

Restaurants

Listings are excerpted from the Reader Restaurant Finder, an online database of more than 3,000 Chicago-area restaurants. Restaurants are rated by more than 2,200 Reader Restaurant Raters, who feed us information and comments on their dining experiences. Web ratings are updated daily; print listings reflect the most current information available at publication time. Reviews are written by

Reader staff and contributors and (where noted) individual Raters. Though reviewers try to reflect the Restaurant Raters' input, reviews should be considered one person's opinion; the collective Raters' opinions are best expressed in the numbers. The complete listings and information on how to become a Reader Restaurant Rater are available at www.chicagoreader.com/restaurantfinder.

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Eating Late

After Midnight It's Never Just About the Food

Parked cabs line the curbs outside Baba Palace, a 24-hour Pakistani-Indian restaurant on the corner of Chicago and Orleans. A large sign in the window promises a Meal Deal for \$4.50.

Inside, men from the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Africa congregate at all hours of the night, many stopping in two or three times a shift. In one of the two front rooms satellite TV beams in the Pakistani news channel Geo for the Urdu speakers. Al Jazeera is on in the back room.

Baba Palace
334 W. Chicago
312-867-7777

Baba Palace is the oldest of the cabbie outposts nearby, according to Mohammad Malik, who bought the restaurant with his brother in 1996, when it was located at Hubbard and Clark. In ten years, he claims, he's raised the price of a meal only a dollar. "I was a cabdriver too," he says.

Malik estimates that 80 percent of his clientele is cabbies, but Baba Palace, which has a spiffy Web site (www.babapalace.com), is hardly a well-kept secret. There are other customers, mostly men—students looking for food that reminds them of home, a businessman who got hooked 11 years ago when he was a student, a software developer from out of town who's used the Internet to find local restaurants serving halal meat. The restaurant also attracts its share of foodies—there are favorable posts about it on the culinary chat site LTHForum.com. Some people come in simply looking for a place that's cheap and open late.

Around 11 o'clock on a recent Tuesday night Malik stands behind the counter in a tunic and baggy trousers. An American flag is tacked to the hutch behind him, near a display case that offers discount phone card brands like Crazy, Mafia, Go Crazy, Rocket, and Extreme. Several cabdrivers, identifiable by the earpieces that have been in vogue since the city banned the use of handheld cell phones while driving, approach Malik and place their orders.

Lassis are available, but nearly everyone asks for tea, made with milk and cardamom and served in Styrofoam cups. The popular Meal Deal consists of a smallish portion of a fixed menu item (chicken tikka, frontier chicken, chicken with chiles, yogurt-marinated chicken boti) or one of several specials, which range from mutton to egg curry to a Friday fried-fish special. There's a choice of rice or naan on the side; a large order, \$8, comes with rice or two naan.

With the exception of the grilled items, the food sits in steam trays behind the counter—Malik simply scoops it onto the plates. But "the bread has to be fresh," he says. "Not even a minute old." He leans over a microphone and calls the orders into the kitchen: "Uno naan. Dos naan." The Mexican grill man doesn't cook the meals, Malik insists, "except in case of emergency."

After placing their orders the cabdrivers choose a table in one of the three spacious rooms or along the wall near the counter. Often they know each other by sight, but they say they can sit down with just about anyone and feel welcome.

The restaurant is sparsely decorated with pictures of mosques and framed verses from the Koran. On the wall facing the front door is an enormous, slickly designed menu board with photographs that show you what you're ordering.

When the bread arrives from the kitchen, Malik calls people up to the counter to get their orders. Asked about the food, one regular damns it with faint praise, saying, after a substantial pause, that it's "not bad." Another adds that it's "not as spicy" as the food at Zaiqa, one of two 24-hour places down the street on Orleans (Kababish is the other). Even I found the



Baba Palace, customers watching cricket

chana dal rather bland (my friend, who's traveled in India, called it "earthy tasting"). The mixed vegetables—cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, and green beans in a tomato sauce—were also bereft of heat, though there's a spicy raita you can help yourself to at the counter. The large, doughy naan were delicious and noticeably fresh—the Meal Deal beats Subway, no question. And though the menu is meat heavy, the specials always include two vegetarian dishes.

The cabbies say there are other draws. They come to use the bathroom, take a break from driving, drink tea, play pool, use the prayer room in the basement, and socialize. They trade war stories about passengers, who've been known to litter, vomit, or even urinate in their cabs—or to flash city badges before exiting with hollow promises to return with the fare.

Late on another recent night, three middle-aged cabdrivers sit at a table in a room full of cricket fans

absorbed in the third match of a series between England and Pakistan. (England went on to a huge loss, and Pakistan won the series the following week.) Sipping tea, the men commiserate with one another about their frequent tickets—for picking up customers near the corner, for doing U-turns, for double-parking. Sometimes they don't even know they've been issued one until it appears as a mark on their record or arrives in the mail ("flying tickets," cabbies call them). Fighting the citations takes time they don't have, and some have learned it gets them nowhere. "The city's the crook, you know," complains a Pakistani man named Das. He says he tried to contest a ticket once, but on hearing his heavily accented English the administrative hearing officer dismissed him, saying, "I don't understand your language."

