

Revolutionary Chicago: From the Rise of the Hog Butcher to Modern Culinary Capital

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America's food, from farm to supermarket to table, is the result of a continuing revolution in all areas of food production in the 19th and 20th centuries. A great many of these revolutionary changes emanated from one city: Chicago. Although New York and San Francisco may be better known internationally as food meccas, Chicago — often called the most American of all big cities because it is the dominant metropolis of the Midwest — is the epicentre of America's industrial and national distribution systems.

Formally incorporated in 1837 as a city of 4,000 people, Chicago became the driving force of enormous changes in American life and cuisine. Because of its location in the mid-continent with access to its tremendous food resources, the city was established by forward thinking planners and entrepreneurs as the hub of water, then rail, and later, road and air transportation networks. Chicago drew in the raw food of the continent, processed it, and sent its products out to the nation and the world. By 1880, Chicago was the world's leading wheat shipper; the grain produced and processed using machinery made in the city's factories. The world's first assembly lines were created for the Chicago stockyards and, by 1900; eighty percent of the nation's meat came from such companies as Armour and Swift. 'Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat', poet Carl Sandburg called the city in the 1920s.

Strong people in their powerful engine of a city needed big food — meat and bread — and they wanted it fast. This led to another revolution in food production and delivery: fast food. McDonald's was founded in Chicago in 1955 and is still headquartered in a Chicago suburb. This was the image of the city until the third revolution in the final decades of the 20th century as Chicago deindustrialized and became an international center of business, finance and services. Led by cutting-edge chefs and an eager, educated consumer base, Chicago became a leader in culinary innovation and experimentation and home to some of the world's leading restaurants, including Charlie Trotter's and Alinea.

Geography and Transportation

Chicago was built on a floodplain of a small, slow-flowing river that empties into one of the world's great freshwater seas, Lake Michigan. For much of the year the floodplain was a sodden marsh with a few areas of higher ground and some mud islets emerging in the sluggish stream. In the spring, the place was alive with black flies, and in summer with swarms of mosquitoes. In 1823, visiting Englishman William H. Keating found the climate awful: cold and wet

in winter, hot and humid in summer, with capricious weather patterns. The visitor claimed Chicago could never feed even its few hundred residents — 'a miserable race of men' — because of its climate and poor soil. The city's name came from a local Native American word meaning a wild leek or wild onion — an appropriate name for what would become a world-class food city.

But the 19th century was a moment in history when the idea of progress was at work. Americans worked with amazing speed to transform the continent's agriculture and industry to become number one in the world by century's end. Nothing seemed impossible given enough labor, inventiveness, will and greed. Chicago's harbor faced the large populations of the eastern United States and also offered passageway westward into the great wealth of the interior continent. But the harbor was blocked by a sandbar that took city leaders (using mainly Irish workers' labor) years to clear. Surveyors and engineers understood that other natural passes by land and by water led eastward across Indiana and Ohio to New York. They were the same people who built the most complex engineering feat of the 1820s: the Erie Canal that cut across New York State (finished in 1825). Businessmen linked to all levels of government wanted the potentially abundant agricultural products of the Midwest that could now easily (by the standards of the day) move to New York City. In return, merchants brought prized items to Chicago, such as fresh Atlantic oysters that were available in the city's newly built hotels as early as 1837.

Tributaries of the Mississippi, including the Illinois River, cut through the prairie. City planners knew that a canal like the Erie was needed. Also dug by Irish laborers, the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848 linked Lake Michigan with the interior rivers that flowed to the Gulf of Mexico, making Chicago the center of America's agricultural trade. Later in the century, an even greater engineering project was carried out. The Chicago River flowed into Lake Michigan carrying all kinds of disease-bearing effluents. If the river flow could be reversed, then all the detritus could be sent westward to interior rivers and ultimately the Mississippi River. Beginning in 1889, Chicago leaders planned, engineers designed, and newly arrived ethnic laborers — Irish, Germans, Bohemians, Italians, Poles and many African-Americans — worked to build the Sanitary and Ship Canal. Running parallel to the old I and M canal, the waterway actually reversed the Chicago River much to the dismay of down river towns. The lessons learned and techniques used in its construction were applied to another revolutionary project, the construction of the Panama Canal (1904-1914). It transformed world trade.

