

As the Pandemic (Hopefully) Wanes, Chicago Is Back and Stronger Than Ever

By Elaine Glusac

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Photos by Jeff Marini

From left: Posing in Hyde Park; the celebrated Rose Mary restaurant.

The Windy City is roaring back from the pandemic, thanks to its entrepreneurial spirit and strong sense of pride.

In the aftermath of the Great Fire, which razed more than 2,000 acres of central Chicago in 1871, leaving nearly 100,000 homeless, one resident, William D. Kerfoot, displayed a hand-painted sign that read: all gone but wife, children and energy.

I have been thinking about Kerfoot since the pandemic. But not before a full year of questioning why I still lived in Chicago when everything I loved about it—the theater, music, sports, and dining scenes, as well as the 26-mile lakefront—was closed or verboten.

As the city has been slowly reopening, I have been reminded of Kerfoot's outlook. Jazz musicians started holding "step sessions" on neighborhood porches, encouraging residents to BYO and use virtual tip jars. They're planning to return to porches in spring 2022. Entrepreneurs renovated an RV as [Majostee Spa](#), a mobile nail salon making home visits. Stephanie Hart, owner of [Brown Sugar Bakery](#), recognized the need for comfort food during the pandemic; now the baker is looking to open a shop for her famed cupcakes at O'Hare International Airport, where she can, as she puts it, "export a little bit of my African American neighborhood and inspire [people] to come to 75th Street and see everything we're serving."



Photo by Jeff Marini

A musician plays in Hyde Park.

"Chicago sees itself, since the fire, as a city able to withstand whatever," said Shermann Dilla Thomas, a historian who offers guided city tours. "It also makes us a city that doesn't believe in small plans. After you get a blank canvas, the sky's the limit."

In the wake of 2020's social justice movement, there is new attention to oft-overlooked areas of the city. Bronzeville, the historic Black hub five miles south of downtown, boomed following the Great Migration of African Americans from the South in the first half of the 20th century. It later suffered from redlining and overcrowding. But today, the [Bronzeville Winery](#), a Black-owned wine

bar, joins a new development devoted to minority-owned businesses, including [House of Africa](#), a boutique from fashion designer Sarah Kuenyefu. [Boxville](#), a seasonal market in shipping containers, gives fledgling companies a start. In June 2021, the South Side area saw a new monument to civil rights activist Ida B. Wells unveiled in the neighborhood she once called home.

“It takes a small wheel to turn a larger wheel,” said Eric Williams, the owner of Bronzeville Winery, whose original retail store, Silver Room, helped transform the now-trendy Wicker Park neighborhood in the 1990s. “People need to see success to see what’s possible.”



Photos by Jeff Marini

A wintery risotto at Rose Mary restaurant.

There are other launches too. Near the city’s southern border, the [Pullman National Monument](#) unveiled a new visitor center in the 141-year-old clock-tower building, devoted to the factory town where Pullman rail cars were built. The [Obama Presidential Center](#) broke ground in Jackson Park in September, beginning construction on the former president’s library with completion estimated in four years. The center is conceived as a digital archive with community spaces including a public library and playground.

Chicagoans are showing up for their own. According to Open Table, total restaurant reservations are three-quarters of prepandemic norms. Entire streets remain blocked off for dining (and don’t worry about the weather; we managed to socialize alfresco in chalets, huts, and tents, even during the long winter). It can take months to get a table at the hottest new restaurant, [Rose Mary](#), which opened in April 2021 with a mix of Croatian and Italian food. Meanwhile, locals are visiting one of the state’s most enduring tourist attractions, [Navy Pier](#), savoring panoramic skyline views and rooftop cocktails at its new hotel, [Sable](#), which

opened in June 2021 and houses 223 nautically inspired rooms. But perhaps the most inclusive vibe in town can be found at the new [Nobody's Darling](#), a Black-, queer-, and woman-owned bar in Andersonville on the North Side, where everyone is welcome to quaff boozy mezcal old-fashioneds, vespers, and zero-proof spritzers in the narrow, sexy space.



Photo by Jeff Marini

You can't beat the bar at Nobody's Darling.

In the same fall week, I attended a White Sox baseball game at the home park and *As You Like It* at the newly reopened [Chicago Shakespeare Theater](#) on Navy Pier. I reveled in the communal joy of live performance, while remaining aware, as I moved around the city, of survivors and newcomers amid stretches of vacancies. We are still in recovery, but at least the recovery has begun. As Dominique Leach, the owner and executive chef of [Lexington Betty Smoke House](#), said, she's doing three people's work to stay solvent—adding, "I have a lot of fight in me."



Photo by Jeff Marini

The savory, smoky dishes at Lexington Betty Smoke House

One hundred fifty years ago, a post–Great Fire Chicago had to reset, giving rise to the modernist architecture for which the city is now famed. The pandemic reset may not be as tall literally, but it’s wider metaphorically, reinvesting in communities, encouraging entrepreneurs, and proving that the energy remains to make it work in the City that Works.

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