



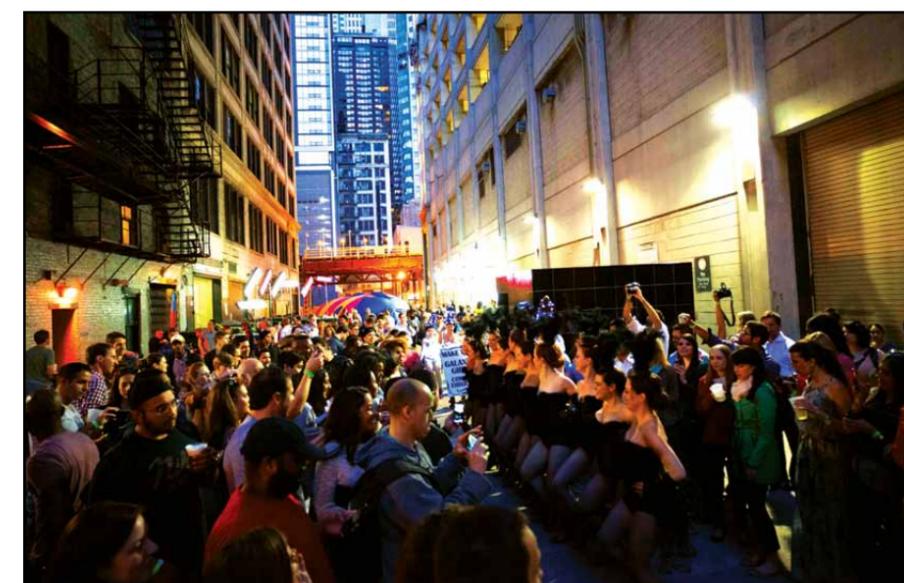
# INSPIRED BY INDUSTRY

Once an industrial stronghold of factories, wholesale markets, and warehouses, Chicago's West Loop is undergoing a slow renaissance as it becomes one of the hottest destinations in the Windy City. By **Gayatri Bhaumik**

Once known for its deep-dish pizza and the Michael Jordan-era Bulls, Chicago is quickly becoming a destination for serious creatives and foodies, who are flocking to the city's emerging West Loop neighbourhood. While retaining remnants of its gritty working class persona, the neighbourhood's gentrification can be seen in the sleek restaurants and sexy bars that now line Randolph Street. Proving itself the Midwest's hotspot *du jour*, tech firms like Google and Twitter have joined Harpo Studios, long-time headquarters for Oprah Winfrey, in West Loop, while the district's art credentials are presented in the form of Union Park's annual Pitchfork Music Festival, a showcase of up-and-coming indie bands, and the Chicago Loop Alliance's Activate program, which hosts creative art and music experiences in unique, underutilised spaces across the enclave.

Leading the creative charge is the **Chicago Artists Coalition**. Founded in 1974, the CAC is a major player in the city's arts community, leading efforts in artist advocacy and support, and providing professional development and residency initiatives. Operating out of a historic building on North Carpenter Street since 2011, the CAC features a lofty gallery, artist residency studios, and exhibition spaces which regularly hold compelling exhibitions and installations, including *Vagabunda*, a recent show by interdisciplinary artist Rashayla Marie Brown that explored concepts of privilege, migration, and the search for power and freedom. 217 North Carpenter St; +312 491 8888; [www.chicagoartistscoalition.org](http://www.chicagoartistscoalition.org)

A well-mixed tippie is the perfect prelude – or epilogue – to an artsy night out, and while West Loop is teeming with bars, lounges, and champagne salons, few have the unfussy elegance of the **Lone Wolf**. Simplicity is at the heart of this howling success, where glass block windows, rounded leather booths, and a dark, broody atmosphere complement a short, sharp cocktail list by Stephen Cole of Barrelhouse Flat. Your choices are three *sgroppino* (Venetian-originated cocktails), four signature cocktails,



Left: View of West Randolph Street and River Center. Credit Seth Anderson  
Top: Sample 'America's best burger' at Au Cheval.  
Bottom: An Activate event by the Chicago Loop Alliance.

a curated wine collection, and a carefully crafted selection of draft and bottled beer. Try Cole's perfectly-balanced Giralamo Sour, a concoction of Luxardo Amaro Abano and Luxardo Bitters rounded out with lemon juice and simple syrup, and finished with egg white; or for something simpler, order up one of the Three Floyds beers on tap. 806 West Randolph St; +312 600 9391; [www.lonewolf Tavern.com](http://www.lonewolf Tavern.com)

Lone Wolf is also the perfect spot for an aperitif while you endure the inevitable wait for a table at the nearby **Au Cheval**. Picture the classic American diner dressed in dark wood and rich leather banquettes and you have this high-end spin on classic Americana. The brainchild of homegrown restaurant whiz Brendan Sodikoff, Au Cheval is often reverently spoken of as having the best burger in America. Some might say this is a tall order, but the eatery is certainly doing its best to meet expectations. The short menu looks deceptively simple, as befits a diner, but features a 32-ounce pork porterhouse with foie gras and roasted apples; and a crowd favourite, a "single cheeseburger," which comes with two perfectly grilled patties topped with expertly melted cheese - say yes when the waiter asks if you want a fried egg and bacon – and bookended by soft, fluffy buns. Wash it down with a selection from 'light,' 'full,' 'specialty,' or 'rich' beers, and your taste buds will be in seventh heaven. 800 West Randolph St; +312 929 4580; [www.auchevalchicago.com](http://www.auchevalchicago.com)

The West Loop's restaurant scene wouldn't be complete without **Next**, a Grant Achatz-run eatery where a sleek minimalist aesthetic and neutral colour palette offset nods to the neighbourhood's industrial roots. Like going to the theatre, the only way to gain admittance here is to buy tickets for specified dates in advance. Meals here are a damnably indulgent, multi-course, themed extravaganza, where diners put their trust in the chef for a lingering meal that could go up to 20 courses. Themes, which have included 'Paris 1906', 'elBulli' and 'Chicago Steakhouse', change three times a year. 953 West Fulton Market; +312 226 0858; [www.nextrestaurant.com](http://www.nextrestaurant.com)