Nothing was easy. Without engine-driven machinery, much of the city's economic infrastructure, its domestic and business fabric, was built by human muscle. Because the place was built on a seasonally waterlogged swamp, the land had to be drained. Even so, for years the streets were seas of literally impassible mud. The solution in the 1850s was to raise the city's buildings. The job was accomplished using hundreds of hand-cranked jacks that raised stone buildings — incredibly with people in them — and then setting new raised foundations under them. The lead engineer was George Pullman, who later invented and built a sleeping and dining railway car empire, thanks to a largely Irish-immigrant labor force. Chicago was a leader in inventing and using the newest technologies to effect changes in the city.

Railroad building reinforced Chicago's place in America's food economy. William B. Ogden, the city's first mayor, worked fervently to open the Galena & Chicago Union railroad that ran to the new farming lands to the west. The railroad's first trip carried a load of wheat. The Illinois Central Railroad that ran north and south opened the market for southern and central Illinois wheat and fruit growers. Within 12 years, 11 railway lines covering 4,000 square miles led into the growing city, and by 1903, 27 railroad routes converged in the city. From 1852 to 1856, Chicago's wheat imports by rail grew nine times and corn imports four times. To accommodate the traffic, steam powered grain silos serviced by railcars sprang up. A decade later, more than four million bushels of grain passed through the city. By the 1880s, Chicago was the world's largest wheat shipper (surpassing the former leader, Odessa, Russia). Americans ate a lot of it — 160 pounds a year — but much was shipped to Europe. One of Chicago's earliest shipments was to the Crimea to feed British and allied troops in their war against the Russian Empire. And did we say that the 1850s song, 'Poor Paddy Works on the Railway', tells us who built them?

Wheat and Meat

What has been called the first agricultural revolution was centred on Chicago. The prairie to the west needed draining and plowing to become one of the world's great granaries. American inventors responded to the problem. John Deere (and other competitors) developed a self-cleaning steel plow that could cut the deep prairie soil in 1830. Wheat grew abundantly in the fresh soils and Cyrus Hall McCormick's new reapers and combines harvested it. A native Virginian, McCormick patented his mechanical reaper in 1842 and continued to refine it. Before long he saw that the newly opened flat prairies of the Midwest were ideal for large-scale machines and he moved in 1847 to Chicago, a 'city' of 25,000 people. With the canals, the Great Lakes, and the railroads, it was rapidly becoming the centre of commerce and distribution for America's number one industry, agriculture. By the 1870s, McCormick Harvesting Machine Company produced all the machines at a centralized

factory, rather than license work to subcontractors as other manufacturers did. The company also expanded by buying up smaller firms that had new or better products, much like today's conglomerates. The new factory eventually employed 7,000 workers and was Chicago's largest. When McCormick merged with two other Chicago firms in 1902 to form International Harvester (now called Navistar), it soon became the largest manufacturer of agricultural machinery in the world, supplying 80 percent of the American market. Chicago collected the fruit of the land, but also manufactured the means of creating it.

Chicago butcher Alexander Clybourn began slaughtering and packing for export beginning in the 1830s. Production skyrocketed from 683,600 pounds of pork in 1848 to 2.7 million pounds in the following decade. The American Civil War (1861-1865) saw the meat business boom as companies packed meat for the Union Armies. In 1865, city leaders decided to rationalize the meat industry by building a centralized stockyard that was served by rail lines. The Union Stockyards became the symbol of the gritty industrial city. City fathers in 1864-65 called it the greatest pork-packing city in the world, a new 'Porkopolis'.

Pork was destined for poorer consumers, beef for the better off (and eventually for the masses), said the Chicago packers. When railroads reached Kansas, beef cattle from as far away as Texas were shipped to Chicago. The first Union Stock Yards had holding pens for 21,000 cattle, and later, many more. The great packers Phillip Armour, Gustavus Swift, Nelson Morris and later Thomas E. Wilson, brought in and processed 12 million animals by 1890, and 14 to 18 million by 1910. In that era, 80 percent of America's meat was processed in Chicago factories that employed 25,000.

