

Five incredible culinary experiences from 2023

 future3733.substack.com/p/five-incredible-culinary-experiences

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If anything, 2023 proved that the Chicago restaurant scene is on the post-pandemic mend.

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Yes, many spots closed (so say goodbye to Grand Lux Cafe, Signature Room, Metropolitan Brewing, Dusek's Tavern and Cooper's Hawk, among others). However, many promising spots opened, including UMMO, Warlord, Asador Bastian, Olio e Piu and Thattu.

And with all the action that happened last year, I was fortunate enough to be part of various incredible culinary moments that (mostly) took place in restaurants. Below are five of them:

—*Talk show*: In May 2023, Avondale restaurant eden, 2734 W. Roscoe Ave., hosted an amazing **gathering of Chicagoland chefs, nonprofit CEOs and other business leaders** to discuss building a thriving community that supports everyone.



eden restaurant. Photo by Andrew Davis

Chef Sebastian White (who heads The Evolved Network, which provides culinary and gardening programs to equip youths in systemically oppressed communities) and Prairie Grass Cafe Chef Sarah Stegner (part of The Evolved Network's advisory board) hosted the event, "Round Table II," which featured a panel of at least two dozen individuals.

The panelists included Green City Market CEO Mandy Moody, Chef Paul Kahan, EDIFYE Executive Director M. Pauly Jackson, Growing Home Inc. Executive Director Janelle St. John, chef/author Rick Bayless, eden Chef Devon Quinn, Grow Great Englewood's Bweza Itaagi, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology's Dr. Todd DuBose, and Batter and Berries Chef Ken Polk, among others.

Bayless stood out by saying, in part, "What I want to encourage everybody to do is to [envision] what it would be to not need to have this meeting—that [community-building] is built into our culture."

More about this meeting is at <https://future3733.substack.com/p/round-table-ii-brings-chefs-nonprofits>.

—*Waking me up*: I have to say that the Lake View spot **Wake 'n Bacon**, 420 W. Belmont Ave., surprised me—in a very good way.

The casual spot—ensconced in the first floor of an apartment building near Lake Shore Drive—with an even more casual name uses some unexpected items (Spam, anyone?) to create some pretty enticing dishes.



Wake 'n Bacon's Bombazo Pambazo. Photo by Katie McConell

The Wham Bam Thank You Spam (spiced, battered Spam fries served with housemade chipotle-mayo dip) was memorable for the right reasons. And I definitely plan on revisiting just to re-sample the Bombazo Pambazo—a Mexican-style sandwich filled with potatoes, chorizo, avocado, sour cream and pineapple-pickled red onions, served on bolillo bread and brushed with guajillo sauce.

Also, you can add CBD to almost any menu item or cocktail, enhancing your experience. After all, Wake 'n Bacon is at 420 W. Belmont Ave. (Get it?)

—*Step into The Parlour.* **The Parlour at the Albion Manor**, 1480 W. Webster Ave., isn't the easiest spot to access—although it's in Lincoln Park—but getting there is definitely worth it.



The Parlour bar lounge. Photo by BBPhoto.com

Located on the second floor (with the British pub The Albion on the first floor), The Parlour has some of the coolest cocktails (and mixologists) you're likely to encounter. For example, there's the ominous-sounding Love Like Blood, which contains bourbon, allspice dram, blood orange and lemon. Also, Chef James Menendez has crafted items that could double as conversation-starters, ranging from the cured beet (!) tartare that comes with a plate of delightful, fragile puffed rice chips to hiramasa (yellowtail amberjack) tartare.

Aside from the cool bar food and drinks, there's the atmosphere itself. There's plenty of lush furniture and, if you're lucky, musical and/or burlesque entertainment. You just go there and immerse yourself in the experience of it all.

—*Smart dining*: One of the top restaurant experiences I had last year had to be at the Italian restaurant **The Albert** (named after Albert Einstein, of course, as the spot is in The Hotel EMC2).

