

SOME LIKE IT HOT!

We've found 50+ reasons why Chicago's food is better when it's fiery. Get ready to feel the burn!

BY LISA SHAMES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH CLAUNCH, KENDALL

KARMANIAN, CARLOS JAVIER ORTIZ, REBEKAH

RALEIGH, DAVE SLIVINSKI AND ANTHONY TAHIER

If variety is the spice of life, then what happens when you live in a city packed full of a variety of spices? Our verdict: Endless possibilities and some serious flavors. From chocolates with a surprising kick and sauces that have us seeing red to a chef who isn't afraid to tap into science to create a new flavor, the Windy City definitely knows how to turn up the heat. (Need proof? Check out the 10 dishes that thrilled our tastebuds... and made our eyes water.) The only question that remains: Can *you* stand the heat?



CHOCO ONIC: Katrina Markoff in the kitchen at Vosges.

COCOA GONE CRAZY

Vosges Haut-Chocolat founder Katrina Markoff loves to tell stories. And when her medium of choice is high-end chocolate paired with exotic global ingredients, we're all ears, er, mouths. Her Aztec truffle collection with ancho chilies, Ceylon cinnamon and Mexican vanilla is sure to invoke images of Montezuma and pyramids. Then there's the bacon-infused chocolate from her Groove collection, which came to Markoff through listening to the Blues, and her pink peppercorn- and lemon zest-laced white-chocolate "flaming" heart. They're all music to our, well, you know. 520 N. Michigan Ave., 312.644.9450; 951 W. Armitage Ave., 773.296.9866, www.vosgeschocolate.com.

PASSAGE TO INDIA *Chutney, cardamom and curry have us eating East at three hotspots*

If you want to get an idea of what **Marigold** (4832 N. Broadway Ave., 773.293.4653) is all about, take a close look at their “duck leg dum” starter, which takes a made-in house Indian garam masala spice rub—created from a family recipe, no less—and pairs it with a duck leg cooked in the French confit style. It’s this combination of traditional with the unexpected that makes Marigold special. And their made-daily chutneys (mint and tamarind; tomato; onion and date) are pretty cool, too. >> On paper, mixing together Latin and contemporary Indian cuisines sounds like a bad idea. But then we take one bite of **Vermilion’s** (10 W. Hubbard St., 312.527.4060) skirt steak that’s been marinated in yogurt and spices—think ginger, coriander, cumin—and cooked in a tandoor oven until it’s melt-in-your-mouth tender, and we remember why we shouldn’t make assumptions. (Also don’t miss the burger trio—mango cumin plantain, tandoori chipotle burger and madras curry beef served with mango-dusted fries, tamarind chutney and pico de gallo—on Vermilion’s recently introduced lunch menu.) >> The way Angela Lee saw it Randolph Street needed a modern Indian restaurant. And she was just the person to open one, being a partner in both Sushi Wabi and De Cero. Enter new-on-the-scene **Veerasway** (844 W. Randolph St., 312.491.0844), which

blends Indian spices and cooking techniques with American sensibilities in a contemporary space. The menu may be designed for sharing but with dishes like garlic-mashed-potato naan, seared scallops in coconut milk, and house-made lamb meatballs with apricots and almonds, we don’t think we’ll want to.



CURRY CLUB: Marigold



CALLING ALL MEATHEADS

If the pink, pig-head ticket dispenser (grab a number; you’ll need it) doesn’t tip you off to what **Paulina Market** (3501 N. Lincoln Ave., 773.248.6272) is all about, perhaps the glass case stuffed with their made-from-scratch sausages (curry brats, andouille and chorizo are among the dozens of options) or the hanging snack sticks (salami, honey pig tails) will. Vegetarians, you’ve been warned.

“There’s really a misconception when it comes to Cayenne pepper. When used in moderation in sauces and soups, it gives a great flavor and is not as crazy and spicy as people often think. The flavor is intense and really melts into the food.”

—Jason Paskewitz, co-owner of Jackson Park Bar and Grill, opening this spring.



The Midnight Mary at the Drawing Room.

SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

Think Bloody Marys are only suited for brunch? Don’t tell that to Charles Joly, general manager and chief mixologist at **The Drawing Room at Le Passage** (937 N. Rush St., 312.255.0022), who has transformed the heavy cocktail classic into a lighter, fresher drink that he insists is perfect for anytime of the day... or night. For The Drawing Room’s Midnight Mary—and for all of the hotspot’s creative drinks, in fact—Joly starts in the restaurant’s kitchen (“Great ingredients are going to come from the kitchen, not from opening a bottle,” he says), where he infuses the vodka with spices, including cilantro, pink and white peppercorns, along with vegetables such as red peppers, onions, celery. Next, Joly creates a tomato water—think freshly mashed tomatoes that are strained through cheesecloth overnight—that’s translucent but full of flavor. The tomato water is then muddled with lime juice and basil leaves, combined with the infused vodka and ice and poured through a sieve into a glass garnished with a mini sweet red pepper and pepper-stuffed olive. Mary mary quite contrary, indeed.



ZED451's sauces.

