Chicago Tribune

FOOD & HEALTH





Far left: The original sweet egg sandwich at Egg Tuck, located at 326 N. Michigan Avenue, in Chicago. TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/ CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Left: Server/bartender Anna Blankenship prepares an El Viejo San Juan cocktail at Marina's Bistro and Rum Bar, Jan. 4. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Taylor Mason, founder of Taylor's Tacos, in Little Italy restaurant on Dec. 21. After a 10-year journey through pop-ups and catering, Mason opened Taylor's Tacos with her wife Maya Mason. TRENT SPRAGUE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

MINI REVIEWS EGG TUCK, MARINA'S BISTRO AND TAYLOR'S TACOS

What we missed in 2023

By Louisa Kung Liu Chu, Lauryn Azu and Rebecca Johnson Chicago Tribune

s we say farewell to 2023 and jump into 2024, the Tribune Food team took a look back at the new restaurants that, for one reason or another, we weren't able to cover last year.

So here are three mini restaurant reviews, listed alphabetically, in our annual catch-up. We visited each of these establishments just once, instead of

our usual two visits for larger reviews, and as such we did not award stars.

— Kayla Samoy, food editor

Egg Tuck

If there's one activity I tend to spend too much time on, it's scrolling through TikTok. But when a gooey, cheesy breakfast sandwich popped up on my feed, I was egg-cited to give it a try.

The Korean-inspired street food at Egg Tuck — touted as some of the best

in Los Angeles before making the jump to Chicago — lived up to the social

Co-owner Nicole Kim opened the Michigan Avenue location last month with the help of the chain's founder Ryan Son. While visiting L.A., Kim said she tried the food and thought it could become a popular brunch spot in

Chicago, as an in-between of sit-down and fast food restaurants.

"It's in the middle," Kim said. "It's something you can grab and go and it's freshly made." She also said she was excited to bring a trendy Asian eatery to the city.

While almost every dish contains eggs, the centerpiece of the menu are the egg sandwiches, and for good reason. Each one comes with a sizable, crispy brioche bun, nearly overflowing with soft scrambled eggs, spicy aioli and egg sauce. There's protein add-ons, including bacon, ham or tteok-galbi, a beef short-rib patty. They're all also \$10 or less.

I ordered the basic egg sandwich, and while the taste wasn't quite what I expected — it leans much more sweet than savory — it was delicious. Kim said the bacon and cheese is their best-

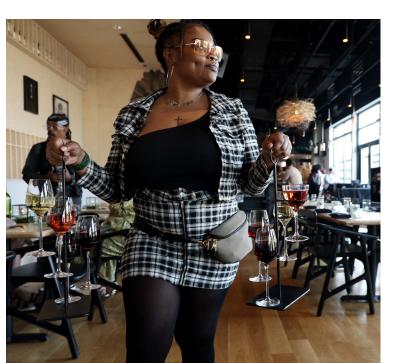
seller by far.

But the star of the show was the \$6 "famous egg tots." The tater tots were topped with two over-medium eggs and chives, along with the spicy aioli and egg sauce combo. They had the slight spiciness that I love in breakfast food. Kim had an apt description, calling them a spin on loaded fries. It also paired nicely with the \$6 iced vanilla chai latte, a sweet drink with the right amount of vanilla that I'll definitely go back for.

"It's a simple idea," she said. "We have these so fluffy eggs, why not put them on top of the tater tots so you can have the soft and crunch taste at the same time"

Unlike in L.A., Kim said some of their other bestsellers — especially

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Colorful ingredients, transparent pricing and 'girl dinner dates'

Chicago chefs' 2024 food and drink trend predictions

By Rebecca Johnson Chicago Tribune

Trends come and go, and that extends to our stomachs. We sampled pickles in a blanket and sipped on purple milkshakes in 2023, and Chicagoans found new restaurants they loved, or frequented old haunts.

While it's impossible to know for sure what funky flavors or dining experiences will pop up in the new year, the Tribune asked chefs and restaurant owners in Chicago, many of whom are considered the best and most innovative in the business, about how they expect the city's food scene to evolve in 2024.

"Each and every little city has

their own thing going and we don't need bigger cities like (New York and Los Angeles) to tell us what to do and what we like to eat and what we are into specific to our region," said Won Kim, head chef at Korean Polish restaurant Kimski in Bridgeport.