The processing systems devised by the meatpackers were the first of their kinds. Refrigerated railway cars, developed by Swift, were the means by which the city's stockyards supplied the nation. Armour, and then Swift, built the first assembly line — disassembly line, as commonly said. In buildings with multiple stories, animals were slaughtered and then broken down by task specialists at lower and lower levels until the offal and spare parts at the bottom were turned into sausages — early versions of Chicago's beloved hot dogs. New machines were used increasingly, from wheels to hoist and kill hogs to chopping machines to make the sausages. These factories were integrated facilities in which all types of meat products were made, from soap to leather. As Swift said, they used 'everything but the squeal'. Famously, Henry Ford visited the Armour plant, which was a tourist attraction, and got the idea of his automobile assembly line. Industrial production worldwide was transformed by the Ford model (as satirized by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*).

Market Innovations

The early 1800s brought the Midwest increasing agricultural wealth. In Chicago, merchants bought and sold commodities, especially grain, thus setting prices, and,

from the 1830s, some degree of quality control. It was a risky business, with many disputes rising among brokers. In 1848, a group of merchants assembled to create an organization to mitigate risk. Called the Board of Trade, it was granted the right to control grain grinding, and in 1859, the state granted it powers to formulate rules for trade and to mediate business disputes.

During the Civil War when massive supplies were needed by the Union armies, a system developed whereby contracts for commodities were given and payments made upon delivery. That arrangement became the futures market by the 1870s. The Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) became the place where U.S. merchants, farmers and grain traders came to haggle over price and formalize delivery terms for crops still in the field or in storage. While CBOT focused its agriculture expertise largely on corn and wheat, it also served as the foundation for the Chicago Butter and Egg Board, formed in 1898. In 1919, the Chicago Butter & Egg Board was reorganized as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME or the Merc or Chicago Merc). The CME traded butter and eggs, but also onions, pork bellies, live cattle and hogs. Today, Chicago remains the U. S.'s central futures market.

Dining Revolutions

Chicago also was home to revolutions in dining. With office workers packing the downtown, Chicago's Loop, lunchtime dining systems sprang up. Service had to be quick because lunch hours were typically 30 minutes. A hierarchy of dining establishments sprang from these lunchrooms.

In 1880, Herman H. Kohlsaat, who ran one of the country's largest commercial bakeries, founded a downtown dairy lunch room. 'Lucky' Charlie Weeghman, who started as a coffee boy at a popular Loop restaurant in the 1890s, pioneered 'one-armed' quick-service dairy eating places. The term refers to chairs with one arm, forming a small flat table like a school desk. He made a fortune. John Raklios, a Greek immigrant to Chicago, arrived penniless in 1901, and began his food career by selling apples in the street. He built a chain of white-tiled mainly one-armed lunch restaurants that were kept spotlessly clean and served reasonably priced food. By the 1920s, he had more than 30 outlets, most of which were served by a central commissary. These places were revolutions in public dining that remain today: fast, clean, and cheap.

Quick service places took on other names with somewhat different service and fare. John Kruger, who operated a smorgasbord restaurant in 1890s Chicago (the city had a large Scandinavian population) restyled his place a 'Cafeteria'. The name was simply a marketing ploy inspired by a trip to exotic Cuba, much in the news because of the Spanish-American war. Later, in the 20th century, the cafeteria and the serving line became intertwined, giving rise to a number of food service operations from institutions to restaurant chains. Modern buffet outlets are

an example and a return to the old smorgasbord concept: cheap and plentiful, if not high quality.

In the first decade of the 20th century small, simply appointed places with stand-up counters or a few tables called 'luncheonettes' appeared. Many were independent, a number were in drug stores. Walgreen's drug store (now a huge international chain) put a soda fountain in its second Chicago location in 1909 with great success. A few years later they added lunch counters serving luncheonette-style dishes, made in the first five years by Mrs. Myrtle Walgreen herself. Five-and-dime general merchandise stores opened lunch counters early in the 20th century, beginning with F. W. Woolworth (founded in 1879).

Immigration

Chicago is home to about 145 ethnic groups, many of which arrived after immigration reforms in 1965. Some of their cuisines have spread across the city, especially Mexican. But earlier immigrants created some of Chicago's iconic dishes, each with revolutionary implications for American food.