FROM A TO ZED

ZED451 (739 N. Clark St., 888.493.3451) corporate chef John Radcliff wants to get something straight: While there'll be plenty of beef, wild boar, duck, bison, fish and chicken on their all-you-can-eat menu, it won't just be a "big meat parade." Not that we would mind. But with more than 30 house-made sauces and dressings—think chimichurri, chipotle peanut butter, horseradish mustard—to mix and match with your meat (all designed by a guy who's put in time on the barbecue-competition circuit), we say, bring it on!

"Learning barbecue is a lot harder than I thought; I mean, you're competing with the self-appointed masters of the universe. The sauce can't be the star, but it needs to enhance what's there." —John Radcliff, corporate chef ZED451

SPICE BOY

Chef Steve Chiappetti of Viand (155 E. Ontario St., 312.255.8505) feels our pain. Well, at least he understands the struggles we go through while attempting to cook restaurant-quality food at home. To help us non-pros, Chiappetti's created his own line of spice blends and exotic salts that he says makes creating great dishes easy, and after giving them a test run, we have to agree. Craving chicken cacciatore? Add some of Chiappetti's Classic blend to chicken, canned tomatoes and black olives. Bring out the meaty flavor of a steak with his Steak House blend. And for his Southside BBQ mix—think spicy peppers, cumin, coriander, tomato powder, dried red wine vinegar—this Chicago boy taps into his roots. Says Chiappetti, "Fresh is great, but don't underestimate the power of dry spices."

MOLE MANIA!

Our favorite south-of-the-border sauces are looking up! When **Adobo Grill** (1610 N. Wells St., 312.266.7999; 2005 W. Division St., 773.252.9990) chef Freddy Sanchez wanted to upgrade his moles, he went straight to the source: Oaxaca. There he met a woman famous for the labor-intensive sauce and brought her to Chicago to teach him the way of the mole. Sanchez learned that no matter which of the restaurants' five moles he's making (from guac to manchamanteles), he'd better be patient—the mole negro can take up to eight hours to make. The secret ingredient, he says, is love. When **Salud Tequila Lounge** (1471 N. Milwaukee Ave., 773.235.5577) chef Jose Gonzalez wanted to kick things up a bit, he went to the source, too: his mother in Mexico. She gave him the inside scoop on mulato chiles—the smoky flavor is perfect for his new salsas—and annatto seeds, great for flavoring oil.

RIGHT ON 'QUE

The newest wave of barbecue joints is proving that smoke is the new chic.

FATTEN UP Purists may initially turn up their noses at **Fat Willy's Rib Shack's** (2416 W. Schubert Ave., 773.782.1800) newfangled ingredients (pigs raised in Denmark! European cheeses!), but once they bite into the smoky baby back ribs or super-tender brisket, they won't mind.

HOT AS HONEY Think **Honey 1 BBQ** (2241 N. Western Ave., 773.227.5130) isn't legit? Just take a look at their glassed-in smoker and the hickory next to it. Better yet, sample their Arkansas-style spareribs, hot links and rib tips to be sure.



Ribs at Smoque BBQ

BLOWING SMOQUE For the guys at the insanely popular **Smoque BBQ** (3800 N. Pulaski Rd., 773.545.7427), it's all about matching the right cut of meat with the right rub, wood smoke, sauce and cooking technique. Sound complicated? Yeah, but their 15-hour smoked brisket—with a two-layer spice rub and a light coating of their amazing house-made sauce—makes perfect sense to us.

LIQUID HEAT

Jimmy Bannos may be known for the New Orleans cuisine he dishes out at **Heaven on Seven** (www.heavenonseven.com), but it's the 3,000-plus bottles of hot sauces—bring him one he doesn't have, and you'll get a free lunch—that first catch your eye. His tip for applying heat? Add a little at a time, he says, so "your tongue doesn't fly out of your head."



WALL OF FIRE! Heaven on Seven



The Spice House

THE WEEKLY GRIND

Any seasoned cook—pun intended—knows the value of a well-placed spice or two. And in Chicago any seasoned cook, or professional chef for that matter, knows the value of Old Town's **The Spice House** (1512 N. Wells St., 312.274.0378), a shop that grinds and blends its spices (ranging from Chicago steak seasoning to Tahitian vanilla extract) by hand in small batches. Your nose will smell the difference even before you open the door.

POP ROCKS

We're glad **bluprint's** (222 Merchandise Mart Plaza, 312.410.9800) Sam Burman likes to play in the kitchen. If not, his very cool tarragon crumbs wouldn't exist. Burman blends tarragon, rice bran oil and maltodextrin—a modified tapioca—to create melt-in-your-mouth balls that pair perfectly with his Hawaiian yellowtail.



Tarragon crumbs at bluprint.

MULLING WINE *Bin 36's Brian Duncan has a varietal for every seasoning*

Brian Duncan loves wine—as wine director and partner of grape-centric **BIN 36** (339 N. Dearborn St., 312.755.9463) it goes with the territory. But Duncan loves spicy food, too. So how does he get these two adversaries to play nicely? Easy, he says, if you follow these rules. Pair Indian food with a Gewurztraminer or a ripe Syrah or Australian Shiraz. A fruity Riesling goes well with Asian cuisines. The sweet-and-sour flavors of Thai and Korean dishes work with Chenin Blanc. And definitely stay away from high-tannic wines—think Cabernet—which only exaggerate the heat. Group hug, anyone?



