

A more cultured taste

From Terzo Piano at the Art Institute to new menu at the Adler, a guide to dining at Chicago museums and zoos

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It used to be that going to a museum for the food was like going to Wrigley Field for the baseball. They offered a version of the thing in question, sure, but you were pretty likely to be disappointed.

But these days, most Chicago cultural institutions have upped their culinary games. Now, while your kids dine on the inevitable mac-and-cheese and chicken nuggets, you can often get something you actually want to eat, rather than some sad compromise between hunger and availability.

In the past few months, I've been sampling menu items at many Chicago destinations. My tasting has been by no means comprehensive: Budget and waistband don't allow for that.

But I've been, by and large, satisfied. I've had tilapia at the Shedd Aquarium (not locally sourced), a Vietnamese banh mi sandwich at the Adler Planetarium, and good craft beer on tap at the Lincoln Park Zoo.

The worst dishes were still OK, something you'd eat rather than push around your plate for a bit. And the best were ones you'd be happy to order even if the cultural institution were not in the picture.

Many of the places take advantage of their setting to provide great views, too. The Morton Arboretum's Ginkgo Cafe looks out, through giant windows, on the central pond. The Patio at Cafe Brauer, at Lincoln Park Zoo, has an outdoor area right on the Nature Boardwalk and an impeccably landscaped area of South Pond. At Terzo Piano, atop the Art Institute's Modern Wing, a patio seat shows you sculpture in the foreground and beyond that, Millennium Park and the skyscrapers around it.

Even the more modest cafes at Adler and the Shedd have outdoor tables that take full advantage of their spectacular lakefront locations.

Art Institute

The king of local museum dining remains the very upscale, very accomplished Terzo Piano. Go here to take a break from puzzling over whether the artists below were being ironic or post-ironic, or just go here for lunch, museum be darned.

Chef Tony Mantuano calls his menu "modern European," although it definitely tilts toward the Mediterranean side of the continent. It bursts with bright ideas and the kitchen, mostly, executes them expertly.

On my most recent visit, I tried the eggplant fries, served with a creamy tzatziki, and they were amazing, the single best thing I ate in my museum-food tour. These delicately breaded vegetable rectangles stake out a very happy middle ground between junk food and health food, between the fryer and the farm.

And the signature salad, at \$17, is expensive by the pound but well worth trying if you make a habit of eating greens (this is true even if the version you are served doesn't include the promised English peas, as mine didn't). The base ingredient, sweet pea tendrils, is something extraordinary in the salad realm, and the shallot vinaigrette, whorl of pancetta and slices of a slightly soft cheese give the greens just enough decadence.

You can go to the starkly decorated room without even visiting the museum. Just enter on Monroe Street and take the elevator up. But the restaurant is open for dinner only on Thursdays, when the Art Institute also is open late.

111 S. Michigan Ave.; 312-443-3600 or artinstituteofchicago.org; Terzo Piano, 159 E. Monroe St.; 312-443-8650 or terzopianochicago.com

Lincoln Park Zoo

The Patio at Cafe Brauer, run by Levy Restaurants for Lincoln Park Zoo, is another place worth visiting for its own merits — especially that pond-front setting.

The nighttime menu reads like one from a decent, mid-range restaurant. China and tablecloths come out beginning at 3:30 p.m., and the hamburger patties switch from pre-shaped, food-service standard to hand formed half-pounders. (We won't mention the irony of the weekend breakfast menu at a zoo restaurant trumpeting its "Cage-Free Eggs.")

But even the more limited, daytime menu — the one most likely to be seen by regular zoo-goers — has charms. There's a good, marinated flank steak sandwich, with onions, peppers and a little Boursin cheese, and the Green City Market salad includes lots of ripe berries.

Bonus: You can watch the people and the nature going by, or just recover from the stress of shepherding little ones through a zoo, with a cold tap beer in your hand.

