



# ACME Hotel Company

CHICAGO ON THE ROCKS

BY KENDALL JONES



The man sitting across from me on the train struggled without success to stay awake as the Blue Line rattled its way from O'Hare International Airport into the heart of Chicago. Each jolting bump and turn snapped him briefly out of his slumber and his nodding consciousness was a powerful contagion begging me to sleep. It had been a long day marked by a pre-dawn cab ride and delayed flights, but somehow I stayed awake.

I soon found myself stepping off the train in Chicago's River North district, just one block away from my destination, the ACME Hotel Company, home of the Berkshire Room. While checking in, the clerk asked what time I wanted my coffee delivered in the morning. The prospect of a thermos of piping hot, fresh coffee waiting outside my door in the morning immediately re-energized me. Maybe this wouldn't be an early night after all.

## HARMONIOUS HOUSING

Located in the heart of one of the city's most vibrant neighborhoods, surrounded by dozens of restaurants and nightspots, ACME Hotel Company is a sleek, modern, luxury hotel, with an unmistakable rock-n-roll vibe that literally echoes through the hallways. Murals and artwork are everywhere and the album covers framed on the elevator walls are not merely decorations, they reflect the customized, ACME-designed playlist: Pink Floyd, Flaming

Lips, AC/DC, The White Stripes and more. Now that is my kind of elevator music.

The knock-n-drop coffee service (available 24 hours a day) and the rock-serenaded elevator rides speak volumes about the hotel's philosophy: comfort need not come at the expense of fun and it shouldn't break the bank. The well-appointed rooms are affordable by Chicago standards (ranging between \$106 and \$384, depending on the season), the coffee is complimentary, and the knock-n-drop breakfast service includes fresh, inexpensive

options from the West Town Bakery, which is adjacent to the lobby.

I decided to stay in one of the spacious yet affordable suites, which teemed with important amenities, like an uncommonly low-priced minibar, a Bowers and Wilkins Zeppelin wireless audio system and a television equipped with hook ups for my devices, both PC and Apple. In the bathroom, a set of big red lips glowed on the mirror, a hotel-wide design feature that also functions as the room's very sultry nightlight.

## CHICAGO'S RIVER NORTH DISTRICT

Over the past 40 years, the River North district evolved from a scruffy part of town into one of the city's premiere destinations for art, food and nightlife. Michigan Avenue (aka The Magnificent Mile) marks the eastern border and the Chicago River marks the southern and western borders.

Along with hundreds of restaurants, bars and entertainment venues, River North is home to the country's highest concentration of art galleries outside of Manhattan. It is a walkable, tourist-friendly part of the city, with service to the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line and within easy walking distance of the city's downtown core.



## DINING IN RIVER NORTH DISTRICT



If you don't spend all of your money shopping the Magnificent Mile, the one-mile shopping stretch of Michigan Avenue that hosts more than 460 stores and 275 restaurants and bars, head into the River North neighborhood for one of these deep dishes.

### THE BAR AT FRONTERA GRILL

Celebrity Chef Rick Bayless' flagship restaurants, Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, sit side-by-side on Clark Street, sharing a wall and a simple theme: fiercely authentic, upscale Mexican cuisine. Scoring reservations at either spot is challenging, but the bar at Frontera Grill offers the best opportunity to enjoy the food, and one of the signature Mezcal-based margaritas. || [rickbayless.com](http://rickbayless.com)

### EATALY

This monument to all things Italian is bigger than you're imagining. It's like an Italian-themed amusement park: a single building housing a grocery store, department store, brewpub, wine bars, restaurants and more. In the morning, hit Gran Bar Lavazza for an expertly drawn cappuccino and a cornetto (croissant), in the afternoon have a snack and a house-brewed beer at the Birreria (beer bar), and stay for dinner at one of Eataly's several restaurants. || [eataly.com](http://eataly.com)

### FARMHOUSE

If you crave elevated, farm-fresh cuisine, paired with an impressive beer list, you are looking for Farmhouse. Described as a "farm to tavern" concept, the restaurant owns a farm outside the city where it grows and raises many of the ingredients it uses. The menu changes with the season, but know that Farmhouse can blow your mind with something as simple as cauliflower, which it prepares with maitake mushrooms, wheat berries, orange, beer and white soy. You'll find a rotating selection of 28 beers on tap, 26 in bottles and 10 more in cans. As you'd expect, given the concept here, the beers are all from local and regional producers. || [farmhousechicago.com](http://farmhousechicago.com)



Outside my suite, the hotel offered more stuff that helped me feel at home on the road, like a gym, a whirlpool and a coin-op laundry center, which is especially valuable when you travel light on long trips. The Einstein Room, located on the mezzanine level above the lobby, provides a meeting space, a foosball table and a comfortable living space where you are welcome to kick back and relax.

