pluess—of the now-annual event. "We asked ourselves the question: what kind of bacon party would we want to go to? And that's the party we made: great restaurants, plentiful food, an emphasis on creativity and community, with humor and personality." This year's event features 170 restaurants, forty-five of them Baconfest first-timers. While we admire the founders for rallying Chicago restaurants, Chicago breweries, and most importantly Chicagoans, their most impressive achievement is their work with the Greater Chicago Food Depository. "The work of the GCFD," says Zurer, "is a totally appropriate complement, or maybe counterweight, to a festival that embraces unbridled indulgence."



Manny Hernandez/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Manny Hernandez

Co-founder and CEO, Tamale Spaceship

Starting out in 1991 as a dishwasher at Ed Debevic's, Manny Hernandez now operates one of the oldest running food trucks in Chicago. His Tamale Spaceship is a sci-fi-inspired traveling chow zone that doles out innovative tamales served by chefs in (somewhat frightening) Mexican wrestling masks. This eye-catching food truck broke the ice in Chicago for similar trucks back when the trend was just beginning. And after four years building up funds, Hernandez was able to launch the first Tamale Spaceship storefront in Wicker Park. While the Mexico City native is quick to shrug off any American Dream label, he will say this: "I think my role is to say, 'Yes, it can be done.' You can play with the big boys without having a big budget."



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Matt Matros

Founder and CEO, Protein Bar

Matt Matros' health-conscious, fast-casual restaurant Protein Bar has grown from one store in 2009 to what are now thirteen Chicago-area locations and seven more across the country. "We are setting the standard for Chicagoans seeking the food they need to live their lives," he says of Protein Bar's success. Currently Matros explores wellness trends across the globe to expand upon Chicago's healthy dining options. He also looks to bring something new to the table: "Chicago has room for a social enterprise restaurant. A restaurant that plows 100 percent of profits back into the community it serves." Should be interesting.

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Bill Kim

Chef and Owner, Belly Shack, bellyQ, Urbanbelly

"Accessible, flavorful and affordable food." That's how Bill Kim describes his restaurants, and the fine-dining-turned-casual chef couldn't have put it better. Chicagoans and visitors line up for his dumplings and fish cakes, and Kim works to be as accessible as his restaurants. His new blog, for example, takes readers behind the scenes of his kitchen. "It's about letting people into our environment," Kim says. He also wants to highlight his lesser-known staff, like the woman who has been making his dumplings every day, forty hours a week, for four years. Tack on Ramenfest 2015 and the relaunch of Belly sauces designed to "enable the home cook to replicate restaurant dishes," and Kim seems a chef of the people.



Sonat and Robert Birnecker/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Robert and Sonat Birnecker

Founders and Owners, Koval Distillery

Koval was Chicago's first distillery in over 100 years, making founders Robert and Sonat Birnecker the leading lights of Chicago's craft spirits scene. It took a while to get Koval off the ground: aside from the legal impediments, the Birneckers were committed to keeping the distillery fully organic, kosher and, to whatever extent possible, local. Now Koval produces a wider variety of spirits than any other distillery in Chicago. Unlike some, they actually mash and distill on-site. "From the

beginning, we've been grain to bottle," says Sonat proudly. The Birneckers have had a huge impact on distilling nationwide: through their consulting efforts, they've helped set up more than one-third of new generation craft distilleries in America.



Sonja Kassebaum/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Sonja Kassebaum

Co-founder and Co-owner, North Shore Distillery

North Shore Distillery leads Chicago's new wave of distilleries. In 2004, along with husband Derek, Sonja Kassebaum was one of the first craft distillers in Illinois; her efforts to reform the state's production and labeling laws are one of the reasons we find such amazing local spirits on local liquor store shelves. North Shore Distillery produces award-winning vodka, gin, absinthe and aquavit, stocked by every great bar in Chicago, and they annually release a limited-edition spirit that's always met with roars of praise from booze geeks. Kassebaum's talents extend to mixology: the distillery boasts a tiny boutique cocktail lounge, a must-visit on any trip to the northern suburbs.



Ray Daniels/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Ray Daniels

Founder and Director, Cicerone Certification Program

Ray Daniels has been suds-ing up Chicago's beer scene for decades, but it wasn't until recently that the beer scene finally caught up with the visionary. In the mid-nineties, Daniels wrote a book about beer; a year or so later, he was preparing to open a brewery, but the timing wasn't right, so he created the first mead and cider festival, way before cider took off. In 2008, just as the economy tanked, Daniels launched a beer sommelier certification program. He held on, and his Cicerone Certification Program has become the industry gold standard, certifying 50,000 people all over the country. The veteran home brewer's behind-the-scenes prowess—creating two twenty-year-old beer festivals, educating brewers at Siebel Institute of Technology, and drumming up a vibrant brewing community—has helped establish Chicago as a craft beer center.



Melissa Graham/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Melissa Graham

Founding Executive Director and Head Spear, Purple Asparagus

Some say that kids these days are too demanding and, up to a point, that's exactly the kind of kid Melissa Graham would like to cultivate. Through her Purple Asparagus, a nonprofit organization that educates everyone about eating food that's good for the body and the planet, Graham puts into action her belief that the more children "experience how joyful good food is, the more they will demand it from their parents, from their schools, and from food sellers." Graham and Purple Asparagus have touched the lives of tens of thousands of Chicago children, helping make them all more demanding...in the best way.

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Josh Deth

Owner, Revolution Brewing

Revolution's Josh Deth built his resume working at respected breweries like Goose Island and Golden Prairie Brewing. His own dream brewery had several false starts, but since Revolution opened the doors to its Milwaukee Avenue brewpub in 2010, it's been all onward and upward. Josh now also helms a brewery and tap room on Kedzie Avenue with more than a dozen beers. Plans are underway to expand this facility to meet growing demand. With a strong distribution system and an eye always on the quality of his operation, Deth remains in the vanguard of Chicago's craft beer revolution.



Mickey Hornick and Jo Kaucher/Photo: Joe Mazza/BraveLux

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Mickey Hornick and Jo Kaucher

Chef and Owners, The Chicago Diner

Ahhh...the smell of onions and grilled meat that fills the air at a diner. Well, you won't detect those scents at The Chicago Diner, "meat free since '83." A radical departure from traditional diners, The Chicago Diner has all the traditional diner trappings ...with a twist: fresh, local produce and an all veggie menu. Owners Hornick and Kaucher wanted to do something to benefit the greater good of the city in the most delectable way, so they merged diner food with vegetarian ingredients. Ding ding! The concept caught on and has been successful beyond anyone's wildest imaginings.

Carmen Rossi, Chris Bader and Kevin Killerman**Co-owners, Barn & Company, Heating and Cooling and Hubbard Inn**

If you've lived in Chicago—and eat and drink out regularly—the likelihood is high that you've been to one of the places owned by power troika of Rossi/Bader/Killerman. It's possible, however, that you've never heard their names before. They're the ultimate behind-the-scenes guys. Rossi is a Frankfort attorney with a taste for restaurants; he and his partners are all over the North Side. They're getting ready to dig in deeper with Pomp & Circumstance, a sixties throwback resto on Wells, with a farm-to-table approach—a concept very popular in the Eisenhower/Kennedy years, mostly on farms. Rossi and Killerman also own Kelsey's and Casey Moran's... and, unsurprisingly, they're planning a new place, this time on Randolph.