

# Paired to perfection: Iconic Chicago foods and the wine to drink with them

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By [ANNA LEE IIJIMA](#)

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Chicago boasts one of America's most eclectic food scenes. From iconic street foods to the cutting edge of gastronomy, the culinary landscape of Chicago is a tapestry of the city's innovative spirit, tumultuous history and industrious immigrant communities.

The Windy City is also home to some of the country's most outspoken and opinionated food and beverage aficionados, which is why we asked them to spotlight their essential Chicago foods with a beverage pairing that's fresh and fun. (Spoiler alert: you won't find deep-dish pizza and Miller Lite here.)

**Hot dogs and more at Redhot Ranch paired with Vignes du Maynes 2022 Chénas Petites Pierres (\$38 at [Los Naturales](#))**

For Oscar Salinas, the owner and buyer at Los Naturales, the wine shop and bar housed inside the Pilsen bar Caminos de Michoacan, the ultimate hot dog could only mean Redhot Ranch. Beef franks nestled in a pillowy bun, adorned simply with celery salt, relish, onions and sport peppers, along with “a pop of acidity from the pickle and mustard,” he describes.

On evenings when the Chicago native and his friends join up on the outdoor patio beneath the L at the Redhot Ranch in Logan Square, a hot dog might be followed by a cheeseburger and fries. Then, a Polish sausage, maybe, and some fried shrimp, too. “The pro move is to get a cup of cheese,” he says, mainly for your fries, but you could dip everything in it, barring the hot dog, of course, “out of sheer respect for the Chicago dog.”

To wash it all down, Salinas might bring along a bottle or two of chilled red wine, “something fun, ideally gamay, a Beaujolais from France,” he says. “Something light and refreshing to pair with all those meats, but definitely not too serious.”

*Redhot Ranch, 2449 W. Armitage Ave., 773-772-6020,*  
[redhotranchchicago.com](http://redhotranchchicago.com)

## **Tavern-style pizza at Middle Brow paired with Tribute to Grace Grenache Rose (\$28.99 at [wine.com](http://wine.com))**



Chicago classic Shrimp DeJonghe pairs with aligoté, according to Cassandra Sakai of Gibson's Restaurant Group. (Skurnik Wines & Spirits)

Deep dish is the pizza everyone associates with Chicago, says Francisco Joseph, a bartender and sommelier at Easy Does It, the popular Logan Square wine bar. But anyone who lives here long enough eventually discovers that Chicago's most iconic pizza is [tavern style](#), he explains. "You have this thin, crispy crust, a range of sauces, and depending on where you go, pepperoni under the cheese or on top of the cheese," he says. "It's just the best, most shareable, snackable pizza out there."

Joseph is especially fond of [Middle Brow](#), the Logan Square brewery and winery where tavern-style pizza is available on Tuesdays only. His preferences are "pretty classic, just sauce, cheese and pepperoni with some red chili flakes for a bit of heat," he says.

To pair, "a rosé, especially Grenache from California, nails it every time," says Joseph, who champions rosé as a year-round drink, not just for summer months. "Grenache from California has that coastal feel, that minerality and salinity that makes it so versatile," he says. "It has the right amount of weight, but it's still crisp and refreshing."

*Middle Brow, 2840 W. Armitage Ave., 773-687-9076,  
[middlebrowbeer.com](http://middlebrowbeer.com)*

## **Shrimp DeJonghe at Hugo's Frog Bar and Chop House paired with Sylvain Pataille 2019 Bourgogne Aligote (\$35 at [The Chicago Wine Co.](#))**

A Chicago staple from the 19th century, Shrimp DeJonghe is a window into the city's enduring culinary history, explains Cassandra Sakai, the corporate director of beverage at Gibsons Restaurant Group. While historically a casserole of whole, peeled shrimp bathed in butter and topped with a garlicky coating of sherry-laced breadcrumbs, she says, "you can find contemporary, even elevated takes on Shrimp DeJonghe across town." But for Sakai, it's Hugo's that still represents the classic.



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If budget wasn't a concern, "the decadence of the garlic and butter sauce, and that toasty crunch of the breadcrumbs begs for white Burgundy, typically chardonnay," she says. "But I'm always thinking about value," explains Sakai, which is why aligoté, Burgundy's lesser-known white, would be her go-to choice. "It's approachable and affordable, while still having this character, a brightness and acidic bite that would cut through all that butter and garlic," she says.

