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BE TEMPTED BY A TASTY TRIO

AUSTRALIANS flock to New York and Los Angeles in droves, but Chicago, the third largest metropolis in the US, is no laggard in attracting tourists. In 2017, a record 55 million visitors hit the city famed for its world class architecture and museums and second-to-none bar and restaurant scene. It hardly needs pointing out that you can't leave town without eating one of Chicago's three food staples - pizza, Italian beef and hot dogs. Yet a deep dive into the wealth of recent restaurant openings and new and old bars would keep you busy for weeks.

The best kick-off point for nostalgia buffs is the Old Town Ale House in the area of the same name. A stone's throw from Second City, the renowned comedy venue that launched the careers of such talents as Bill Murray and Stephen Colbert, the regular crowd is a mix of tourists, hipsters, young professionals and old lags. It's almost sacrilege not to order a stiff bourbon or a beer as you gaze at the paintings on the walls. A line-up of nude portraits of US politicians created by the veteran owner Bruce Elliott.

Logan Square is Chicago's major party and dining district. The Ladies Room, located in the Fat Rice restaurant, has one of the finest cocktail programs in the city. The bartenders combine trendy ingredients such as avocado leaf tincture and salted coconut foam in eclectic combos to pull in the crowds. Estereo is an all-day bar with a south of the border theme and drinks list. Daily specials include seasonal drinks based on pisco, mezcal and tequila teamed with hand-harvested strawberries and blueberries, grapefruit bitters and ground cherry-infused singani - the national liquor of Bolivia distilled from white muscat grapes.

The Whistler has a community feel and features local DJs and the works of local artists in the windows. The constantly changing cocktail list has a distinct Latino flavour with delights, including Key Largo - rum, pineapple liqueur, lime and black pepper. If you prefer really good food in a bar menu - baked oysters, duck rillettes - head for Billy Sunday where gun chef Matthias Merges helms the kitchen. A curated beer list, gleaming modern bar and schmick cocktail list are the drawcards at the Spilt Milk Tavern. Another must-visit in Logan Square is Wondermint Malted, a carefully choreographed recreation of a Chicago dive bar with wood panelling and checked tile floor.

The Chicago area has the most breweries in the US - 202 - ahead of Denver and Seattle. Old Style beer has been the default position for the city's brewski lovers for decades and signs touting its pleasures are everywhere. But Chicago is also a major power in the world of craft beer. There are official Chicago Brewery Tours or go freelance. You'll find Forbidden Root in West Town, which bills itself as the city's first botanic brewery using all natural ingredients. In the tap room you can sip on brews infused with barks, stems, blossoms, saps and herbs and spices, and then dine in the adjacent gastro-pub. The Goose Island Beer Co has built up a formidable reputation. Drop by the Fulton St premises with its sleek industrial chic tasting room for a Goose IPA.

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In spite of the brewmaster's name - Frank Lassandrello - there's a firm German influence at Motor Row Brewery, located in the former heartland of Chicago's auto industry. Seasonal beers such as Belgian ales are a major lure at the venue's Blues and Brews events held on Monday nights. Revolution Brewing in Logan Square has a contemporary German beer hall and you can sign up for a brewery tour. If you're pushed for time, the Great Central Brewing Company in Fulton Market offers a selection of craft beers in its 200-seat tap room. A top choice is the Free Bird American Pale Ale.

Chicago has a long, fine dining pedigree. Top chefs always gather where there is big money. One of the best newbies is Brass Heart, run by former Longman & Eagle alumni Matt Kerney. There's creative tasting menus of 12 courses or more, highlighted by dishes like whole prawn with umami butter and sourdough cone with avocado sorbet and corn creme. Twain in Logan Square is named after Mark Twain and offers contemporary

American food that shouldn't be missed. Tim Graham, formerly of Travelle in The Langham Hotel, shows his finely honed skills in recreated classics such as log with duck liver peanut butter mousse, sloppy joe with roasted bone marrow and "pigs in a blanquette".

As you would expect there's a stellar beer list at Funkenhausen on Chicago Ave in West Town. Chef Mark Steuer has his tongue in his cheek with some of the names of the main dishes - oysters hockafella, surfenturfen and big-ass veal schnitzel - but there's no hint of folksiness in the results. Easily one of the best modern takes on German cuisine I have ever tasted.

At the recently opened St Jane Hotel, the Free Rein restaurant is filled with non-guests at lunch and dinner. The fusion cuisine dishes in the smart all-day bistro taste as good as they sound - foie gras with green curry and papaya through fried chicken oysters and saffron spaghetti with crab, tomato and sea urchin sauce. Fancy French? Head to Le Sud in Roscoe Village, a split-level bistro serving French and Mediterranean mains such as foie gras tarte and stuffed rabbit at reasonable prices.

Like many major cities all over the world, Chicago is experiencing a rash of new Asian restaurants which mix east and west flavours. Passerotto in Andersonville combines Korean and Italian flavours into an amazing blend of tastes such as kimchi panjeon pancake with ramp pesto. The separate wine bar has a seriously good line-up on offer or just pop in for a drink.

Back in Logan Square, BiXi Beer prides itself on being Chicago's only Asian-inspired brew pub. The rooftop terrace overlooking Milwaukee Ave is crowded to the max during summer. But whatever the weather, come here to enjoy the expertly-made brews with beef bao, belt noodle soup and beer stew with lemongrass and Sichuan peppercorns.

For all the modern dining excitement, few food pleasures in Chicago are as memorable as Italian Beef - wafer-thin slices of roasted beef served on a long Italian roll, topped with peppers and liberally sprinkled with jus. Al's Italian Beef has been dishing the goods since 1938 and, although it's now a chain, the original venue is a pilgrimage spot. Located in the Little Italy neighbourhood on Taylor St, there's no reservations and it's cash only - the old Chicago way.