### BERKSHIRE GLAMOUR

Having familiarized myself with the surroundings, I developed a powerful thirst and headed down to the Berkshire Room, ACME Hotel Company's lounge. Truth be told, this is a major reason I opted to stay at this hotel—the lounge is one of the most-celebrated libation destinations in Chicago.

While everything else at the hotel screams of modernity, the lounge provides a touch of Old World elegance stirred thoughtfully with its contemporary surroundings. Admiring the refinished terrazzo floor, vintage spirits bottles and antique punchbowls, I easily believed the stories about 1940s mob bosses holding court regularly in this structure. Since its construction in the 1920s, the building has always been a hotel or restaurant, the Berkshire Room taking its name from the property's original name as the Berkshire Hotel. If the walls could talk, the stories they would tell.

Today, people visit the Berkshire Room for its esteemed craft cocktail program, which includes a breathtaking array of American whiskeys, ryes and bourbons along with a selection of house-blended, barrel-finished drinks. The "Dealer's Choice" option allows you to choose your spirit, flavor profile, style of glassware and then leave the rest up to the mixologists. I ordered a Cognac, herbaceous, in a rocks glass and was not disappointed. Live like a rock star and ask for the vintage spirits list, which invites you to drop

a portion of your paycheck on a single shot. Two fingers of 1936 Mount Vernon Rye will set you back \$300.

In addition to booze, the menu features upscale snacks and desserts. I enjoyed the bacon-dusted popcorn and swooned over beef short rib sugo, served on a bed of bleu cheese polenta. As for dessert, I decided to wait until later. After all, I had Chicago's River North district to explore before my head hit the pillow.

I walked through the lobby, passed an open elevator blaring "More Than a Feeling," and stepped out onto Ohio Street. I had a decision to make. Which direction should I go? With literally hundreds of places to eat and drink within easy walking distance, there was no wrong answer. I walked away knowing the hotel and those big red lips would be waiting for me when my wanderlust waned. ●



## RIVER NORTH LIBATIONS



Be it before or after dinner (or anytime doors are open—no judgment), step into one of these legendary and historic watering holes for a true taste of Chicago.

### BLUE CHICAGO

Expect nothing fancy at this venerable blues bar, where a Sunday night back-up band is probably better than any blues band headlining shows in the Pacific Northwest. A serviceable beer list and straightforward cocktails (well drinks) are all you need to accompany the music. For 30 years they've served up the blues seven nights a week and since 1991 the same guy (Lorenzo) has worked the door. || [bluechicago.com](http://bluechicago.com)

### POPS FOR CHAMPAGNE

Your bartender will proudly tell you their Champagne selection is the largest of any bar in America, and with 250 different bubbly on the menu, it's hard to disagree. They also serve cocktails, beer and still wines, but that's not the point of visiting this bar, which happens to be right across the street from ACME Hotel Company. If you don't like your Champagne straight up, consider one of the sparkling cocktails. Elegant, yet modern and casual, Pops for Champagne is a great place to start or finish the night, with live jazz Sunday through Tuesday. || [popsforchampaigne.com](http://popsforchampaigne.com)



### WATERSHED

Located in the basement below Pops for Champagne, this dark and cozy bar feels something like a speakeasy, but there's no secret handshake required. The beer-focused menu offers a broad selection of local and regional beers, along with wine and cocktails, while the food menu at Watershed is loaded with small plates and appetizers. On Sunday nights the staff works the turntable, spinning vintage vinyl, and on Tuesdays you'll enjoy half-price beers from a featured brewery. || [watershedbar.com](http://watershedbar.com)

### GREEN DOOR TAVERN

The story of the Green Door Tavern is a lesson in Chicago history. Without going into details, this is the last freestanding wood-framed structure in the city, constructed immediately following the Great Fire of 1871. During Prohibition, a green door signified the presence of a speakeasy. Yes, there was a speakeasy in the basement of the Green Door Tavern. In fact, it's still there and, along with all the memorabilia comfortably cluttering the interior, is a nod to Chicago's history. They serve food and cocktails, but the focus here is the draft beer list, which includes a selection of less-common local beers you might not see on tap anywhere else in the area. || [greendoorchicago.com](http://greendoorchicago.com)



BERKSHIRE ROOM BY KIM SHARPE JONES, TOP CENTER PHOTO BY THINK LEIGH PHOTOGRAPHY

BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO BY THINK LEIGH PHOTOGRAPHY, TOP RIGHT PHOTO BY KIM SHARPE JONES