



A MATTER OF TASTE

The 50 finest things happening in
Chicago's food scene right now.

By Lisa Shames

With Michael Gebert and Liz Grossman

Elske's whole-roasted
maitake mushrooms
topped with a pear cream
and shaved cauliflower

PHOTO BY ANTHONY TAHLER



1. Bad Hunter's butter dumplings
2. El Che Bar's grilled sweetbreads with pureed cauliflower
3. Elske's charming Scandinavian-inspired interior
4. Skate cheek roulade with white asparagus, grapefruit and licorice tuiles from Entente

10 MOST EXCITING NEW RESTAURANTS

1 BAD HUNTER

While vegetables are all the rage, no other place in Chicago comes close to celebrating the delicious possibilities the green kingdom offers as this West Loop restaurant. Inside the light-and plant-filled space, chef Dan Snowden uses his experience at Nico Osteria and The Publican to create nonmeat dishes that even the most devout carnivore would approve, including a 'Bolognese' pasta dish made with root vegetables. There's a smattering of terrific meat, chicken and fish dishes should the desire present itself, although we've never felt the need to go there. **INSIDER'S TIP** Beverage Director Michael McAvena is one of the city's natural wine pioneers. Let your server know to take advantage of his expertise. 802 W. Randolph St., badhunter.com

2 EL CHE BAR

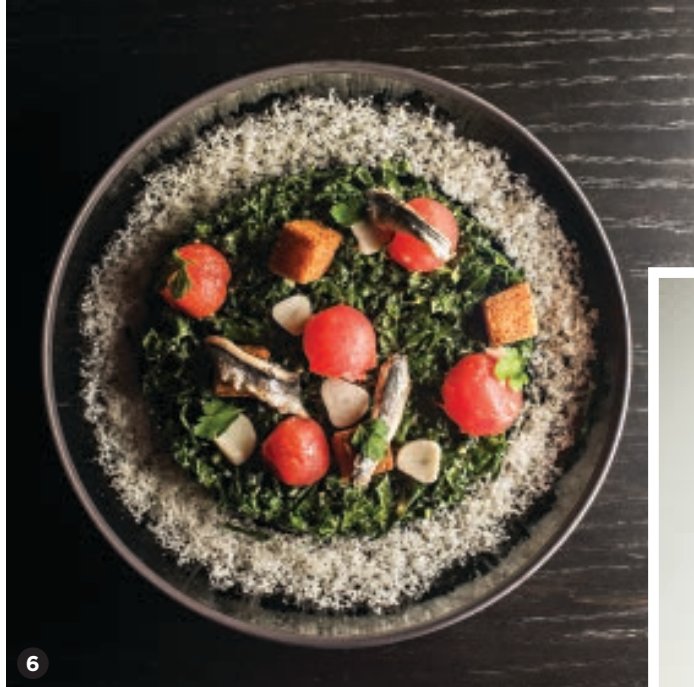
When John Manion went looking for someone to create his napkin drawing of the wood-burning hearth of his dreams, he knew just the person to call: a motorcycle builder. "I went to a bunch of steel guys," he says, "but no one was as into it as I wanted them to be." That passion and clear vision is all over Manion's second restaurant, which, like his first, heads to South America for inspiration. That hearth does amazing things to oysters, spiced quail and sweetbreads, but Manion's gnocchi with a romesco is terrific too. In other words: He's on fire. **INSIDER'S TIP** Book the chef's counter, and you'll get a 10-course tasting menu and an up-close view of all the fiery action. 845 W. Washington Blvd., elchebarchicago.com

3 ELSKE

There's a lot to love about this modern American restaurant beyond its name, which means love in Danish. The synergy of husband-and-wife chefs David and Anna Posey—he handles the savory and she the sweet—can be seen in the harmony of the West Loop spot's Scandinavian-inspired interior design and on its beautiful, constantly changing plates, which might include soft scrambled eggs with confit chicken thighs and kaffir-lime custard with sunchokes. A plant-filled outdoor courtyard with a fireplace and inviting benches adds to its charm. Ain't love grand? **INSIDER'S TIP** In addition to its a la carte offerings, Elske offers a perfectly portioned eight-course tasting menu. 1350 W. Randolph St., elskerestaurant.com