Bin 36 wine director Brian Duncan.



SUGAR & SPICE

Opposites really do attract, especially when you're talking about the sugar-meets-spice desserts that are popping up around town. Case in point: the mango-habanero sorbet made in house at **Cooking Fools** (1916 W. North Ave., 773.276.5565) will cool you off and heat you up at the same time. >> The name of new Lincoln Square eatery **Tallulah** (4539 N. Lincoln Ave., 773.942.7585) may sound sweet and innocent, but the restaurant's ancho chile-and-chocolate mousse with roasted banana bisque from ex-Meritage chef Troy Graves is anything but. >> By now everyone's heard about the painstakingly crafted seasonal cocktails at **The Violet Hour** (1520 N. Damen Ave., 773.252.1500), but we're just as smitten with the food. While the curry rice krispy square with cheddar-walnut icebox crackers and spiced nuts isn't officially a dessert, we think it's just a matter of semantics. >> And although the updated brownie dessert over at **Lockwood** (17 E. Monroe St., 312.917.3404) may have initially garnered all the buzz, we prefer the subtle heat of their Aztec hot chocolate served alongside crème brûlée with Madagascar vanilla. It's a killer combo.

HOT PLATES

Our top 10 spicy dishes aren't all fancy, but they've all got fire!

1. SALSAS AT FRONTERA GRILL We love Chicago native Rick Bayless's salsas (garlicky three-chile, roasted tomatillo). 445 N. Clark St., 312.661.1434.

2. DUCK CURRY AT TAC QUICK THAI KITCHEN Consider yourself lucky if you see this dish on the specials list. 3930 N. Sheridan Rd., 773.327.5253.



3. CHICKEN AT CRISP You will get messy eating Crisp's Korean-fried chicken, but it's worth it. 2940 N. Broadway St., 773.697.7610.

4. HOT DOG AT HOT DOUG'S A culinary school degree isn't required to make hot dogs, but it didn't hurt Doug Sohn. 3324 N. California Ave., 773.279.9550.

5. CHILI AT TWIN ANCHORS Don't miss this tavern's hearty chili. 1655 N. Sedgewick St., 312.266.1616.

6. FRESH WASABI AT COAST Think regular wasabi's hot? Try it fresh. 2045 N. Damen Ave., 773.235.5775.

7. PATATAS BRAVAS AT MERCAT A LA PLANXA Potatoes fried in garlic oil and finished with paprika aioli? Yes, please. 638 S. Michigan Ave., 312.765.0524.

8. SHISHITO PEPPERS AT SUSHISAMBA RIO There's always a hot one or two among the bunch. 504 N. Wells St., 312.595.2300.

9. BLACK SABBATH BURGER AT KUMA'S CORNER This burger with blackening spice and chili may cause head banging. 2900 W. Belmont Ave., 773.604.8769.

10. TOFU AT LAO SZE CHUAN The Ma Po tofu isn't for the meek. 2172 S. Archer Ave., 312.326.5040.



MARKET DAYS

Any Windy City Indian-food lover worth their ghee (clarified butter) or paneer (fresh cheese) has made at least one pilgrimage to **Patel Brothers** (2610 W. Devon Ave., 773.262.7777), the family-owned grocery store that's spawned an Indian-food empire. Offering an ever-expanding selection of spices, chutneys, hot sauces and prepared foods, Patel Brothers now has 35 stores across the country, but this is the original.

THE NEW HOTSPOT!

Normally fusion restaurants don't get us all hot and bothered. But along comes the multi-room, pan-Asian restaurant **Thalia Spice** (833 W. Chicago Ave., 312.226.6020) and its menu of spot-on renditions of Thai, Malaysian, Indian, Vietnamese and Japanese dishes. Look who's feeling the heat—and loving it—now!





WALK THE LINE: Nacional 27's Randy Zweiban.

MUY CALIENTE! *Nacional 27 chef Randy Zweiban is on a spice quest*

With 27 different Latin cuisines influencing his menu at Nacional 27 (325 W. Huron St., 312.664.2727), executive chef and partner Randy Zweiban is no stranger to exotic spices. (On his current menu, you'll find everything from Tasmanian salmon ceviche to Cubano pork and Chimichurri-crusted sirloin.) But that doesn't mean he's done looking. To keep his 10-year-old restaurant *nuevo*, he's always on the hunt for

more. "It's always fun to look at new things and push the envelope further," Zweiban says. The chef's most recent finds include a smoked sea salt—a nice way to add flavor to fish without the smoking process, he says—black cumin from the Middle East and a vanilla sea salt that's great for both sweet and savory dishes. His spice secret: Lightly toast them in a dry pan to intensify their flavor. Do try this at home.

"We're not doing crazy kitchen science, but we do like to play around from time to time."

—Chef de cuisine **Sam Burman** at blueprint on the restaurant's innovative spices