At Baba Palace Das found a sympathetic ear.
—Tori Marlan

For the Night Owls

A selection of restaurants that always serve food past midnight

Agami

4712 N. Broadway | 773-506-1845

\$\$

JAPANESE | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 3, SUNDAY-THURSDAY TILL 1

Agami is clearly poised to tap into Uptown's booming nightlife scene—the sushi bar serves until 1 or 2 on weekends, midnight during the week. Under chef Soon Park the extensive menu includes novelty items like the "spicy tuna rice crispy"—rectangles of crisp buttered rice topped with spicy tuna tartare and a thin slice of jalapeno. Among the cooked appetizers the ginger chicken roll, a hefty battered cylinder of chicken, asparagus, and bell peppers in a sweetly smoky ginger teriyaki sauce, was practically an entree in itself. A plate of sashimi was beautifully presented, with thin, firm, shockingly fresh slices of tuna, salmon, shrimp, octopus, and—my pet among the fishier fishes—mackerel. The list of elaborate signature makis is a little overwhelming, but the Green Turtle maki we tried was a dense, sweet, rich construction of grilled eel, avocado, and tempura crunch topped with wasabi tobiko and shrimp. Arranged in a circle and outfitted with a smiling turtle's head of wasabi paste and a tail of caramelized eel, it was also adorable. Agami can be pricey, and with a corkage fee of \$15, it's no longer BYO, practically speaking. **Martha Bayne**

Arturo's Tacos

2001 N. Western | 773-772-4944

\$

MEXICAN/SOUTHWESTERN | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: 24 HOURS EVERY DAY

"Sorry, we don't have anything," we mumbled to the panhandler. But a glance down at the table said we had too much. That's easy to do here: margaritas come in goblets sized for Henry VIII, and once the platters of fajitas and Veracruz-style whole red snapper arrived, we found ourselves piling up hastily cleaned plates. Open round the clock, this inviting, brightly lit corner storefront draws Anglo and Hispanic locals—twentysomethings sipping up a night's drinking with the Tex-Mex standards (tacos, tortas, fat burritos) and workmen huddled over cups of coffee at the counter. I dug the posole: squeeze some lime and add shredded cabbage and white onion to the hominy and tender chunks of pork in a flavorful chile-infused

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stock, and it's a perfect winter meal in a bowl. The panhandler, though, just wanted a cigarette. **Kate Schmidt**

Bijan's Bistro

663 N. State | 312-202-1904

\$\$

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS; SUNDAY BRUNCH | OPEN LATE: TILL 4 EVERY NIGHT | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED

This reincarnation of the venerable late-night hangout Bijan is amazingly unsullied by tourists. Regulars crowd around the mahogany bar, and Ralf, the courtly host, seems to know half the tables in the joint. My martini came in a flash, as you might expect from a place where dead soldiers of Absolut line the tops of the windows. Bijan's keeps New York hours, serving till 3:15 AM on weeknights, 4 on Saturdays, and the food is a credit to the kitchen. Escargots, piping hot and rich with garlic butter and Pernod, came in a ceramic crock, each nestled in its own little well. I'd asked my server, tiny as a Romanian gymnast, whether the portobello mushroom soup was rich. Who was I kidding? Of course it was—and very tasty too. Even a workaday house salad was outstanding; generously dressed with blue cheese dressing, with cucumbers crisp and sweet. Other menu options are larger salads; a ten-ounce burger with aged cheddar; a beef tenderloin sandwich with watercress, horseradish sauce, and grilled onions; and entrees from a vegetable stew over couscous to pasta, fish, and meat dishes. Desserts, if you should be able to handle one, include warm banana bread pudding and bananas Foster. I walked out into the bitter night immune to the cold, head swimming with butter. **Kate Schmidt**

Calo Pizzeria Restaurant

5343 N. Clark | 773-271-7725

F 6.5 | S 5.0 | A 5.5 | \$\$\$ (8 REPORTS)

ITALIAN | LUNCH: MONDAY-SATURDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 2, SUNDAY TILL MIDNIGHT, OTHER NIGHTS TILL 1

For 40 years this was a comfortable Italian place beloved for its total lack of chic. It's been slicked up, but the old-school menu remains. The mussels appetizer consists of more than a dozen plump mollusks bathed in a creamy wine sauce, and a salmon alla forno special was nicely cooked and topped with crispy onion strands and a creamy dill sauce. Pastas and pizza continue to be big sellers; also on the menu are steaks, chops, and seafood—fried calamari, jumbo fried shrimp, and sauteed orange roughy. The entrees still come in enormous portions, with soup, salad, and pasta or garlic-roasted potatoes, and the prices are still low. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Diner Grill