*Hugo's Frog Bar and Chop House, multiple locations,*  
[hugosfrogbar.com](https://www.hugosfrogbar.com)

**Garrett Mix at Garrett Popcorn Shops  
paired with Taylor Fladgate 20-year-old  
Tawny Port (\$49.99 at [Binny's](#))**

Few can resist the sweet, buttery aroma of caramel corn that wafts from any of the Garrett Popcorn Shops, but it's their classic Garrett Mix — a happy accident that brought together two of their hit products in 1977 — that made it a true Chicago icon. A sweet, crunchy caramel corn combined with the salty, tangy flavors of cheese-coated popcorn, "it gives you this punch of flavor that's really satisfying," says Regine Rousseau, a media personality, CEO and founder of Shall We Wine, a marketing company for wine and spirits brands. Growing up in Chicago, "Garrett Mix was definitely a treat, an ingenious example of how opposites attract," she says. Your first bite might be a combination of cheese and caramel, or maybe you go back and forth between the two.



Garrett's Mix Popcorn paired with Taylor Fladgate 20 Year Old Tawny Port. (E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Regardless, "a 20-year tawny Port, with its rich caramel notes and hint of salinity, mirrors these flavors beautifully," Rousseau says.

*Garrett Popcorn Shops, multiple locations, [garrettpopcorn.com](https://www.garrettpopcorn.com)*

**Beijing Duck Dinner at Sun Wah BBQ  
paired with Louis Chenu Pere & Filles  
2021 Savigny-Les-Beaune Premier Cru  
Les Lavieres (\$57 at [Verve Wine](#))**

Sun Wah BBQ has been a cornerstone of Chicago's diverse culinary landscape for over three decades, bringing authentic Hong Kong-style barbecue to the heart of Uptown. The generous BYOB policy has made this James Beard Award-winning restaurant a magnet, especially for wine professionals, says George Day-Toles, the retail manager at Verve Wine in Lincoln Park. Day-Toles likes to plan dinners with a group, loading up the lazy Susans on each table with a diverse selection of wines paired with the off-menu Beijing Duck dinner, a multicourse extravaganza that starts with crisp-skinned Peking duck, carved tableside, followed by duck-fried rice and soup. Duck is a slightly gamier bird, he explains, with savory dark meat that has a pleasant nuttiness to it.



Duck dinner at Sun Wah BBQ pairs well with a lighter Burgundy, like the Louis Chenu Pere & Filles 2021 Savigny-Les-Beaune Premier Cru Les Lavieres. (Juliette Chenu)

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"A lighter style of Burgundy, something pretty and ethereal, with a bit more fruit and lift melds so well with the savoriness of the duck and the different sauces there," he says.

*Sun Wah BBQ, 5039 N. Broadway, 773-769-1254,  
[sunwahbbq.com](http://sunwahbbq.com)*

**Italian beef sandwich with giardiniera  
at Mr. Beef paired with Jeppson's  
Malört (\$27.99 at [CH Distillery](#))**



A bottle of Malört at a bar on July 21, 2023. (Talia Sprague/Chicago Tribune)

No spirit screams Chicago quite like Jeppson's Malört, a bitter digestif infused with wormwood, the same ingredient once believed to make absinthe a hallucinogen. Crafted in Chicago since the Prohibition era, it was originally sold as a tincture to rid the stomach of worms and parasites. The flavor of Malört is described in various colorful ways, ranging from "a band-aid found on the ground to gasoline," says Antonio Frausto, the manager of CH Distillery and the restaurant Jinsei Motto in West Loop. "But to me, it has this lovely grapefruit character along with a bitter finish that kind of punches your throat in the back end."

A classic digestif and hangover cure, it's the perfect sip to rinse back a classic Italian beef sandwich, thin slices of roast beef piled high on French bread with giardiniera, says Frausto, "dipped, of course, in au jus till it's all sloppy and juicy." Frausto favors Mr. Beef, in River North, but Al's Beef comes in as a strong second.

*Mr. Beef, 666 N. Orleans St., 312-337-8500*

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