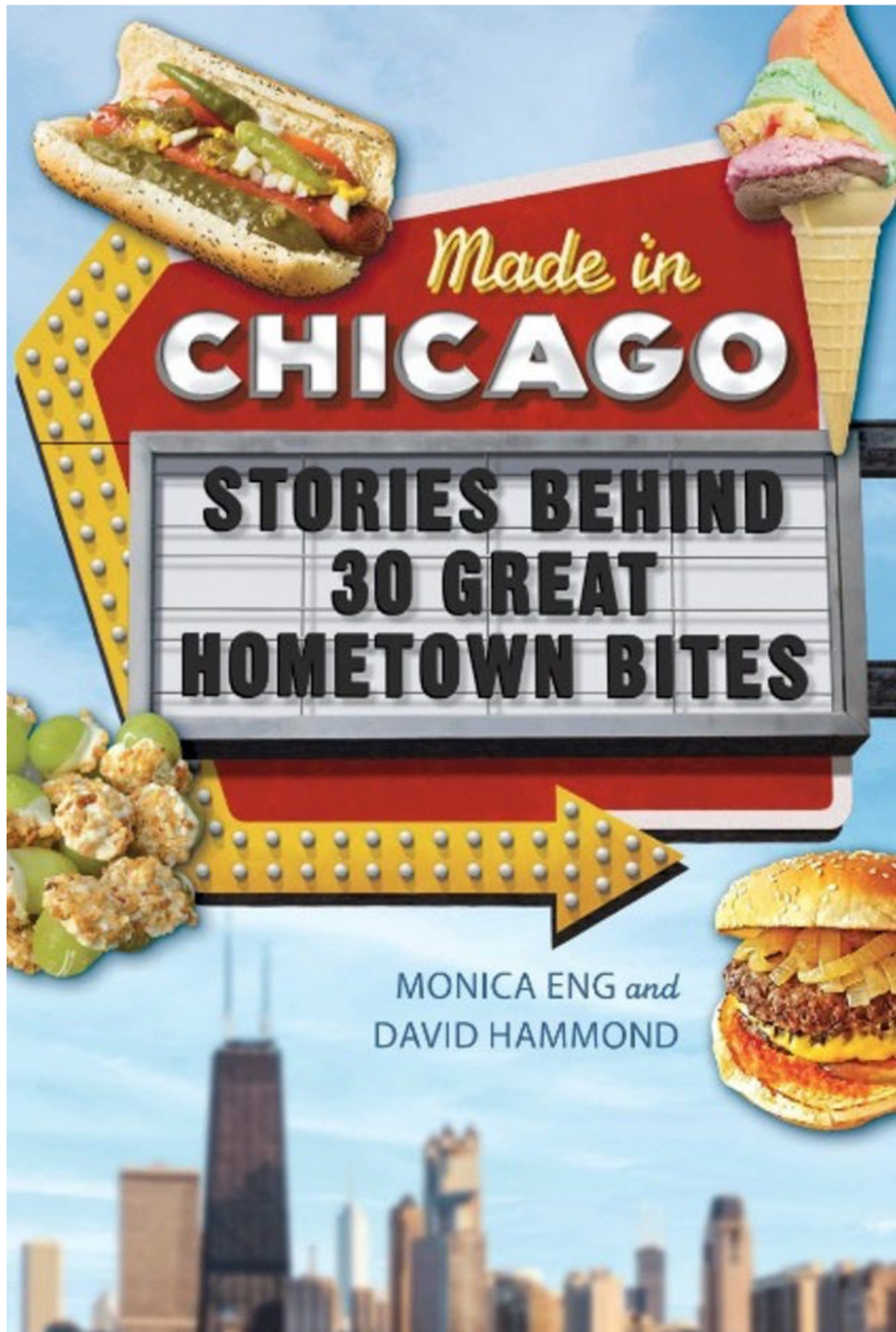
When I wrote my review, I said that Chef Steve Chiappetti's cuisine was "transformative." That opinion hasn't changed.



The Albert's ribeye. Photo by Andrew Davis

Every single dish my friend and I tasted was something that we found pleasing, if not addictive. For example, my dining companion has always been leery of risotto in restaurants—but the creamy dish at The Albert changed his mind. And the three-cheese ravioli with white truffle cream sauce (and topped by balsamic to cut the richness) was probably one of the top five dishes that I tried the entire year.

—*Book it*: I thought about putting another restaurant here, but an interview just nudged it out of contention. Talking with authors Monica Eng and David Hammond about their book **Made in Chicago: Stories Behind 30 Great Hometown Bites** (available on Amazon) helped change the way I view Chicago cuisine—in part because of the informative talk and in part because of the information the book itself provides.



MONICA ENG *and*
DAVID HAMMOND



Made in Chicago: Stories Behind 30 Great Hometown Bites. Photo courtesy of David Hammond

The book covers everything from akutagawa (hamburger meat with chopped onions and green peppers, bean sprouts and scrambled egg, served with a side of rice and gravy) to taffy grapes—and it also includes recipes for many of the dishes as well as restaurants where these snacks and meals can be found. I was so impressed that I purchased this book as a holiday gift—and I'm sure I wasn't the only one.

The full interview is at <https://future3733.substack.com/p/monica-eng-and-david-hammond-dish>.

Honorable mentions: I also had incredible experiences at **Tzuco**, **The Florentine**, **Marisol**, **UMMO** and **Tacombi**. Let's hope that 2024 proves to be just as rewarding as last year.



The Florentine's caprese salad. Photo by Andrew Davis

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