

# for review only

## INTRODUCTION

### *"No Longer Taking Reservations"*

**W**hen it comes to restaurants, Chicago is the City of Big Choices. It's the ultimate foodie town. What other city can boast that it's named after a food, in this case the small wild onions that grew in profusion along the region's riverbanks?

Over the years, Chicago's dynamic and varied restaurants have defined the city, fed and entertained millions, drawn people together and helped the city grow and develop. Most of them, however, have been "86ed," a restaurant term for a menu item that has been discontinued. And yet while these establishments—whether holes-in-the-walls or starched-white-tablecloth dining rooms—may be gone, they're not forgotten. They won our hearts and minds—and stomachs. They served up plate after plate, block after block of good food and priceless memories. They embody a vast smorgasbord of fascinating people and places, history and hysterics, décors, designs and dishes.

Running a restaurant is tough work. Experts estimate that half of all restaurants close within their first year. That means tens of thousands of superb, trendsetting, inviting, fun or just plain crazy restaurants have come and gone since Chicago was founded in 1833.

Why did some stay open a century or more, while others faltered within a few months? Prohibition did some in. Others were closed by the health department. Still others simply ran their course or fell behind changing tastes. Like athletes, some quit at the top of their game, while others lingered on life support for years before putting up the closed-for-good sign.

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Won Kow in Chinatown was Chicago's oldest continuously operating Chinese restaurant until it closed in 2018. *Eric Bronsky.*



A quick look at some “dearly departed” restaurants that died as this book was being born identifies some surprising reasons why restaurants close. One of the most unusual reasons is the story behind the shuttering of Monastero’s Ristorante & Banquets (3935 West Devon Avenue). Opened in 1967, this successful place went out on a high note in 2017 when an offer—apparently too good to refuse—for its property came out of the blue (or perhaps from above). Monastero’s sold its property to the Elim Romanian Pentecostal Church so the group could build a new church and community center. Why that spot? Church leaders wanted the property

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because a study had concluded that Monastero's was at the geographic center of their congregation.

A restaurant that closed to a “standing ovation”—literally, with an eight-hour-long line out the door—was Hot Doug's (3324 North California Avenue). This tremendously popular sausage superstore closed in 2014 after just thirteen years. But don't say “just” to owner Doug Sohn, who worked there virtually every day the restaurant was open and personally greeted almost every customer. “I had the opportunity to close because I could, not because I had to, and that's rare in the restaurant business,” Sohn said.

Schaller's Original Pump (3714 South Halsted Street) also closed recently but had a much longer history than Hot Doug's. (“Pump” in its name referred to the beer that was pumped in from a brewery next door.) Thought to be Chicago's longest continuously running tavern, this once proud place closed in 2017 after 136 years. That's old enough to have sported liquor license number six, served visitors to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and hosted celebrations for all three Chicago White Sox World Series wins.



This horse cart was an attractive fixture at Monastero's, which closed on short notice due to an unexpected offer to buy the property. *Eric Bronsky.*

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Located across the street from the legendary Eleventh Ward Democratic Party headquarters in Bridgeport, Schaller's catered to politicians, particularly the Daley clan. It was also popular with laborers, cops and city workers. "If you wanted to see anyone from the neighborhood, you'd come here," Elmer Mestrovic told the *Tribune* the day Schaller's closed. The sixty-year-old neighborhood resident had been going to the tavern since he was a toddler, but there weren't enough locals like him who were loyal to Schaller's fading eating and drinking culture. Another reason the tavern closed is that it was hit with high property taxes after ninety-two-year-old Jack Schaller, who lived upstairs, died in 2016. This caused the tavern to lose tax exemptions that had been "grandfathered in" to the owner.

In 2017, the South Loop also lost its oldest and most famous restaurant, Blackie's (Polk and Clark Streets). It was a playground for movie stars and celebrities, from Lena Horne to the Rat Pack. The Marx Brothers and Three Stooges stopped in frequently, once reportedly getting into a food fight. "Alas, no one in the family wanted to continue running it," said Jeff Thomas, the fourth-generation owner from 1976 to the closing. "The restaurant business requires an enormous amount of time and work."



