

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.

R

Food Service

Let Them Eat Cake . . . and Oxtail Soup . . . and Veggie Lasagna . . .

Good to Go

Delivery and carryout spots with food ratings of 7.5 or higher

Art of Pizza

3033 N. Ashland | 773-327-5600

F 8.3 | S 6.8 | A 3.5 | \$ (5 REPORTS)
PIZZA, ITALIAN | LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11 | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED | BYO | SMOKE FREE

☘☘☘ I'm not usually a fan of pan pizza—I've encountered too many gummy, half-raw bottom crusts—but Art of Pizza's pan crust is crisp and buttery, with only a bit of chewiness. Even more impressive: toppings here aren't superfluously greasy. The menu forgoes froufrou California-style pies in favor of specialties such as "Art's Meaty Delight" (sausage, bacon, ground beef, pepperoni, and sliced beef). Handily, all slices are \$2.75, no matter the crust or topping (Raters are nuts about the stuffed pizza). Reasonably priced subs, sandwiches, ribs, chicken, and pasta dishes are also available, along with prepackaged salads and cake slices for carryout. The ambience isn't much, but this small storefront is clean and friendly, and its strip-mall location makes a convenient stop-off if you're hitting the Jewel across the street. **Anne Ford**

Arya Bhavan

2508 W. Devon | 773-274-5800

F 8.0 | S 7.7 | A 5.8 | \$ (13 REPORTS)
INDIAN/PAKISTANI, VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY | LUNCH: FRIDAY-SUNDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

☘☘☘ "Friendlier and more relaxed than Mysore Woodland and Udipi," says one Rater, while another gives Arya Bhavan points for serving southern as well as northern Indian dishes and a buffet that's "amazingly fresh." The lunch spread is offered Friday through Sunday, the dinner buffet nightly. Some favorite dishes include the garlic naan, mixed-vegetable pakora, chana masala, tandoori paratha, *tandoori gobi* (marinated cauliflower cooked tandoori style), and the *dosai*, enormous crepes filled with potatoes, onions, and chiles. A delivery menu is available online at aryabhavan.com (minimum order \$35). **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Coast Sushi

2045 N. Damen | 773-235-5775

F 8.5 | S 7.0 | A 7.3 | \$\$ (12 REPORTS)
ASIAN, JAPANESE | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN LATE: MONDAY-SATURDAY TILL MIDNIGHT | BYO

☘☘☘ Starters at this subtly lit sushi place include unique creations like sesame-crusted scallops and Sunny Side Shiitake,

On a frigid afternoon the week before Christmas, Mary Ellen Diaz hurries into Epiphany United Church of Christ, home of First Slice, the organization she founded to provide restaurant-quality food to needy Chicagoans. In the small basement kitchen of the church, off Damen just south of Irving Park, her small staff and a handful of volunteers are preparing pork chops, oxtail soup, chicken potpies, and glogg cakes—a holiday specialty. Diaz peers into a large pot of soup. "Hank, I need more vegetables in there," she says. "I need carrots and celery." She pulls out some cash, and a volunteer heads off on a grocery run.

Diaz launched First Slice—as in the first slice of the pie rather than the crumbs—in 2002. She signed up paying subscribers for three freshly prepared three-course meals every week—such as salad, veggie lasagna, and peanut butter chocolate pie—then used the income to provide the same meals for free to the needy. At one point she had nearly 100 subscribers, but she eventually decided she was too busy cooking for them instead of the poor. Now she has 40 or so, though she recently started advertising for more. They allow her to offer hundreds of free dinners every week—nutrient-rich meals instead of the processed, highly starchy, heavily sugared foods the needy too often get from food pantries.

Hoping to bring in more funds, Diaz opened the First Slice Pie Cafe in November, a few tables tucked into a corner on the first floor of the Lillstreet Art Center. She offers slices of several truly scrumptious pies—from basic apple to red wine and poached pear—cakes, cookies, and fair-trade coffee served in mugs made at the center. The nondesserts include simple, hearty dishes such as Swedish pea soup, turkey chili, black bean tamales with pepita salsa, and shredded duck, baby spinach, and mozzarella served on sesame flatbread. Several dishes

First Slice Pie Cafe

4401 N. Ravenswood
773-506-7380

are from the First Slice repertoire but with a twist: the bacon and eggs dish Diaz serves the homeless becomes a light but rich bacon and sweet onion quiche. "Quiche doesn't connect with people on the street," she says. Everything's affordable, which is a little surprising given that Diaz is a three-star chef and the ingredients she uses are locally grown and organic whenever possible.