4 ENTENTE

You might assume its limited menu makes ordering easy at this casual Lakeview spot from restaurant vet Ty Fujimura (Arami). Instead, the 11 or so savory items from chef Brian Fisher's (Schwa) changing menu—perhaps a cool riff on a wedge salad beautifully plated in a circular pattern, housemade fettuccine with maitake, and lobster in green curry with fermented coconut—are all must-orders. The three dreamy desserts from pastry chef Mari Katsumura (Acadia, Grace) make it even tougher. Our suggestion? Come hungry and bring friends. **INSIDER'S TIP** Entente keeps the creativity going with its mocktails, which feature ingredients such as English pea, mint and cocoa nib. 3056 N. Lincoln Ave., ententechicago.com



5. Logan Square's intimate Giant 6. Kale Caesar salad with white anchovies and brioche croutons at GT Prime 7. Honey's rotisserie chicken entree with ratatouille



5 GIANT

Despite what its name might lead you to believe, Logan Square restaurant Giant is anything but. What this 44-seat spot lacks in size, it more than makes up for in charm and wonderfully flavorful food from chefs Jason Vincent and Ben Lustbader. Their time together at beloved Nightwood is all over this unpretentious spot and its menu, which ranges from an uni shooter (deep-fried goodness at its best) and sweet-and-sour eggplant to Sortallini, the duo's playful twist on tortellini with guanciale, pine nuts and a light tomato broth.

INSIDER'S TIP It's not easy creating a wine list that can nimbly go from Chinese spices to barbecue ribs, but the one here from Avec alum Josh Perlman does just that. 3209 W. Armitage Ave., giantrestaurant.com

6 GT PRIME

Given his stellar resume, including at Charlie Trotter's, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that Italian-born chef Giuseppe Tentori is, as he puts it, "a huge meat-and-potatoes kind of guy." But it makes total sense once you eat at his chic River North steakhouse, which cleverly features perfectly cooked meaty offerings in 4- and 8-ounce portions. That leaves plenty of room for his noncarnivore dishes, including our new favorite version of kale, here in a twist on a Caesar salad with brioche croutons. **INSIDER'S TIP** Book the second-floor private dining room, and you'll not only get a great view of the open kitchen below but of the beautiful restaurant itself, designed by Karen Herold of Studio K. 707 N. Wells St., gtprimerestaurant.com

7 HONEY'S

Visually, this West Loop restaurant, set inside a former machine shop, exudes a laid-back, come-as-you-are vibe. On the other hand, though, tables are adorned with white tablecloths, the housemade bread is served warm and service is more akin to what you find in a fine-dining restaurant. Then there's the Mediterranean-leaning food from chef Charles Welch (Sepia), which deliciously wanders from spit-roasted cauliflower and a grilled romaine Caesar to seafood tagliatelle. Multiple personalities never tasted so good. **INSIDER'S TIP** The Hive, located on the second floor and accessible via a staircase in the Honey's vestibule, is one of Chicago's hippest new intimate lounges. 1111 W. Lake St., honeyschicago.com

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY TAHIER



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8. Leña Brava's shrimp aguachile with a sungold tomato broth
9. Squab with pineapple leaves from the innovative Smyth
10. A piece from local artist Adam Siegel in Roister's dining room

8 LEÑA BRAVA

If anyone knows a thing or two about cooking with live fire, it's Rick Bayless, who's been doing just that for years at Frontera Grill, Topolobampo and Xoco. At his newest spot, husband-and-wife chefs Fred and Lisa Despres make good use of a wood-fired hearth turning out dishes such as grilled striped bass and octopus "carnitas." Beautiful ceviches and seafood cocktails are must-orders, too, at this lively ode to the cuisine of Baja California. The fiesta vibe is accented with some terrific cocktails, Mexican wines and one of the city's best selection of mezcals.