One of the happiest restaurant endings came in 2005 when Eli Schulman closed his restaurant to refocus on cheesecake, his most popular dessert. *Marc Schulman.*

Won Kow (2237 South Wentworth Avenue) was another family-run restaurant that recently closed up shop, in part because no one in the family was interested in the long hours required to run it. Opened in 1928, this Chinatown mainstay was Chicago's oldest continuously operating Chinese restaurant. After ninety years, it was easy to take Won Kow for granted, but the building's stone guardian lions (also known as fu dogs) were not enough to protect the business. Chicago will miss its chop suey, chow mein and egg foo yung but also the more authentic Chinese dishes, including bird's nest soup, orange chicken and dim sum.

Another ethnic community lost its favorite restaurant, Chicago Brauhaus, at the end of 2017, this time after fifty-two years of suds and sauerbraten. It was a true Deutsch treat. Brothers Harry

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A Bridgeport hangout for pols and police, Schaller's survived for 136 years. In 2016, the year before it closed, the 92-year-old owner, Jack Schaller, lived upstairs. *Eric Bronsky.*

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and Guenter Kempf maintained this old-world holdout in the heart of Lincoln Square, once part of a thriving German American community. The restaurant served large portions of hearty, traditional German food to the sound of oom-pah-pah bands. Sometimes the musicians would even lead customers dancing outside into the Lincoln Square mall. The brothers may have tired of running a restaurant for so long, but their name will live on, as the city renamed the square in front of the now shuttered restaurant “Kempf Plaza.”



A whole book could be written about the names of lost restaurants. Some were literal (Not Just Pasta), while others were funny or even goofy. Here are some favorites: Gable on Clark, Doctor Jazz and Great Gritzbe’s Flying Food Show (renamed Not-So-Great Gritzbe’s after it didn’t do so great). There was Mondays...and Fridays. Club Lucky... and Hemingway’s Movable Feast. Flaming Sally’s...and Dingbats. The

Pump Room was named after the Pump Room Restaurant in Bath, one of the English city’s most stylish spots. Gordon Sinclair said he left the ‘s off the name of his restaurant, Gordon, to shave twenty-five dollars off the sign painter’s bill.

Meanwhile, menus of bygone restaurants also deserve their own tome. Although usually not given more than a glance, menus speak volumes about their restaurants, displaying class, mediocrity or poor taste. The menu covers for Henrici’s and Nanking expressed elegance and sophistication, while Hyde Park’s House of Tiki’s menu had layer after layer of stickers, reflecting price increases.

Menus reveal the prices of yesteryear. In 1944, a triple-decker sandwich cost \$0.30 at B/G Foods, but in 1979, braised steak strips of African lion (with Grand Marnier sauce) cost \$16.00 at Café Bohemia.



A 1931 menu cover from Henrici’s, Chicago’s most revered fine dining restaurant, expresses style and grace. *Chicago History Museum.*

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Also, menus set out the rules. “Extra charge for all Meals or Desserts taken to Rooms,” said the 1856 menu at the Foster House, a boardinghouse. Or, “No ladies welcome,” read the menu in a number of Chicago’s nineteenth-century restaurants.

Chicago is especially privileged to have so many ethnic restaurants. Many of them were opened by immigrants who arrived with empty stomachs but worked miracles to fill the stomach of hungry Americans, not only hungry for food but also interested in learning about other peoples, experiencing their traditions and tasting their cooking. If we are what we eat, then Chicagoans are a wonderful spicy mélange of cultures.

Restaurants feed body and soul, and the ones we’ve lost can give us a taste of where we’ve been and who we are. Let’s take a trip down memory lane to see which bygone restaurants you remember and which ones you might have missed out on. Your table’s waiting...



The Blackhawk, next to the Loop “L,” could be Chicago’s most favorite bygone restaurant. This menu cover indicates class and sophistication. *University of Illinois at Chicago Library.*