

Savor Chicago



Food tours offer a taste of several diverse Windy City neighborhoods.

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

The old saying that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach applies to cities, too. Walk a city's streets and pop into its food shops and cafés to taste its distinctive flavors. This is a great way to get to know and love a city, and it is especially true of Chicago, where its culinary creations combine with the best ethnic fare bubbling from its urban melting pot.

Chicago Food Planet offers culinary walking tours of the near North Side and the trendy Bucktown and Wicker Park neighborhoods, and it recently expanded into Chinatown. Each three-hour tour combines tastings in six or seven food establishments with a walk-and-talk overview of neighborhood history and architecture. Tours max out at about 15 people, the majority of whom typically hail from the Midwest.

The appeal is multi-generational. Mark and Lisa Fulford of O'Fallon, Ill., booked a tour with their son and his wife and recommend it to anyone visiting Chicago. "I've never been in a tea shop and never in a spice shop," says Lisa, who sampled both on the North Side tour.

THE BUZZ ABOUT FOOD

Interest in culinary tourism has grown dramatically, says Shane Kost who started the tours in 2006. Ten years ago there was perhaps one television show that dealt with food, he says. Now there are whole networks dedicated to what we eat. "People really care about what's in their food these days," he says.

Several of the restaurants and food shops on the tours follow the local food movement, believing that to know your farmer is to know your food. All are small, family-run businesses. None pay to be included but are chosen for their word-of-mouth reputation for being unusual, authentic and tasty.

Tours begin at midday and follow

a pattern of progressive eating: sample the fare at stop one, walk and talk, sample at stop two, and so on. By the end of the tour, no one is hungry for lunch. "I thought the portion sizes were large—more than I expected," says Tanya Cioffi of Toronto.



Right: At Goddess and Grocer, you might have a hard time trying to decide what to pick for lunch.

Chicago Food Planet photo

Top: Unlike many thick pizzas in Chicago, Piece pizzeria serves thin crust New Haven-style pizza.

Katherine Rodeghier photo

BUCKTOWN AND WICKER PARK

"I think these are the two best neighborhoods in the city, so I want to share my love of them with you," says Carrie Drapac, one of the guides who lead the Bucktown and Wicker Park tour on Chicago's near northwest side. Settled mainly by immigrants from Poland and Germany, the area generally was composed of factory workers who lived in modest Bucktown homes and factory owners and other entrepreneurs who resided in Wicker Park mansions.

Both neighborhoods deteriorated during a period of what Drapac calls "suburban flight" spawned by racial and ethnic turnover. "These neighborhoods literally emptied out," she says, and by the 1960s were "just a cut above a slum." The turnaround began in the 1980s, and by the 1990s gentrification was in full swing as artists and young people moved in and rehabbed homes and businesses. Some houses, once priced at \$40,000, now go for more than \$1 million, and the neighborhoods have blossomed with upscale shops, art studios and dozens of restaurants.

George's Hot Dogs is one of the old-timers, around since 1948. George's ingredients are so fresh that a tomato isn't sliced until it's ordered, says Drapac. While the tour group downs a dog, she explains that it was introduced to the city during its World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 and how its seven toppings evolved from competition among street vendors.

At Mindy's HotChocolate, owned by pastry chef Mindy Segal, a



James Beard award finalist, samples on a summer day consist of iced chocolate drinks topped with cubes of homemade marshmallows. Not to be fooled by its name, the restaurant has a full lunch, brunch and dinner menu. Down the street, antipasto salad is sampled at Goddess and Grocer, a deli named for the owner who acquired

the "goddess" title from rock bands she catered on the road. At Piece, a slice of New Haven-style thin crust pizza is served with a sample of one of the brew pub's handcrafted beers.

As the tour heads into a residential area of Wicker Park, Drapac points out homes noteworthy for their architecture. Several became boarding houses during the bad times and are now pricey private homes. One dating from 1877 was an American Legion hall at one time and still has a 1902 vintage cannon on its side lawn. After it was sold, new owners found a 20-foot bar hidden behind a false wall, a speakeasy left over from Prohibition.

