

Frankly, most of the affordable lunch food in the Loop sucks: salty soup, grease-drenched burgers, wilted salads and service that would make a Soviet grocery clerk look obsequious

BEST DELI

GENE'S SAUSAGE SHOP & DELICATESSEN

Polish Americans and other omnivores flock here for garlicky hard salami, fresh kielbasa, golabki (beef-and-pork-stuffed cabbage rolls), smoked pigs knuckles and pierogi. Gene's is a straight-up-Chicago deli: Unlike its cousins in New York it has no room for tables or chairs, devoting every bit of space to Eastern European delights. Gene's is the sole importer of many products lining the shelves, such as exotic multi-flower honey from Poland and a whole line of mustards with names so consonant-heavy they tie American tongues. Yet Gene's greatest gift to the people of Chicago is the complete line of Polish-style sausages made on the premises and hung in neat, turgid rows along the wall behind the spotless half-a-city-block deli counter. With its White Eagle bas relief facade and red-and-white flower boxes on the roof, Gene's seems more sausage palace than deli. A warning to the

uninitiated: the heady smell of the fresh meat and yeasty breads may prove overwhelming to Americans used to our hermetically sealed grocery stores. Just inhale deeply, muscle your way to the stunning deli case and take a number.

5328 West Belmont, 777.6322

Readers Choice: Ashenknaz, 12 East Cedar, 944.5006

BEST BAR FOR BREAKFAST

CLUB 747

New Orleans has the proudest tradition of round-the-clock inebriation, with few bars admitting to ever locking their doors. But Chicago has a few notorious places, round-the-clock brownstone cop bars that keep the doors always locked unless they know you know somebody. Then there are bars that open at 7am for those who stayed up all night or woke too early with the shakes. But the best dawn drinking has to be the cruel, self-hating act of getting crocked on the red-eye from L.A., drinking cans of Coors or Bud under your little airline blanket until dawn. You arrive a mile above your home, bleary and bloodshot, hanging stabbed

to the sky, looking down at the still-chilled city. The plane lands a little after six, and the ground-bound bars will open at seven. Knock back a topper alongside three or four hardcores with their shots and short beers, and that postman who used to lose your magazines two apartments ago. Go home. Doze. Wake. Regret.

BEST EGGS BENEDICT

ERWIN

There's always serious disaster potential when you order eggs Benedict. Most restaurants and diners whisk out an appetite-suppressing concoction slathered in so much underarm-stain-yellow hollandaise sauce you have to wade to reach the poached eggs, Canadian bacon and English muffin. But Erwin serves eggs Benedict with a light touch. The hollandaise sauce has just the right mix of spices, drizzled judiciously so as not to reduce the English muffin to gruel. The Canadian bacon doesn't fight back when you bite into it; eggs come how you order them. With home-fried potatoes, fried onions and a fresh wedge of orange to round out the dish, Erwin's eggs Benedict is worth the trip when you're ready to move up from the Egg McMuffin. 2925 North Halsted, 528.7200. Brunch served on Sunday only

BEST FISH & CHIPS

RED LION PUB

Perhaps you might think only the oh-so-British surroundings make the fried cod here taste like the finest Dover Sole. Somehow, fish and chips seem so much more scrumptious and homey when washed down with a jar of Newcastle near a red telephone booth, as a friendly black cat watches the proceedings and classic films play on the pub



**BUCKTOWN & WICKER PARK'S
BEST SZECHUAN & MANDARIN CUISINE**