INSIDER'S TIP Forgot to make a reservation? No problema. Head next door to Bayless' Cruz Blanca and cool your heels with one of the brewed-on-site beers. 900 W. Randolph St., rickbayless.com

9 ROISTER

Think the team behind fine-dining restaurant Alinea can't do casual? This West Loop spot, with its lively vibe, laid-back service and tasty food, says otherwise. The bustling open kitchen is your first clue they're on a different path. The boozy amuse-bouches and T-shirt-clad servers are others. But perhaps it's the food of chef Andrew Brochu that does the most to prove the point, with dishes that range from aged cheddar rillettes and Yukon fries to A5 Japanese wagyu. Brochu's whole chicken done three delicious ways is the stuff of poultry dreams. **INSIDER'S TIP** Snagging a dinner reservation is tough, but not so at lunch when you have the added bonus of ordering the stellar fried chicken sandwich. 951 W. Fulton Market, roisterrestaurant.com

10 SMYTH

It takes guts to end an eight-course meal with a bowl of dried vegetables. But this tasting-menu restaurant isn't afraid to nudge diners out of their comfort zones. The POV of husband-and-wife chefs John Shields and Karen Urie Shields—who met working at Charlie Trotter's—permeates the beautiful, spacious West Loop spot. But as pretty as the room is, your attention will quickly turn to the open kitchen and the stunning food coming out of it, which might include Dungeness crab and foie gras with a Japanese-style custard, and a savory brioche doughnut.

INSIDER'S TIP The restaurant's superseasonal focus gets help from a local farm, which grows a variety of produce exclusively for the restaurant. 177 N. Ada St., smythandtheloyalist.com



5 | CHEFS TO WATCH

1 DIANA DÁVILA

Logan Square's Mi Tocaya Antojeria isn't kidding about the "Mi" (me)—chef Dávila gives recipes from her Mexican family a refined spin in her small Mexican cafe. Proof can be found in her uncle's recipe for tender beef tongue in a peanut butter sauce or mama's lamb albondigas. *2800 W. Logan Blvd., mitocaya.com*

2 JEFF LUTZOW

Ever try the The Publican's pizza? Odds are no, since Lutzow only made it for staff meals back when he worked there. Fortunately, now the rest of us have access to his seasonal artisan pies, which are wonderfully crispy and chewy in all the right places, at Pizzeria Bebu. Can't decide between the carbonara with housemade pancetta or the funghi? Here, you can order them in half-and-half versions. Genius. *1521 N. Fremont St., bebu.pizza*

3 MICHAEL SIMMONS

A Marie-Jeanne is both a size

of wine bottle and a sweet old aunt who whips up deliciously comfy things in the kitchen. Both fit Simmons' informal Café Marie-Jeanne, where a smoked trout omelet makes a simple, chic dinner. *1001 N. California Ave., cafe-marie-jeanne.com*

4 MARISSA JANZ


At Lincoln Park's Willow Room, a charming rehabbed 135-year-old tavern, this Nico Osteria vet makes sunny food with global touches, ranging from Italy-meets-South tagliatelle with sausage and turnip greens to roasted cauliflower with *zhug*,

an addictive Middle Eastern hot sauce. *1800 N. Halsted St., willowroomchicago.com*

5 AJ WALKER

While Publican Anker may take inspiration from its older, beloved sibling, The Publican, with a similar earthy and beer-friendly focus, chef Walker has also established his own identity at this hip Wicker Park spot with dishes such as green chili fish stew with chewy fregola. And like at The Publican, you'll find a perfectly roasted chicken too. Family values, indeed. *1576 N. Milwaukee Ave., publicananker.com*

DIANA DÁVILA PHOTO BY ANDREA BAUER; JEFF LUTZOW PHOTO BY MARCIN CYMMER; MICHAEL SIMMONS PHOTO BY MICHAEL GEBERT; MARISSA JANZ PHOTO COURTESY OF B4FLIGHT



What initially was a design problem—an awkward placement of the ventilation system—turned into these intimate seating areas. In the columns in between, storage space was created for the servers. "I believe whenever you have a challenge," says Bowers, "it's our job to make the item we don't like our best friend."

"The pattern of the glass divider at the chef's window is our modern interpretation of ironwork found on gates and railings in old Southern homes," says Bowers. "It gives the kitchen a layer of detail and refinement."

The cognac color of the counter stools, as well as other hues in the space, are indicative of ones that were fashionable during the pre-Civil War period, says Bowers. The marble tiles underneath are purposely arranged in an uneven pattern to mimic the look of oyster shells.

Owner Charlie McKenna was adamant about having oysters in the restaurant as a nod to the Southern tradition of keeping oyster shells in a barrel, a symbol of good luck. After finding inspiration in a gold oyster belt buckle, blocHaus custom-made this beautiful installation.