Irish

Many Irish immigrants landed in Chicago, lured first by the promise of a burgeoning Midwestern city, then, after the Great Fire, by the seemingly endless opportunities rebuilding that city. Unlike many other immigrant groups who arrived with little to no English, the Irish were able to move quickly into the ranks of public service and leadership positions through the late 1800s and into the 1900s.

Because Irish immigrants left behind famine and starvation, the idea of 'traditional Irish' food never played a role in most Irish-American households. Irish immigrants often desired nothing more than simple, filling meals of meat and potatoes. Certain Chicago public houses in the 1900s became popular with the Irish community, not just because of such filling cuisine, but also because of their Irish or Irish-American management.

In the 1990s, interest in Irish cultural traditions exploded with the worldwide success of the dance and music show 'Riverdance' (starring Chicago's own Michael Flatley, whose family owned a pub for many years.). Since that time, several restaurants and pubs have expanded their Irish concept beyond their name to include more traditional fare in their menus. The fare in all of these establishments is heavy on meat and potatoes with occasional fish dishes -- (fish and chips and lots of salmon as well as oysters and mussels are common, owing to their abundance in the waters off Ireland's coasts. Other popular dishes include bangers and mash, beef and Guinness stew, bridies, shepherd's pie, and soda bread. (Corned beef and cabbage, perhaps the single most dish associated with the Irish, is not an Irish dish. The Irish would have eaten bacon and cabbage instead, using bacon cured from the loin rather than the belly. In Ireland, beef typically was costlier

than pork. Irish immigrants started using corned beef when bacon, prohibited by Kosher laws, was not available in Jewish delis in crowded New York.)

Germans

The first major 'foreign' ethnic group was Germans who arrived after 1848. Their preference for bread, beer, potatoes, sausages, and meats cooked into hearty dishes fit right into Chicago's food profile. Some 470,000 strong by 1900, their numerous restaurants, butcher shops and bakeries were heavily patronized by all Chicagoans. Today the German population has been assimilated but the tradition lives on in restaurants such as the iconic Berghoff opened in 1878.

Another German legacy was breweries and taverns. The city's first proper brewery was opened by German immigrants as early as 1833, and beer became an economic engine for the fast-growing city. By 1869, there were almost as many barrels of beer made per year (246,212) as there were people (298,977). The beer was lagered, unlike the older English ale styles, and this became and remains the most popular American beer variety. In 1855, there were 675 taverns, almost all of them owned by German and Irish immigrants and the number grew steadily until Prohibition was imposed in 1919 and remained in force until 1933. Chicago's gangs had been in business before Prohibition, but if there was a golden era for them, it was the 1920s as they opened illegal breweries, smuggled liquor from Canada, and replaced legitimate taverns with speakeasies. By the mid-1920s, the city had some 20,000 speakeasies and 15 breweries. This age also saw the rise and fall of the most notorious Chicagoan of them all, Al Capone and made Chicago a byword for violence. When alcohol became legal again in 1933, some of the illegal joints became legitimate restaurants and nightclubs.

Jews

Another important immigrant group was East European Jews, whose numbers soared between 1880 and 1930 to reach 270,000 by 1920. Jewish street vendors sold everything at the famous street bazaar, Maxwell Street, which is still a center of street food, although today mainly Mexican. Their all-beef sausages (made without pork to conform to Jewish dietary laws) became one of the most iconic foods, the hot dog. With about 2,500 locations, the Chicago area has more hot dog restaurants than any other city in the world

The Chicago hot dog has an interesting history. The early street food vendors in the 1880s made sandwiches using homemade German sausages. Then they increasingly used sausages made by the new massive packing operations from the leftover scraps from butchering, including unsavory bits. But hot dogs were a source of cheap protein for impoverished Chicagoans, many of whom worked for the packing companies. Hot dogs also could be eaten on the run and at baseball games.

Because Jews did not eat pork and beef was so plentiful, all-beef sausages became the default hot dog in their area. By the 1920s, the Jewish hot-dog makers' reputations for quality were so good that the all-beef hot dog became the sausage of choice for street vendors and the growing number of hot dog stands. After World War II, hot dog stands grew more sophisticated in décor, foods, and numbers. Veterans returning to Chicago looked for businesses to start, and what better than the familiar and loved hot dog? Stands became canvases for vernacular art and described the social character of neighborhoods. To this day, Chicagoans are attached to their local stands, often arguing with fellow citizens about the merits of each place.