From a focus on transparent pricing and social equity to an emphasis on fun, photogenic

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Left: Server Be'Anna Clark delivers wine flights to diners at Bronzeville Winery in Chicago on May 17. Cecilia Cuff, the co-owner of Bronzeville Winery, proposes that 2024 could bring a slightly elevated twist on the fad of women flocking to restaurants to enjoy their favorite comfort foods on "girl dates." Maybe that food is fried shrimp, wine flights or Champagne, she said. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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around lunchtime - are the Royal West burger-wich and Royal burrito, which contain the short rib. I ordered the \$10.50 burrito, and found the combination of flavors a bit too sweet and overpowering for my taste, although it was certainly filling.

The brightly decorated restaurant is perfect for people who enjoy a hearty, relatively affordable breakfast. There's some seating, but takeout and food delivery appeared to be the more popular option. The store is open from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

There's also plans to expand, Kim said. They're preparing to open another location in Lincoln Park in about a month and one at the University of Illinois Chicago in the spring. — Rebecca Johnson 326 North Michigan Ave.,

872-318-2108, eggtuck.com

Marina's Bistro and Rum Bar

Nestled in the Uptown neighborhood's Magnolia Plaza strip mall, chef-owner Eric Roldan opened Marina's Bistro and Rum Bar in August. The cozy and lamplit space features classic and modern takes on iconic Puerto Rican dishes such as mofongo and pastelillos, and a bar that whips up handcrafted rum-based

Roldan said the restaurant began as Marina's Cafe, an Avondale ghost kitchen in 2021. The chef won a \$245,000 Chicago Recovery Plan grant in 2022, which allowed him to finish construction on the restaurant. Over two years later, Marina's Bistro pays homage to his mother, who taught Roldan how to cook and passed away when he was

Marina's gives you all the chill party vibes and sense of island pride - conversations in English and Spanish rise and lull to the tune of salsa hits. Above you there are decorative vines, wrought iron chandeliers and exposed wood beams in the style of Old San Juan. The bar space, which sits about four patrons, has wall art that pays homage to the island's 78 municipalities. From a back wall, a portrait of Roldan's mother, Marina, gazes lovingly.

I was greeted with complimentary and very snackable plantain chips served with vegan guava butter. My order of pollo al ajillo, or chicken marinated with garlic and onion, was well seasoned and served in a precious silver pan.

"The secret to it is slow temperature," Roldan told me later, saying the whole process takes 48 hours. "That's how we get that (tender) consistency."

To accompany the juicy chicken, I ordered the tostones,



The Arroz Con Gandules, clockwise from left, Quesitos and Pollo Al Ajillo, with the La Playita cocktail at Marina's Bistro and Rum Bar. JOHN J. KIM/ CHICAGO TRIBUNE



The Shrimp Taco, left, and Sweet Potato Taco at Taylor's Tacos. TRENT SPRAGUE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



The egg tots at Egg Tuck. TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

which were salty and crispy on the outside but maintained their soft interior. Rounding out this trio, the arroz con gandules, or yellow rice cooked with pigeon peas and sofrito, was a perfect complement to the chicken.

The variety of the rum-focused drink menu matches and at times supersedes all these savory and filling dishes. Marina's uses the rum brands Don Q. Barrilito and Bacardi, Roldan said.

The La Playita passion fruit cocktail came stacked with a wedge of lime and fresh mint sprig atop white rum, lime, puree, soda and speckles of passion fruit seeds. It reminded me of pineapple-flavored Fanta.

Don't leave without trying The Yabucoa, also made with white rum, and soursop, a fruit in the custard apple family that's native to the Caribbean region. Marina's drink was milk-colored, a little bit tangy and yet refreshing, and also neatly presented with a pink

There are also mocktails that sound more than basic, with notes of coconut milk, agave nectar and fruit puree freshly squeezed in-house.

I can see Marina's adding to

the splendor of Uptown's diverse dining options. It has the added bonus of being steps away from

Look out for Roldan's specials for Chicago Restaurant Week, including the aforementioned pollo, a patio as the months turn warmer and maybe even live music. — Lauryn Azu

4554 N. Magnolia Ave., 773-739-9161, marinasbistrochicago.com

Taylor's Tacos

It was the year of Taylor, as in tacos of course.

You may have seen the taco that Taylor Mason calls Sexy Crispy Shrimp. Possibly in all its gorgeous fried glory at Taylor's Tacos, the shop she opened with her wife Maya Mason in Chicago last Cinco de Mayo. Or perhaps you caught the surf versus turf battle it won against the campechano by Taqueria Chingón on "Good Morning America."

The taco lives up to the hype, with ethereal tempura-esque shrimp topped with a hot pink tangle of Maya's Pickled Red Cabbage.