Diaz studied with Madeline Kamman in California and at L'Ecole des Arts Culinaires in Lyon, and she was head chef at the Printer's Row restaurant for several years. But she was always more interested in working in a restaurant modeled on Jane Addams's Hull House community kitchen than in becoming one of Chicago's celebrity chefs. In 1997 she rehabbed an old skaters' warming house in Lincoln Park and opened it as North Pond Cafe, where she emphasized seasonal, locally grown ingredients she found at farmers' markets and tried to keep prices down. She wanted the cafe to be "something where friends could walk in and have a good meal. Every place I'd cooked prior to North Pond were places that my friends could only go to on special occasions—not just their birthdays but their 30th birthdays."

But the opening of the cafe coincided with the birth of her partner's daughter, and before long Diaz was wishing she could spend nights at home with the child. One evening a group of Lettuce Entertain You partners who were fans of her cooking came



Mary Ellen Diaz at First Slice Pie Cafe

into the restaurant. "It was definitely late at night, and I was disgruntled about the fact that I was still there," she says. "I mentioned something about wanting to find a more nine-to-five job. Within a week I got a call from Richard Melman, offering me his corporate chef job—and I could work out of my house if I wanted to." In 1999 Diaz gave up her part ownership in the business and spent the next few years concocting new dishes for the Lettuce empire. She says she loved the job, but when she and her partner adopted a son in late 2001 she decided she had to move back closer to her Addams-inspired vision. "What kind of values do I want to teach my kids?" she asks. "There's need right next door to you, and I want my kids to see that."

Getting good food to hungry people proved more complicated than she'd assumed. At first she partnered with organizations that already helped the needy, but she says they often turned away unruly individuals—the people she thought needed her cooking most. As she puts it, "I felt like if I was

going to blow a decent restaurant career I wanted to find the people most in need of nutrition." So she started First Slice. Many of the free meals she now makes are distributed through groups such as the Chicago Recovery Alliance and the Heartland Alliance's HOPE Center, both of which serve people with substance-abuse problems.

Diaz believes she's found her calling. She remembers volunteering at Angelic Organics a few years ago, teaching low-income families how to make the best use of the boxes of vegetables the farm donated. "That's when I knew that I was meant more to cook for people in need than for people who could more than afford to sit at a restaurant," she says. She admits that if she raised her prices at the cafe or opened a fine-dining First Slice restaurant she could probably afford to feed even more needy people. But she also wants to challenge the notion that the more food costs the better it is. "I want everyone to be able to enjoy decent food," she says. —Susannah J. Felts

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in which the mushrooms are filled with an egg-yolk sauce. The tofu in the agedashi salad was cut into thick triangles, quickly fried (leaving the center soft and creamy), set on a bed of baby spinach, and topped with scallions, dried bonito flakes, and a light dressing of *dashi* (soup stock). The nigiri was super-fresh; the red snapper, yellowtail, and sea bass are all worth a try. Signature maki include Coast Crab—tobiko, king crab, and spicy mayo—and a Maine lobster variety rolled with cucumber and drizzled with ginger sauce. Hot dishes include the expected tempura and teriyaki along with a seared scallion-and-ginger-glazed tuna and an expertly prepared orange-tamarind duck served with chilled baby spinach. You can order online at coastshushibar.com. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Dharma Garden Thai Restaurant

3109 W. Irving Park | 773-588-9140

F 8.5 | S 6.8 | A 7.5 | \$\$ (8 REPORTS)
ASIAN, THAI, VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY | LUNCH: TUESDAY-FRIDAY; DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY | BYO | SMOKE FREE

Catering to a health-conscious crowd, all the dishes here are prepared without MSG, processed sugar, fish sauce, or artificial ingredients. Though there are chicken and beef offerings, menu items are mostly meatless versions of Thai classics: vegetable pot stickers, a "garden" roll filled with tofu and vegetables, an imitation duck curry (the "meat" is made with soy and wheat). Other dishes incorporate nuts for protein. Cold options include a tofu-and-oyster-mushroom salad and a tangy chilled seafood salad; a standout soup is the kow tom, seasoned with ginger, garlic, and lime and made substantial with a choice of seafood or tofu. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Eatzi's