1635 W. Irving Park | 773-248-2030

\$

AMERICAN, BREAKFAST | LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: OPEN 24 HOURS

Open round the clock and offering counter service only, the Diner Grill has the grizzled, noirish look of a 70s art film, but the food is great, especially the burgers. Like my buddy John says, it's the decades' worth of grease built up on the grill that provides the flavor. For the true Diner Grill experience, get the Slinger: two hamburger patties covered with cheese, topped with two eggs, blanketed with hash browns, then inundated with a couple of scoops of chili and served with slices of white bread on the side. It's impressive and, best of all, tasty (though I did throw a little A.1. in

there just to jazz things up). If you finish the whole thing, the cook will give you a little certificate testifying to your prowess. **Chip Dudley**

D'Vine

1950 W. North | 773-235-5700

F 8.2 | S 5.2 | A 8.0 | \$\$\$ (5 REPORTS)

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL, FRENCH | DINNER: SUNDAY, MONDAY, WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED TUESDAY | OPEN LATE: SATURDAY TILL 3; SUNDAY, WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY TILL 2

After a change of ownership this Wicker Park late-night spot replaced Michael Kerwin's Provencal-inspired menu with standard American fare: quesadillas and calamari, sandwiches and wraps, entrees like pan-seared shrimp with mozzarella and fettuccine Alfredo with chicken. The kitchen's still open till close, at least. The decor remains clubby and sleek. **Kate Schmidt**

Del Toro

1520 N. Damen | 773-252-1500

\$\$\$

TAPAS/SPANISH | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: THURSDAY & FRIDAY TILL 2, SATURDAY TILL 3 | RESERVATIONS ACCEPTED FOR LARGE GROUPS ONLY

The interior of Del Toro, a snazzy new small-plate restaurant in the former Mod space, is meant to suggest a bullfight, from

the red recesses in the bull's-hide wall to the short, hornlike light fixtures above the bar. The menu is ambitious if occasionally pretentious. My friend and I started out with sashimi-grade tuna from the cold-plate menu, two or three little quivering bites each, accompanied by a smoked sea salt. Thinly sliced serrano ham topped with manchego was delicious; anchovy bruschetta, tiny silver fish piled on toast with thinly sliced avocado, were perhaps the best thing we ate. Our large plates were poached halibut and something truly special—simmered pork belly with that ultrasalty, meaty flavor that screams pig. We finished with a bowl of mission figs steeped in red wine, accompanied by a delicately flavored ice cream made from cream cheese and Mahon, a cow's-milk cheese from the Spanish island of Minorca. The atmosphere is loungey, but there's a plus to that: the enormous cocktails are served until the wee hours, and there's a late-night menu Thursday through Saturday. **Chip Dudley**

Happy Chef Dim Sum

2164 S. Archer | 312-808-3689

F 7.1 | S 6.8 | A 5.5 | \$ (8 REPORTS)

CHINESE, ASIAN | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: TILL 2 EVERY NIGHT | BYO

"Noisy, crowded, bustling—all as it should be," writes one Rater of this dim sum place. Salt-and-pepper shrimp, heads on,

are a house specialty, "the perfect balance of crunchy, salty, sweet, and hot." But opinion is split on the dim sum (which is served only between 9 AM and 4 PM): while one calls it "exceedingly authentic and expertly prepared," others pronounce it variously gluey, pasty, greasy, gristly, or bland. One Rater cites some unusual dumplings (scallop roe, Canopy in the Sticky Rice) but says she prefers the late-night half plates such as duck, snails, and a scallop-taro root hot pot. Though waiters circulate with some dishes, most dim sum here are ordered off a checklist, so you need to know what to ask for—and what not to. **Kate Schmidt**

Horseshoe

4115 N. Lincoln | 773-549-9292

F 8.0 | S 6.8 | A 7.2 | \$\$\$ (5 REPORTS)

AMERICAN, BARBECUE/RIBS | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS; SUNDAY BRUNCH | OPEN LATE: SATURDAY TILL 3, OTHER NIGHTS TILL 2

\$\$\$ This faux Texas roadhouse is a swell place to drink, with right friendly staff, regular live music, and a juke well stocked with punk, redneck rock, and country. But while its mission of filling the north side's black hole of barbecue is admirable—see how easy it is to find Texas-style smoked brisket anywhere else in town—it fails to achieve true transcendence in the manner of Hill Country greats like Black's or Kreuz Market. A peek in the small kitchen reveals a possible reason: Horseshoe cooks with a small Southern Pride smoker, which are notoriously difficult for the untrained and unvigilant to coax proper slow-smoked barbecue from. Besides, how can you trust a pitman who smokes seitan and calls it barbecue? Other items—jalapeno corn bread, mac 'n' cheese, chicken wings—are above par for bar food, and heaven help me but I love me some Frito pie. **Mike Sula**

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