Goose Island brews Boardwalk Blue, a blueberry beer with just enough fruit to be summery but not cloying, especially for the venue, and it also has Lagunitas IPA on tap. The restaurant has been featuring live music every Wednesday evening and doing special craft beer events; the next one features Goose Island on Aug. 20.

2200 N. Cannon Drive; 312-742-2000 or lpzoo.org; Cafe Brauer, 2021 N. Stockton Drive; 312-742-2400

Museum of Contemporary Art

The Museum of Contemporary Art has a fine eatery, too. Called Puck's Cafe not because of the Shakespeare character but because it's run by the Wolfgang Puck folk, the restaurant has a menu that is a nice compromise between creativity and accessibility. The tuna sandwich, for instance, is dressed with lettuce, but also fried onion strings and pickled peppers.

I like a higher sauce-to-cheese ratio than was on my green pepper, Italian sausage and olive pizza, but in the Puck tradition, it's an excellent crust, crisp on the bottom, chewy in the middle, and the ingredients were first rate. One, \$11 pie — they also do more exotic ones, including a fig and prosciutto blend — is plenty big for two people.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.; 312-397-4010 and mcachicago.org

Adler Planetarium

At the Adler Planetarium, the recently revamped menu at the Cafe Galileo, run by Food for Thought, will take you by pleasant surprise. It's a sandwiches-and-pizza place, but it's been adjusted to suit more modern, adventurous palates (which means, yes, they are now called tortas, panini and flatbreads).

Offerings include an Indian sandwich on naan, a tandoori salad, and a chorizo flatbread. I tried the flank steak banh mi sandwich, and it was a winner. There's something to be said for restaurants not trying too hard, not stepping out of a comfort (comfort-food?) zone, but this one seems to be trying and succeeding.

1300 S. Lake Shore Drive; 312-922-7827 or adlerplanetarium.org

Museum of Science and Industry

A misstep in the ethnic food realm came at the Museum of Science and Industry, where the primary restaurant, a giant food court, is run by Sodexo. The Thai beef salad and sesame peanut noodles both looked promising but tasted bland.

Better at MSI was a more basic item: The turkey BLT from Jazzman's cafe, more of a takeout and coffee place.

57th St. and Lake Shore Drive; 773-684-1414 or msichicago.org

Shedd Aquarium

Shedd Aquarium's food vendor is also Sodexo and, again, I'd stick to more basic items there, like the pizza or the burritos they'll assemble in front of you in the main food court.

The tilapia I had at Soundings, a Shedd cafe that's meant to be a notch above the food court, was nicely prepared, with (too much of) a cilantro citrus sauce, lightly steamed asparagus and, oddly, some mandarin orange sections. But the dish wasn't as refined as that sounds, and they had an advantage: They were the only museum restaurant that knew I was there to write about the food.

1200 S. Lake Shore Drive; 312-939-2438 or sheddaquarium.org

The Field Museum

These institutions do need to feed their visitors: The Shedd says that 70 percent of its guests buy food or drink there. One approach is to contract with a big, food-service company (the Morton Arboretum uses Sodexo rival Aramark, and they make a pretty tasty fish taco). But it's hard to argue with the approach the Field Museum takes to its food: Let in the chains.

The natural history museum has a McDonald's in the basement, if you must (and sometimes you must). But there's also a Corner Bakery Cafe, the fine, quick-service chain, on the first floor, with seating right in Stanley Field Hall. There's not even a museum premium; prices are the same as at other Corner Bakery locations.

That said, one of the most satisfying things I ate on my slow motion, oft-interrupted museum-cafe crawl came from outside the actual museums.

Between the Field and the Shedd, there's a stand called Museum Campus Cafe. And maybe it was the fact that I hadn't eaten breakfast or maybe it was the gorgeous day. But the entirely predictable buffalo chicken sandwich I had from them — thin, spiced deep-fried cutlets, lettuce, tomato and a modest blue cheese ranch sauce on a standard hamburger bun — really hit the spot. All it lacked was some eggplant fries as a side dish.

1400 S. Lake Shore Drive; 312-922-9410 or fieldmuseum.org

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