

SURPRISING CHICAGO

Who says you can't go home again? I grew up in the suburbs of the "windy city," but didn't feel the need to re-visit until I heard a stream of glowing reports from fellow San Diegans. The destination they described hardly sounded like the "City of the Big Shoulders" I remembered.

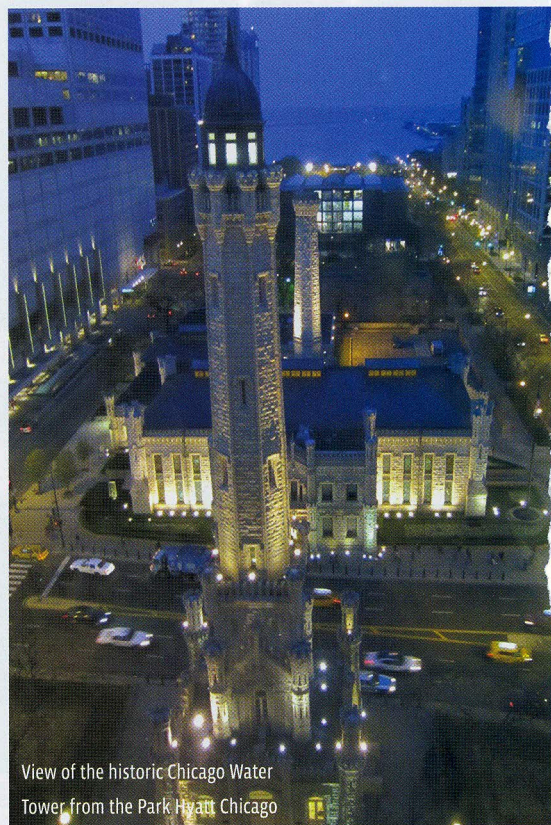
When I went to see for myself, I found a beautiful metropolis with flowers blooming along the streets, and litter-free sidewalks and gorgeous buildings lining every block. The Wrigley Building, Tribune Tower, Merchandise Mart, and other key landmarks were easy to identify, but I was agog at the avant garde architecture interspersed between these historic sites.

The list of the city's designers reads like a who's who of renowned architects. Daniel Burnham ushered in the era of soaring steel-framed skyscrapers. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the Robie House at the University of Chicago. Mies Van Der Rohe designed many of the buildings at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Frank Gehry designed the Pritzker Pavilion and the BP Bridge in Millennium Park. More recently, the Modern Wing addition to the Art Institute was designed by Renzo Piano.

The 92-story Trump Tower, completed in 2009, sits alongside the Chicago River and is best viewed on one of the popular narrated river cruises operated by the Chicago Architecture Foundation. CAF also offers "Chicago's Loop by 'L,'" which includes the history of the city's elevated trains, as well as buildings within the downtown area. The foundation's shop on Michigan Avenue is chockablock with books, clothing, puzzles, and home accessories for lovers of architecture. (www.architecture.org)

Of the super skyscrapers, the John Hancock Center has always been my favorite. When it was completed in 1970, it was the tallest building in the world outside New York City. Today, Chicago has three higher towers, but I still think the Hancock's 94th-floor observatory provides the best view of the city, lake, and beyond to four states.

When we arrived at the Hancock Center, I was glad we'd invested in a pair of Chicago City Passes.



View of the historic Chicago Water Tower from the Park Hyatt Chicago

Not only did they save us money on admission to the top attractions, but we were able to skip the ticket line and go straight to the high-speed elevators. We enjoyed the same easy entry to the Shedd Aquarium and Art Institute, where the lines were also very long. (www.citypass.com/chicago)

My husband Richard and I stayed at the well-located Park Hyatt Hotel, which is just steps from Michigan Avenue and the Hancock Center. From the padded window bench in our room, I looked south to Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue on "the Magnificent Mile," east to Navy Pier and Lake Michigan, and north to Macy's (which I nostalgically remember as Marshall Field's).



River cruises are one of the best ways to enjoy Chicago architecture

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAMS/HANSEN STOCK PHOTOS, GRI DESIGN & ANNA KNOTT

We enjoyed the Park Hyatt's boutique hotel ambience and superb service. Concierge Donald booked the rental car we used for a sortie to the suburbs, was great at giving directions, and recommended several good places to eat. Our favorite was Bar Toma, around the corner from the hotel, where Richard declared the gelato "the best in the world." (www.parkchicago.hyatt.com, www.bartomachicago.com)

Dinner in the Park Hyatt's NoMI restaurant was excellent. We also enjoyed lunch at the Park Grill in Millennium Park and at Erie Café overlooking the river. Hugo's Frog Bar & Fish House offers delicious Bookbinder's soup made with lake white fish and a sherry floater.