2828 N. Clark | 773-832-9310

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | NO DELIVERY

Eatzi's, the new megamarket in the basement of the Century Shopping Centre, is a vast museum of food. There's a huge deli counter with salads and spreads and meat loaf and sides all lovingly bathed in golden light, a decent salad bar and make-your-own-sandwich station, a bakery, a grill, a smoothie stand, an espresso bar, wide-as-your-living-room aisles of gourmet crackers and condiments and chocolates, a surprisingly good little cheese shop, a wine store, and pretty much everything else you could possibly want, and its location, downstairs from a movie theater, makes a night's entertainment ridiculously effortless. I love sneaking a sandwich and some wine into a movie, so I was pretty excited about this embarrassment of riches. Then I ate there. Everything looked great, but it tasted like it was made by people who had only seen pictures of food. The hummus was so heavy on the tahini that it tasted like peanut butter and was thick as paste. The spicy black-bean and mushroom quesadilla was not in fact spicy at all—the predominant flavor was grease. How can you mess up a quesadilla? Same goes for the Thai basil roll—you'd think you couldn't go wrong with glass noodles, tofu, carrots, lettuce, and herbs in a rice-paper wrapper, but try biting through the cardboardlike Eatzi's version. The mushroom caps, stuffed with a gluey mixture of spinach and manchego, were flavorless, and my husband found his red-curry beef salad salty but otherwise bland. Everything reminded us of food, without actually tasting like it. In fact after a full meal at Eatzi's, the latest outpost of a Texas chain owned by the dude who created Fuddrucker's, we pined for the real thing, and went home and made some dinner. **Anaheed Alani**

Fox and Obel Cafe

401 E. Illinois | 312-410-7301

F 7.9 | S 6.5 | A 6.4 | \$ (11 REPORTS)
GLOBAL/FUSION/ELECTRIC | BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | SMOKE FREE | NO DELIVERY

This 50-seat cafe is an extension of the 22,000-square-foot high-end market, which carries house-cured salmon, dry-aged prime beef, and more than 350 cheeses in addition to a lineup of prepared dishes ("home meal replacements," as they call them in the biz). Chef Jason Handelman oversees the kitchen, which prepares up to 75 dishes daily, several of

which are featured in the cafe. They might include marinated flank steak with chimichurri, Thai-style tofu-and-vegetable stir-fry, couscous salad with an apricot curry vinaigrette, or a spice-rubbed New York strip sandwich with caramelized onions and blue Brie. Pastry chef Pamela Fitzpatrick (from LA's acclaimed LaBrea Bakery) runs the bakeshop, where she whips up treats like plum sabayon trifle and lime poppy-seed cookies plus an array of artisanal breads. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Green Tea

2206 N. Clark | 773-883-8812

F 8.0 | S 6.9 | A 6.4 | \$\$ (9 REPORTS)
ASIAN, JAPANESE | LUNCH: TUESDAY-SATURDAY; DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY | RESERVATIONS NOT ACCEPTED | BYO | SMOKE FREE

\$\$\$ The menu is ambitious at this tiny Lincoln Park sushi bar—the only seating is five tables and a short counter. There's an extensive array of maki—from *negitoro* (fatty tuna and scallion) to *ebikyu* (shrimp,

Food (F), service (S), and ambience (A) are rated on a scale of 1-10, with 10 representing best. The dinner-menu price of a typical entree is indicated by dollar signs on the following scale: \$=less than \$10, \$\$=\$10-\$15, \$\$\$=\$15-\$20, \$\$\$\$=\$20-\$30, \$\$\$\$\$=more than \$30. Raters also grade the overall dining experience; these scores are averaged and **As** are awarded as follows: **AAA**=top 10 percent, **AA**=top 20 percent, **A**=top 30 percent of all rated restaurants in database.

cucumber, and avocado) to a Chicago Spicy Crazy Roll (an oversize roll with tuna, salmon, whitefish, cucumber, and masago in a spicy sauce)—plus more than 30 types of nigiri and several sashimi options. They do a hefty business in carryout and delivery; lunch specials range between \$7 and \$12. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

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, 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**

Indie Cafe

5951 N. Broadway | 773-561-5577

F 7.8 | S 6.9 | A 6.7 | \$\$ (14 REPORTS)
ASIAN, THAI, JAPANESE | LUNCH, DINNER: SUNDAY, TUESDAY-SATURDAY | CLOSED MONDAY | BYO

Indie Cafe serves Thai and Japanese food way above average in terms of quality, presentation, and value. The Andaman Salad, for instance—a substantial melange of shrimp, scallops, and calamari tossed with red onion, shredded carrots, and a sauce made with lemongrass, lime, and hot peppers—perfectly balances sweet, salty, spicy, and crunchy. It's a bargain at \$8. The richness of the red curry and the subtle sweetness of the coconut milk in the Indie Signature Curry are likewise exquisitely counterpoised—it's tempting to slurp the leftover sauce straight from the

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