"It's extra crispy, because we

fry it in rice flour," said Taylor Mason, chef and founder. "That was super important to us to make sure that everyone could enjoy it, even with different aller-

She dresses most of the tacos with her lovely crema-laced, tomato-based Secret Salsa plus cotija cheese, cilantro and a squeeze of lime.

Her namesake restaurant is not a traditional taco shop in the neighborhood still best known as Little Italy. It's the only Black, queer women-owned business in the city that specializes in streetstyle tacos with soul.

"It's a fusion of the authentic Mexican street-style taco, and the Black taco," said Mason, a West Side woman who first fell in love with the traditional taco experience when she went to Pepperdine University on a full basketball scholarship in Malibu, California. "The Black taco is the flour tortilla, the ground meat, the lettuce, the tomato, the onion, the cheese and definitely the sour cream and then your chunky red salsa of choice.

Her wife can't go without Ortega salsa on a Black taco, said the chef.

"We fry our tortillas kind of the old school abuela way," said Mason. She made her first signature taco a decade ago, a journey through pop-ups and catering. They now use a deep fryer to cook for about seven seconds then shake them off.

They're not hard-shell tacos, but that brief baptism brings out a toastiness to the corn tortillas sourced from Tortilleria El Rey in Little Village.

'We like to say crispy, but malleable." said the chef.

As terrific as the tacos are, I have become obsessed with the Not Taco Special that changes weekly.

It can be anything from nachos to tostadas to burritos, said Mason. They've also done shrimp boils, as well as outrageous loaded fries on an early visit, to beautiful rice and beans on a recent visit, which were served with their Holy Sh*t Tortilla Chips.

"We've done a lot of different things," the chef said. "But nachos, I think it's probably the most recurring.

They're also built on a bed of those intensely seasoned crackly crunchy tortilla chips.

"We really wanted to again pay homage to Mexican culture," said Mason, who was also inspired by Mexican candy that can be spicy, sour and salty as well as sweet. "The Tajín and chamoy kind of vibe."

The chef also had Black culture in mind, and at her fingertips.

"I love the seasoning to be on my hands," she added.

The secret ingredient is sugar, which makes them a touch too sweet for my taste on the savory menu, but they're still tweaking the recipe.

Especially when dipped in the silky guacamole, a surprisingly small sauce cup size on a menu that's otherwise so generous.

That generosity extends to the exquisite EloTAY. Her take on elotes is a half pint cup of corn off the cob finished with traditional mayonnaise, Tajín and lime, but instead of Parkay, Kraft Parmesan and chile powder, you'll find butter, cotija and Tay's Way seasoning.

"Maya kicks me, because she says technically it should be called EsquiTays," said the chef

When you visit Taylor's Tacos (on Taylor Street!) do note that the entrance is downstairs to the lower level of a vintage brick building, so it's not wheelchair accessible, but they have curbside pickup available. And there's a tiny private outdoor patio when weather permits, hopefully by the next Cinco de Mayo. - Louisa Kung Liu Chu

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ingredients, here are some of their top predictions. And maybe, just maybe, "girl dinner" is here

ORIGIN STORIES

Knowing the faces behind the food or beverage will become more important for consumers, according to Cecilia Cuff, the co-owner of Bronzeville Winery. Authenticity outweighs perfec-

For example, she said a lot of the South Side business's vegetables are grown by students from Olive-Harvey College. Telling diners that their food is partially grown by young adults learning about urban agriculture is more compelling than sourcing ingredients from thousands of miles away and creating a larger carbon footprint, she said.

One of their most popular desserts is cheesecake from Justice of the Pies, a bakery in Avalon Park founded in honor of the owner's late father, and some of their bestselling wines are women- and minority-owned. Community stories set restaurants apart from the "factory experience," she said.

"I think what's out is looking at menu items and having the thing that comes from the furthest place and is the most exotic, and really it's like what does that locality look like on your menu," she said. "People want to know they're spending money in places that have a social equity focus, and people care about the people making their food."

EXPERIMENTAL EATING

Eating at restaurants can often be quite expensive. When choosing to make the investment, Cuff expects many people to opt for dishes that look cool or interesting in pictures, or contain ingredients they've never tried before.

Innova Market Insights, a market research company, predicts that in 2024, as high food price inflation impacts consum-



Soulé Punch, left, and the non-alcoholic Soulé Punch, right, at Soulé in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ers' spending habits, "eye-catching" ingredients will prompt higher spending. Cuff said ube — a purple yam

 $native \ to \ Southeast \ Asia-has$ become a popular addition at Bronzeville Winery. Their bright purple ube latte, created in collaboration with VietFive Coffee, and ube desserts show up well in photos, she said. Customers were also interested in trying their seared watermelon as a vegan nigiri and steak.