Tastebud Tours gave us a chance to sample some of the dishes for which Chicago is famous. These include deep dish pizza at Pizano's, Italian beef sandwiches at Halstead Street Deli, Chicago style hot dogs at Gold Coast dogs, and German cuisine at The Berghoff. Along the way, >>



Millennium Park

NOTEWORTHY DINING SPOTS IN CHICAGO:

The windy city is well known for being the home of deep-dish pizza and Italian beef sandwiches, but a couple of in-the-know foodies took the time to educate me on the current upscale dining scene.

"It's as if a promising new restaurant opens every day," Greg Lemkau told me. "If you just write about pizza and Chicago dogs, you're doing your readers a disservice."

Here's his shortlist of dining and drinking and foodie favorites:

Girl & The Goat — Stephanie Izard's new place (charcuterie using local ingredients).

The Publican — Paul Kahan's place (he also just opened Publican Quality Meats, where he serves up great sandwiches in a little store where one can purchase all sorts of limited Chicago-based foodie items).

Virtue Cider — Gregory Hall was the award-winning brew master at Goose Island Beer Company. Now he's making pure English-style ciders without any additives. Find tasting locations at www.virtuecider.com.

Goosefoot Restaurant — Just won best new BYOB for 2012 (contemporary American food; high-end relaxed dining).

Epic Burger — A chain in Chicago with great quick burgers and shakes.

Pleasant House Bakery — Real English pies; they only make about ten different items.

Grant Achatz's new restaurant: **Next** — A completely different dining experience every few months.

The Aviary — The bar that is

changing the way people think about high-end cocktails (also owned by Achatz).

Perennial Virant Restaurant — Modern American bistro dining from chef Paul Virant.

Longman & Eagle — Regional American fare.

GT Fish & Oyster — Seafood.

Hot Chocolate — Restaurant, dessert, pastries. Mindy Segal (best pastry chef of the year).

"I could go on and on. This list doesn't even include the smaller gems — and there are plenty of those in more obscure parts of the city," Lemkau continued, "including the Bayless restaurants: Frontera Grill, Topolobampo, and now XOCO (doing authentic Mexican soups and sandwiches with brewed-on-the-spot cacao bean hot chocolate)."

Chicago area residents Bill and Jane Hensge also gave me some hot-off-the-press news: The city's Doughnut Vault was recently voted best donut shop in America by Food & Wine Magazine.

That's what I love about Chicagoans. They appreciate innovative cuisine, support the slow food movement, and can still enjoy a delicious donut.



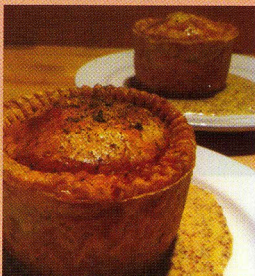
VIRTUE CIDER



GOOSEFOOT



GIRL & THE GOAT



PLEASANT HOUSE BAKERY

Georges Seurat's painting is a symbol of the Art Institute of Chicago



View of Lake Michigan from the observatory at John Hancock Center

In addition to unique foods, Chicago is also home to some of the world's great museums, and no visit to this city is complete without time spent at the legendary Art Institute.

As we approached the great bronze lions that flank the front steps, I had a flashback to arriving on a yellow school bus with my fellow fourth graders (at least one of whom had gotten sick en route to the city). That memory made me smile, but when we entered the French Impressionist exhibit and my eyes landed on Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, I found tears blurring my vision.

For me, that large and evocative painting is The Art Institute of Chicago — a place I visited dozens of times over many years with various members of my family. Those memories are precious and my reaction made me realize that I really *had* gone home again. ELIZABETH HANSEN

<< I learned that brownies were “invented” at the Palmer House Hotel (which I remember as the location of my senior prom). (www.tastebudtour.com)

Upcoming Chicago Events:

- The Grant Park Music Festival is the nation's only free, outdoor classical music series of its kind. Now through August 18 at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.
- Lollapalooza, a three-day live music and “local eats” extravaganza, will take place August 3-6 in Grant Park.
- Chicago Jazz Festival, August 30-September 2, includes free performances at various venues across the city including the Chicago Cultural Center, Millennium Park, and Grant Park.
- Fireworks displays from Navy Pier will light up the sky on Wednesdays at 9:30pm and Saturdays at 10:15pm throughout the summer.