1 | DESIGN MOMENT

When it came to designing Bucktown's Dixie, taking inspiration only from Southern homes would have been, says Nick Bowers of Chicago design firm blocHaus, "too obvious." Looking to add more depth to the modern Southern restaurant's interior, they combined touches from historic plantations and antebellum women's fashions with a midcentury-modern interpretation. The end result? Anything but obvious. 1952 N. Damen Ave., dixiechicago.com

LOUNGE ACTS

**OTTO MEZZO**

The first thing you notice inside Rockit Ranch's new late-night lounge is a Fellini movie flickering on the ceiling. From there, your eyes move to the bar, where Brandon Phillips' jewel-toned cocktails, inspired by post-World War II Italy, include a Negroni, biscotti sour and the deep-purple Chiampan—sparkling cabernet, vermouth, cherry liqueur, saba and cherry bark vanilla bitters, which pair perfectly with Kevin Hickey-approved antipasti such as salumi, truffle fonduta and burrata-stuffed fried olives. 311 W. Chicago Ave., ottomezzobar.com

**UP & UP**

The 13th floor is something you might avoid in a hotel, but when the doors open to floor-to-ceiling views from Wicker Park's The Robey, you're going to want to check in for a while. Low couches are conducive to cozy conversation while you sip mezcal with lime cordial and chipotle Tabasco or Japanese whiskey on the rocks. Or take it outside to the wraparound terrace and (if you're lucky) inside the semiprivate cupola of the art deco spire. 1600 N. Milwaukee Ave., therobey.com

**THE LADIES' ROOM**

Abe Conlon and Adrienne Lo transported us to Macau with Fat Rice, but their tiny crimson-hued lounge adjacent to the Logan Square restaurant goes deeper into the underbelly of Chinese gambling dens from the 1920s.

Once you find the curtained entryway and score one of the 20 seats in this reservation-only spot, you'll sip bourbon and mint tea for two, or plum brandy and shrub cocktails, surrounded by vintage Asian posters and the sounds of hip-hop. 2957 W. Diversey Ave., eatfatrice.com



4 | ROOM SERVICE DELIGHTS

Eating with your eyes doesn't just apply to food, but to the plates on which it's served, the light fixtures, cutlery and all those cool details that make a good dining experience great. Here are a few of our favorites.

LIGHT FIXTURES, APOGEE

Chicago design firm blocHaus found inspiration in pre-Chicago fire streetlights for these stunning chandeliers at this River North rooftop lounge. apogeechicago.com



PLATES, BOKA

Some diligent Pinterest hunting rewarded Boka chef Lee Wolen with the plates and bowls of his dreams from Jane Herold in Palisades, N.Y. bokachicago.com



GLASSWARE, STEADFAST

Beverage Director Benjamin Schiller does plenty of research when it comes to his creative cocktails—and the cool vintage glasses he pours them into. steadfastchicago.com

STEAK KNIVES, SWIFT & SONS

After some rigorous testing—and plenty of steak eating in the process—by the team at Swift & Sons, these beautiful Wusthofs made the, um, cut. swiftandsonschicago.com



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While you might think a Loop cocktail lounge filled with law books has “work event” written all over it, the spacious second-floor lobby bar in the Kimpton Gray Hotel, a stunning renovated historic building, offers a lot more than something on the rocks for the suits. Think martini flights, caviar carts and fun bar bites like chicken skin chips and PB&J foie gras served amid comfy tufted leather couches, midcentury-modern chairs and handsome dark-wood floors. 39 S. LaSalle, vol39.com

5 | SUGAR RUSHES

DUCK DUCK GOAT

Pastry chef Nate Meads says his blueberry rhubarb ice “takes the fire out of your mouth after a spicy dish or two,” at this Chinese-inspired restaurant from Stephanie Izard. Thank the flavors and textures from the soothing rhubarb ice to the low heat of the blueberry and Bullet-chili sorbet. 857 W. Fulton Market, duckduckgoatchicago.com

EDEN

Stefano Tulipano, pastry chef of this West Loop restaurant, adds a refreshing savory note—a signature of his unique desserts—to his coconut sorbet by adding cucumber, which he compresses together with honey and salt. “It’s something a bit salty-sweet to balance the other flavors,” says the Italian-born chef. 1748 W. Lake St., edeninchicago.com

LULA CAFE

At this farm-to-table pioneer, pastry chef Amanda Shepard evokes hints of Mother Nature in her pistachio filo dessert. “There’s honeysuckle granita for a floral flavor, pistachio cream for nuts and dairy, honey for bees, and crispy filo dough, which is like the crunch of a walk in the woods,” she says. 2537 N. Kedzie Blvd., lulacafe.com