"Whenever we put experimental things on the menu, people are always really interested in trying them," she said. "Experimental eating is something that people are more open to now, which has been really fun."

NON-ALCOHOLIC **BEVERAGES**

Some diners might say they're "sober curious," while others say they're members of the NA movement. Whatever you call it, mocktails and other alcohol alternatives are booming business, especially among Generation Z and millennials, according to NeilsenIQ. Sales of non-alcoholic drinks in the United States increased by about 30% in the past year, according to the data firm

This is a trend that lots of

restaurants will continue to pay attention to, Kim said. More restaurants in Chicago will introduce separate cocktail lists, one with alcohol and the other without, or sell popular alternatives such as CBD and THC infused drinks, Kim predicted.

"People my age — especially like mid 40s — that still want to go out and not get absolutely annihilated, tend to veer towards either mixing it up with some NA cocktails, or imbibing in other ways," Kim said.

NEW SAUCES, CONDIMENTS

Fermented sauces might become even more of a staple in 2024, Kim said. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic - when exploring preservation techniques became trendy — Kim has noticed more recognition of fish sauce, miso and kimchi.

"People are taking the idea of fermentation in a good direction, meaning they don't have to rely on specific Korean recipes, they can ferment anything these days," he said. "They figured out that a lot of vegetables and a lot of other explorative produce can be fermented and salted down or

Kim also expects chili crisp oil

to also gain more of a foothold this year. The spicy, crispy condiment has become increasingly popular nationwide, with many companies developing their own iteration, Kim said. Kimski still uses an in-house recipe, which Kim said puts the restaurant's flavoring and

versatility on display. **HUMANITARIAN IMPACT**

Chicago Chefs Cook has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for disaster relief in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Maui and other places. Chefs stepping up as leaders in their communities, and consumers dining at establishments with civically minded proprietors won't go away in 2024, according to the nonprofit's leadership

During the fundraisers, chefs often celebrate their heritage through the food they create, said Sarah Stegner, chef and co-owner of Prairie Grass Cafe, who is on the nonprofit's leadership team.

"It highlights the uniqueness of Chicago, and our kindhearted spirit and how we can make a difference, but it is also a trend that you start to see intensifying," Stegner said.

Younger generations are particularly interested in spending their dollars at places with social impact, said philanthropist Eda Davidman. She listed the sensory-friendly hours at Stegner's restaurant as an example. The restaurant dims the lights and turns the volume of the music down to make the environment more accommodating for people who are neurodiverse or have other sensory sensitivities.

"People feel comfortable and people want to come to that and people want to support not only chef Sarah, but they also want to support the fact that wow, look, she's making a difference in somebody's life," she said.

GIRL DINNER DATES

The "girl dinner" trend took over social media last year, perhaps unsurprisingly as other trends surrounding the word "girl" showed up, from "hot girl

walks" to "girl math." The dinner

variety usually involves a sparse, random collection of finger food, such as fruit, cheese or popcorn, that women often eat by them-

Cuff proposes that 2024 could bring a slightly elevated twist on this fad — women flocking to restaurants to enjoy their favorite comfort foods on "girl dates." Maybe that food is fried shrimp, wine flights or Champagne, she

She said about 75% of diners at Bronzeville Winery are women or women-identifying, a statistic that doesn't surprise her. Women are often planners, Cuff said, and they enjoy comfortable, warm

spaces that are photogenic. "I think it gives women a time to come together, to feel safe, to strategize, to vent," she said.

VEGETABLE COOKING

Any talented chef could cook a prime ribeye well, Kim believes, but there's a lot of thought and technique that goes into making vegetable cooking successful. As more people take an interest in plant-based eating or reducing their meat consumption this year — either for environmental concerns or health reasons — he said this creativity will be on full display.

From carrots to stews, Kim expects chefs to maximize their flavors and use grilling techniques to make the dishes delicious and hearty. During the summer in particular, Kim likes to focus on produce for vegetarian specials.

TRANSPARENT PRICES

Consumers are often left in the dark about the true costs of running a restaurant, Kim said. In 2024, he expects more places to explain their costs and how they decide the pricing on various items.

"People understand why the pricing is and I'll explain like. you know, black truffles aren't an everyday item," he said. "We're lucky enough to have access to it but it's gonna cost you."

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