Falafel sandwiches are sampled next at Sultan's Market. Opened as a corner grocery store in 1985 by a woman who emigrated from Jordan, it became a Middle Eastern deli a decade later. The final food stop is fittingly a dessert parlor, iCream, where custom-made ice cream, yogurt and sorbet are quick frozen on the spot using liquid nitrogen. While a business student at the University of Chicago, the owner came up with the technique as a project for her degree, obtaining liquid nitrogen from the university's medical school.

NORTH SIDE NEIGHBORHOODS

Seven tastings are scattered across three neighborhoods on the Near North tour. It begins with Reuben sandwiches in Ashkenaz, a traditional Jewish deli, and a lesson in tea and a tasting at Tea Gschwendner, the North American flagship shop of a German chain of tea merchants.

Both serve the Gold Coast neighborhood, named for its proximity to Lake Michigan about two blocks away, and the wealthy residents who built elegant homes here. Tour guide Chris White points out one of the most famous, the original Playboy Mansion. Sold after Hugh Hefner took his bunnies to California, it was converted



Above: The Spice House sells spices from all over the world.

Above left: Tour members pour samples of flavored balsamic vinegar for tastings at Old Town Oil. Katherine Rodeghier photos





Above: The Fudge Pot turns chocolate from Chicago's Blommer Chocolate Company into delicious creations.



Above right: George's Hot Dogs has been a tradition in the Bucktown neighborhood since 1948. Chicago Food Planet photos

Among its unusual food shops is The Spice House, owned by Tom and Patty Erd who have appeared on The Food Network as spice experts. Tour members sniff and taste their

freshly ground spices and listen to a talk on the varieties of pepper and cinnamon. Then at nearby Old Town Oil, they mix extra virgin olive oils from around the world with several varieties of aged balsamic vinegar for patrons to drink like a shot. Blood orange oil with tangerine balsamic is a favorite. You also can purchase the oils and vinegars to take home for use in cooking.

by a woman born in Poland, samples include a sweet flaky pastry called *kolaczki* and savory potato and cheese pierogi.

Some of the calories are worked off during a long walk into the Lincoln Park neighborhood and the final tasting at Bacino's Pizza. After finishing a thick slice of its classic stuffed pizza, there's time to wander in Oz Park, named for L. Frank Baum, author of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," and a one-time Lincoln Park resident. A statue of the Tin Man recalls how Dorothy knocked on his torso, but unlike the storybook character, those who finish a Chicago food tour are anything but hollow. ●

Katherine Rodeghier is a new contributor from Western Springs, Ill.

to condos that now go for around \$2.5 million apiece.

Hippies and beatniks inhabited the Old Town neighborhood until they scattered in the wake of the violence of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Restoration beginning in the 1980s has made it "one of the best places to live and work in the city," says White.

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BEFORE YOU GO

Chicago Food Planet tours are held April through November. Near North tours are offered daily starting at 11 a.m., and the Bucktown/Wicker Park tours are held Wednesday through Saturday starting at 11:30 a.m. The Chinatown Tours, which were not available when research was completed for this article, are offered on Mondays at noon. Arrive 20 minutes before tour departure.

To book tours, call (212) 209-3370 or click on www.chicagofoodplanet.com. The cost of the Near North and Bucktown/Wicker Park tours are \$45 for adults, \$30 for children 8-12 and

\$15 for children 7 and under if they are eating. The Chinatown tours are \$60 for adults and \$35 for adolescents and children.

When booking, note any dietary restrictions, such as if you are diabetic or vegetarian. Tours are wheelchair and stroller accessible for all ages and fitness levels. Comfortable walking shoes are a must, and dress for the weather. Tours do not finish at the starting point, but return directions are provided.

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Shoppers will find the shelves at Mindy's HotChocolate filled with sweet treats. Chicago Food Planet photo.

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