

# Chicago Tribune

## Cheap gourmet: Luxe dining for less

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Sure, you know about sumptuous dinners that feature caviar, foie gras and the like, as well as experimental restaurants whose dishes are works of art and/or science.

But who can afford to eat at these places? And more to the point, is there a way to learn whether you even like this stuff without going broke?

Yep. Some of these luxury items are available for very reasonable prices, if you know where to look.

**Caviar.** Fine-dining restaurants will offer caviar service for \$65 or more, and it's definitely an amazing experience. But you can dip your toe in the water, so to speak, for a relative pittance over at Café Matou (1846 N. Milwaukee Ave.; 773-384-8911). The Bucktown bistro has a \$13 appetizer featuring a poached free-range egg (well, an egg from a free-range chicken) topped with a mélange of Petrossian salmon roe, California sturgeon caviar and gravlax (smoked salmon). It all sits on a bed of fluffy polenta with crispy capers. It's not beluga, but you'll get the idea.

**Foie gras.** First it was illegal in Chicago, now it's legal again. Is this one ingredient worth all that fuss? You can find out for \$18 or more at lots of French restaurants (Café Matou, mentioned above, has a couple of dishes that contain foie gras that are priced around \$14), or you can slide over to Graham Elliot (217 W. Hubbard St.; 312-624-9975) for the chef's foilpops, which consist of rounds of foie-gras torchon made to look like Pop Rocks candy (the candy, stick and all) rolled into Pop Rocks candy (the candy that crackles and pops in your mouth). The foie gras are not on the menu; you have to know to ask for them. But they're only \$5 apiece.

### **Cutting-edge cooking.**

You can pay hundreds to experience the culinary sleight-of-hand practiced at restaurants such as Alinea, Moto and Schwa, or you can try Otom (951 W. Fulton Market; 312-491-5804), which is Moto's less-expensive sibling and offers some of that Moto magic on an a la carte basis. For \$12, for example, you can dig into chef Daryl Nash's "cereal," which is a pasta dish made to resemble a cold-cereal breakfast. Served in a bowl, the dish consists of conchiglie, or shell pasta, which has been cooked, dehydrated and flash-fried so it resembles puffed cereal. It sits in the bowl with some sage and chunks of corned beef, and then a waiter pours in a warm, milk-based sauce containing cheddar cheese and Guinness stout. "It looks more like chocolate milk," Nash says.

**Kobe beef.** Prices for Kobe and wagyu beef (wagyu is the generic term; "Kobe" really should refer to beef that comes from the Kobe prefecture in Japan) are super-expensive, considerably more than USDA prime. Is it worth it? You can experiment by trying the \$18 Kobe burger at Park Grill (11 N. Michigan Ave., 312-521-7275). It's a 10-ounce monster of a burger, served with gorgonzola cheese, barbecued grilled onions and mustard on a sturdy pretzel bun.

**Lo** **obster.** Whole lobsters can be scary-expensive in Chicago, but lobster can be, especially if it's served up made from scratch. You can try it by this classic recipe (1110 Pleasant St.) or lobster bisque. The lobster meat (a la carte) is served on crusty bread served here and you've got a meal.



Arrowhead Specialty Meats supplies Park Grill with its Kobe beef burgers.