Chicago-style hot dogs are defined by an elaborate style of toppings that reflects their mixed origins. An all-beef hot dog, preferably natural casing, is heated in a hot water bath, placed on a steamed bun (poppy seed or plain), then topped with a smear of yellow mustard, a trail of bright green relish, chopped fresh onions, sliced tomatoes, dill pickle spears, mildly hot pickled 'sport' peppers and, optionally, a sprinkling of celery salt. French fries are an expected accompaniment. And ketchup is strictly forbidden on the hot dog (though it might be available for the fries)

Italians

Italian immigration increased dramatically during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, and by 1900, some 16,000 Italian-born newcomers had made Chicago home. Mostly from southern Italy, these newcomers were mainly manual labourers. Some opened fruit and vegetable businesses that ranged from street vending to wholesale operations. Two famous Chicago dishes came from this community.

The first is the Italian beef sandwich, or simply 'beef', which is enormously popular as a quick meal in fast-food restaurants, especially in 'beef stands' and is also offered for lunch in many sit-down restaurants, especially those featuring Italian-American food.

To make an Italian beef sandwich, a beef rump roast is slowly roasted while partially submerged in beef stock. Once cooked, the beef is thinly sliced and then bathed in the reheated broth and cooking juices (called au jus, juice, or gravy). Forkfuls of the soaked beef are placed inside long, narrow pieces of French bread cut lengthwise. According to individual preferences, a ladleful of juice may be added (thus served 'wet') or the entire sandwich may be plunged into the juice to soak the bread thoroughly ('dipped'). The traditional additions are hot peppers (*giardiniera*) and/or sweet peppers (fried or roasted mild bell peppers). The best beef stands prepare the meat and condiments in-house. Beef sandwiches are often eaten along with French fries: Many well-regarded stands offer freshly cut, twice-fried potatoes.

The sandwich most likely originated at working-class Italian-American family weddings at which families supplied their own food, including sandwiches filled with

slices of wet-roasted beef. Given the volume of food required, cooks would prepare the beef and often take it to a local Italian bakery for cooking in a large oven, with the bakery supplying the bread. Parallel to the pizza business, beef stands proliferated greatly after World War II, soon gaining popularity outside the Italian-American community. Chicago Italian beef differs in flavor and texture from other beef sandwiches made around the nation, and so has become a destination food for tourists.

The second iconic dish is deep dish pizza — a thick-crust pizza with sides ranging from 25 to 50 millimeters tall. The dough is covered with mozzarella cheese, and then a tomato sauce made from plum tomatoes, sometimes sausage, and more cheese. It is so thick that it takes 45 minutes to make. Critics who think that pizza should be thin crusted, as in those in Naples, have called deep-dish pizza ‘a casserole’ (a dish also integral to Midwestern American cuisine.)

According to the most widely accepted story of its invention, at the height of World War II, Ike Sewell, the executive of a distillery company, partnered with Ric Riccardo Sr., a prominent downtown Chicago restaurateur with Italian roots to create a dish that catered to the many servicemen and war workers in the city. Likely based on thick pizza breads made by the city’s Italian bakers, Sewell wanted ‘big’ food, knife-and-fork food that would fill very hungry workers. They came up with deep-dish pizza. Deep-dish pans were manufactured to specifications, and their first outlet, Pizzeria Uno, opened on December 6, 1943, in the basement of an old mansion near the Loop.

The pizza did not sell well until it was discovered and written about by a reporter who happened to be a World War II veteran. Pizzeria Uno became so popular that Sewell opened Pizzeria Due in 1955 in another Victorian mansion a block away from the original. Many Uno and Due alumni started their own pizza parlors. The original pizza chef teamed up with two cab drivers and a Sicilian butcher to launch Gino’s East in 1966. The crust was equally thick, but the crust was more polenta-based than at Uno’s or Due’s. New locations were added and today there are 11 locations of the Gino’s chain in the Chicago area, Wisconsin and Texas. Another chain was started by Lou Malnati whose father had been the manager at Uno’s. It has almost fifty outlets and ships frozen pizza across the country. Today deep-dish pizzas are served around the world.