NAHA

This River North restaurant’s Armenian roots (chef-partner Carrie Nahabedian’s parents were born there) come out in *kazandibi*, an Ottoman-style milk custard, which pastry chef Craig Harzewski pairs with pomegranate sorbet, pistachios, preserved apricots and mastic, a tree resin from that region. 500 N. Clark St., naha-chicago.com

ORIOLE

“To put on a chocolate dessert after a dozen courses, it has to be really light,” says Genie Kwon, pastry chef and partner at Oriole. Her gianduia chocolate gelato dessert with mascarpone, preserved cherries and sakura blossoms definitely does the trick. “It has a lot of texture contrasts. Plus, I couldn’t resist a nature scene,” she says of its beautiful plating. 661 W. Walnut St., oriolechicago.com

Eden pastry chef Stefano Tulipano’s coconut sorbet adds in savory notes via cilantro sponge cake, cucumber granita and a sprinkling of dill.





5 | ENDURING FAVORITES

ENDIVE SALAD, BLACKBIRD Chef Paul Kahan describes it as "just a modern interpretation of a Lyonnaise salad," but its popularity has earned it a firm spot on the restaurant's constantly changing menu since it opened almost 20 years ago. As for the salad's beautiful—and tasty—potato centerpiece. "Blackbird's modern architecture called out for it," he says. 619 W. Randolph St., blackbirdrestaurant.com

2 PROSCIUTTO TOAST, MONTEVERDE It's amazing what you can do with leftovers. Or that's the case with

chef Sarah Grueneberg, who came up with the brilliant idea of mixing prosciutto scraps with butter. That glorious spread goes on rye toast and is topped with shaved radishes, dill and lemon marmalade. Its many fans know to simply ask for a PBT—and now you do too. 1020 W. Madison St., monteverdechicago.com

3 MEATBALL, CAFE SPIAGGIA When chef Tony Mantuano opened Spiaggia, he resisted putting a meatball on the modern Italian restaurant's menu. But he relented at its more casual younger sibling, where the delicious, tender orb is inspired by the ones Mantuano's Calabrian grandmother used to make. 980 N. Michigan Ave., spiaggiarestaurant.com

4 CHARCUTERIE, RIVER ROAST Chef John Hogan has been honing his charcuterie

skills since 1983 when he first got into the classic culinary technique as a way to utilize neglected cuts of meat. At River Roast, his years of training come together gloriously on his charcuterie board with head-cheese pate, pork and giardiniera terrine, duck and cherry terrine, and plenty of other meaty goodness. 315 N. LaSalle, riverroastchicago.com

5 SAFFRON SPAGHETTI, GREENRIVER The housemade pasta's yellow color comes from the saffron in the dough, while the orange hue of the creamy sauce is via sea urchin folded in. Add in Manila clams and a lob of urchin, and this dish from chef Aaron Lirette is not only delicious but transports you to Italy's Amalfi Coast. Grazie, Aaron. 259 E. Erie St., 18th Floor, greenriverchi.com

Thompson first added poke to his popular ramen restaurant's menu last summer as a way to offer a lighter option. But, he says, "it's become one of our popular dishes even in winter." Napa and red cabbage add depth. "It's like a salad but still filling enough to count as an entree," he says.

"Poke refers to the way the fish is cut," says Thompson. At Furious Spoon, Japanese tuna is cubed and then marinated in sesame oil and ponzu sauce for an hour. "People are expanding what the definition of poke is," he says, "and we're seeing ones now that aren't just made with fish."

"What makes for great poke is a balance of flavors," says Thompson. At Furious Spoon (Thompson is also a partner with chef Rodelio Aglibot in quick-serve FireFin Poké Shop), he starts with a Japanese short-grain rice on the bottom. Roasted garlic adds a bit of punch.

1 | FISH TALE

It got its start in Hawaii, but now poke, a raw fish salad of sorts, is all over Chicago—and we couldn't be happier. Furious Spoon's Shin Thompson gives us the intel on what makes his loaded ahi tuna poke bowl so good. *Multiple locations, furiousramen.com*

L.A. import Katana brings Japanese cuisine to River North this summer.

