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Leo Martin Chicago!

A City by Any Other Name

By Leo E. Martin

"Hog butcher for the world,
Tool maker, stacker of wheat,
Player with railroads and the nation's freight handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the big shoulders."
-Carl Sandburg, Chicago, 1916

Whether referred to as the “city of the big shoulders,” the Windy City, or Chi-town, Chicagoland is a city of a thousand nicknames. Perhaps the most controversial of these numerous cognomens is “the second city,” a disparaging label given to the city by A. J. Liebling in an article he penned for the *New Yorker* in 1952.

Mr. Liebling’s scandalous story focused on the cultural shortcomings of Chicago as compared to the Big Apple. However, after my recent visit to the “Paris on the prairie,” a name bestowed upon Chicago by architect Daniel Burnham in 1909, it is clear Mr. Liebling did not consult a crystal ball while researching his now infamous column.

In May 2009 the much-anticipated Renzo Piano–designed 264,000-square-foot Modern Wing at the Art Institute of Chicago opened, another feather in the cap for a city already the de facto home to Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, the influential Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and the incomparable Field Museum. Suffice to say Chicago is no slouch when it comes to cultural significance. And in terms of food culture it might just be the most dynamic epicurean destination in America today.

Kick-started by Charlie Trotter with his eponymous restaurant in 1987, Chicago’s gastronomic legacy was further cemented with the momentous arrival of Alinea 18 years later. But Chicagoans don’t only lay claim to the best modern cuisine in the country; they also dig into the most soul-satisfying comfort food in the land. With this in mind I planned my annual winter sojourn to the “city on the lake” as a whirlwind eating tour, hitting all the high notes from haute cuisine to haute dogs with a few surprises along the way...

THE HOTEL

Affinia Chicago

I only had two days to squeeze in as many meals as possible, so convenient quarters were paramount. Equally as important was securing reasonably priced lodging, as my budget was nearly entirely devoted to meals. I settled on the affordably smart and centrally located Affinia Chicago. Just steps from the Magnificent Mile and the Old Water Tower, the Affinia is a stylish hotel kept from being cookie cutter by a clever collection of customized perks.

I was offered a choice of Experience Kits free of charge with my stay; among others I could choose the Walking Tour Kit, with a pre-loaded iPod Shuffle programmed with a concierge-recommended tour of Chicago, a city guidebook, and a pedometer, or the StayFit Kit, with a yoga mat, stretching bands, wrist and ankle weights, and workout DVDs. I also had my pick from a late-night menu of cupcakes and warm cookies, a well-edited pillow menu, and a selection of complimentary toiletries—an often overlooked but tremendously useful amenity.

My room was quite large and modern, with a double-sided flat-screen TV viewable from the plush bed or the comfy sofa in the sitting area. Decor throughout the hotel is typical of a hipster boutique property with lots of white on white and a mixture of mid-century-inspired furniture, contemporary art, and well-placed orchids. Service was friendly, if not completely informed, and all in all it was an ideal place to call home.