Mexicans

Chicago has one of the largest and most diverse Mexican communities in the United States and this has affected Chicago foodways in many ways. A strong sense of home identity ensures the preservation of regional culinary practices, including those of Guerrero, Michoacan, Durango, and Jalisco states. Azteca Foods is the largest manufacturer of tortillas in the U.S. Mexicans have been employed in the city’s restaurants and hotels from the 1920s and contributed to Chicago’s rise as a great

restaurant city in the 1980s by staffing and opening many award-winning restaurants. After travelling extensively around Mexico, Rick Bayless and his wife Deann opened two of what many considered the country’s top Mexican restaurants, Frontera Grill and the five-star Topolobampo. Working closely with local farmers and purveyors, Bayless showcased the vibrant flavors of authentic Mexican cuisine, such as complexly spiced *moles*, light citrus marinades, grilled quail, smoky chilies, and cilantro-enhanced dishes. Bayless’ successful operations served as much-admired, much-copied templates in coming decades for ‘high-end Mexican’ establishments throughout the world.

Greeks

Another immigrant group that influenced both local and national foodways was the Greeks. Between 1890 and 1930 more than 450,000 came to the U.S., many of them young men. Starting as fruit and produce peddlers, they opened grocery stores, wholesale food businesses, restaurants, diners, bakeries, and coffee, candy and ice cream shops. The Dove Bar, ice cream on a stick, covered in high quality chocolate, and one of America’s premium confections, was developed by a Greek confectioner. Although the gyros sandwich originated in Greece, it was the invention of a special rotisserie by a local businessman that made it a national speciality.

Uniquely Chicago Dishes

Related to the gyros is a indigenous Chicago dish: the Jim Shoe. This is a large submarine sandwich filled with gyros meat, corned beef, and roast beef — often chopped and cooked on a flat-top griddle with a technique called *tak a tak* in Pakistan. Lettuce and tomato are almost always included, and onions, cheese, tzatziki, mayonnaise, mustard and *giardiniera* [a spicy mixed vegetable pickle] are common additions. The Jim Shoe (no one knows where the name came from) originated several decades ago in the African-American neighbourhoods of Chicago’s South and West Sides, although in recent years it can be found on the North Side and even in Milwaukee and Indianapolis. The shops are almost always Pakistani owned and feature extensive menus without pork products. Although little known outside of Chicago, Jim Shoe embodies many of the features of the city’s culinary legacy: lots of meat plus Greek, Pakistani and African-American roots.

Another fast food dish unique to Chicago’s south side is the mother-in-law sandwich. This is a tamale covered with chili and usually served in a hot dog bun. The tamales are manufactured locally by Tom Tom Tamale (in business since 1937) or Supreme Tamale (since 1950). The name goes back at least to the 1950s (in the Back of the Yards neighborhood), but is likely older. As the story goes, it got its name because the snack, like the relative, is well known for causing indigestion.

Another Revolution

Dramatic changes came to Chicago dining beginning in the later 1970s. From its steak and potatoes beginnings, the city soon expanded its menu with fast food, fancy French food, regional American food, fusion food, farm-to-table food, and molecular gastronomy — and all permutations between. Chicagoans' growing sophistication about food and a crop of new, young chefs created one of the fine-dining capitals of the world by the early 2000s.

Top ingredients became the focus for one pioneer chef, Charlie Trotter. In 1987, he created an elegant, fine-dining establishment that bore his name. With Trotter's intricate degustation menus, it became the top restaurant in Chicago, and one of the best in the country. The same year that Trotter began his restaurant, the Baylesses opened Frontera Grill. It would become as influential for its refined, authentic take on Mexican food as Trotter's was for top fine dining.

In 2005, Grant Achatz opened a restaurant that would reach fame around the world for its daring, creative fare that utilized what would be called 'molecular gastronomy'. Alinea was like no other restaurant in town. With partner Nick Kokonas, he soon earned kudos for one of the best restaurants in the world.

Chicago's fine-dining mode continues with restaurants such as Blackbird, Acadia and Grace. Both Alinea and Grace received 3 Michelin stars in 2015, joining 20 other starred restaurants in the city. Chefs across the city are

expanding their horizons, forming innovative restaurant groups with rosters of more casual, packed restaurants. The innovation continues in the city by the lake.

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