6 | RESTAURANTS ON OUR RADAR

BARRIO This summer, expect playful twists on Latin American street food from *Top Chef* alum Katsuji Tanabe at this lively River North spot. *65 W. Kinzie St.*

BLVD Chef Ross Mendoza (Pump Room) heads up this modern American restaurant, inspired by Hollywood's bygone glamorous age, opening this summer. *817 W. Lake St.*

COLETTA Beef from around the world will be the focus of this modern Italian-leaning

steakhouse from Gibsons Restaurant Group and chef John Coletta (Quartino) when it opens this fall in River Point. *444 W. Lake St.*

KATANA This glitzy Japanese restaurant from L.A. heads to the former BIN 36 space, bringing with it sushi, sashimi, premium sake and lots of skewered goodness when it opens this summer. *339 N. Dearborn St.*

PACIFIC STANDARD TIME Publican chef Cosmo Goss and Nico Osteria's Erling Wu-Bower join forces at this West Coast-leaning restaurant in the former Tavernita space, opening this fall. *151 W. Erie St.*

STEAK 48 Mastro founders go back to their meaty roots with the summer opening of this glam River North spot. *615 N. Wabash Ave.*

NANDINI KHAUND, CINDY'S

At the top of a tall tower overlooking the city—namely, Cindy's on the 13th floor of the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, with its billion-dollar views of the lakefront—Spirit Guide Nandini Khaund mixes potions with rare and curious ingredients, from tea, which she says gives cocktails a sense of terroir, like wine, to activated charcoal for the spooky black color it gives her signature Reanimator cocktail. 12 S. Michigan Ave., cindysrooftop.com



MIXOLOGISTS MAKING THEIR MARK

**JON MCDANIEL, ACANTO**

While Jon McDaniel is a sommelier first, his cocktail list at Italian restaurant Acanto never fails to welcome you from the moment you walk in by tapping into the familiar. But that doesn't mean boring. Exhibit A: his Hard to Forget cocktail, which combines Buffalo Trace bourbon and the Sicilian digestive Averna with the smoke of cherry wood chips to evoke a summer cabin in the woods. 18 S. Michigan Ave., acantochicago.com

MATTY EGGLESTON, SPILT MILK

A 1920s pharmacy has been reinvented as a modern corner bar at Logan Square's Spilt Milk tavern, where mixologist Matty Eggleston keeps the cocktail list short and easy to scan for something you'll undoubtedly like. For summer, we're excited about his take on a mai tai, the Pistachio Mashti, which mixes Bols Genever gin and Cutty Sark over crushed ice with fruit flavors and orgeat, for a colorful throwback to the days of exotic drinks. 2758 W. Fullerton, spiltmilktaavern.com



6 | HOT TRENDS

FLOUR POWER Creative bread offerings are still on the rise, but our favorite remains Parachute's baked potato bing bread, one of the few items on chefs Beverly Kim and Johnny Clark's menu that—thankfully—doesn't change. 3500 N. Elston Ave., parachuterestaurant.com

AU NATUREL! The natural wine movement has fans all over the world, including here at Rootstock. "When you taste one," says sommelier Jamie McLennan, "you can grasp where it came from and understand why it tastes the way it does." 954 N. California Ave., rootstockbar.com

SALAD DAYS The wedge salad is having a delicious revival thanks to some savvy chefs around town. At Maple & Ash, chef Danny Grant upgrades the basic ingredients, including his terrific

crispy, glazed bacon, to make the throwback dish one of our new favorites. 8 W. Maple St., mapleandash.com

PRIME TIME Move over, rib-eye! Prime rib, that decadent meat cut your parents adored, is back—and better than ever. At Prime & Provisions, it comes bone-in at dinner and in a prime rib dip sandwich at lunch. 222 N. LaSalle St., primeandprovisions.com

FREE SPIRITED Think a cocktail sans alcohol isn't worth having? Not at Oyster Bah, where Christina Smith's pineapple-ginger mojito mocktail has all the flavor of a tiki drink minus the hangover. We'll drink to that. 1962 N. Halsted St., oysterbah.com

VEG HEADS The vegetable party has a new leader (sorry, Brussels sprouts) in cauliflower. The Betty's Rachel Dow goes spicy with her rendition that includes potatoes, smoked almonds and pomegranate. 839 W. Fulton Market, thebettychicago.com



Parachute's potato bing bread is studded with bits of scallions and topped with sesame seeds.