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Monique Souriho/Gai Noi

FOOD & DRINK

Eating in Minneapolis Has Never Been Better, Or More Vital

As the city recovers from two months of unrest, restaurants—long a celebration of the city's diversity—are ready for diners to return.

BY DAVID FARLEY

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When Oprah asked Prince in 1996 why he still lives in Minneapolis rather than, say, anywhere else on the planet, the self-proclaimed Purple Yoda said, “It’s so cold, it keeps the bad people out.”

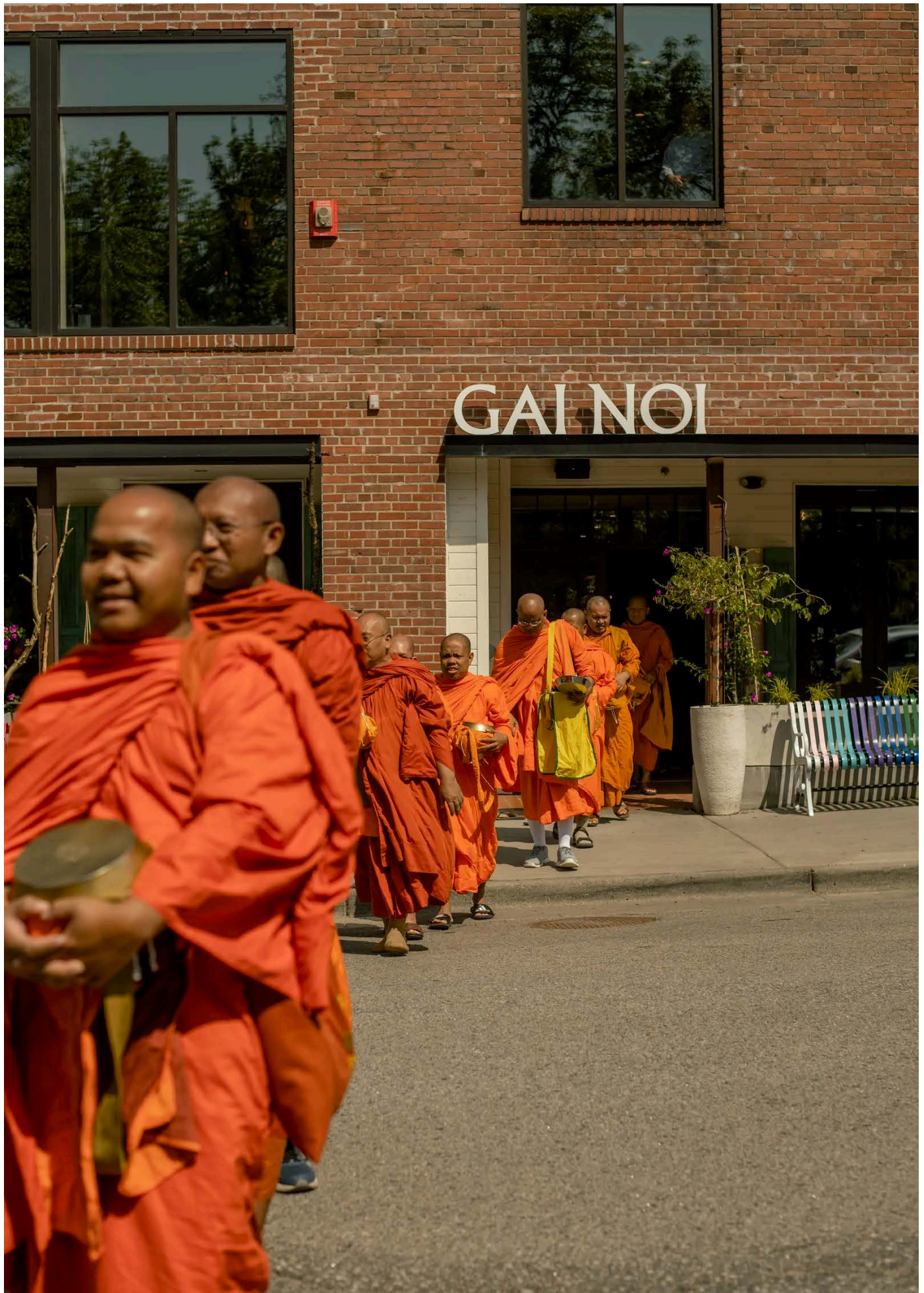
That's not to say that hospitality is lacking: The city has a 200-year history of embracing newly arrived immigrants and, over the past decade, burnt-out bicoastals lured by that Midwest Nice. Among them have been intrepid, talented chefs, undeterred by the cold, who have slowly but surely created a remarkably diverse food scene, using the agricultural bounty that defines the region. As early as 2011, Anthony Bourdain flagged the city’s up and coming chops saying that it “just gets better every year”.



So when, in December 2025, thousands of ICE agents descended upon the Twin Cities, [initiating two months of unrest and violence](#), restaurants were not at the forefront of the headlines, but acutely absorbing its impact. Employees felt unsafe coming to work; customers were scared to leave their homes. Three months later, after ICE has largely withdrawn from the city and left a traumatized community in its wake, restaurant owners are eager to revive what they’d been in the middle of: cultivating a dining culture that

celebrated both immigrant and native culinary traditions, in spaces that made everyone feel at home. They also, frankly, need business back.

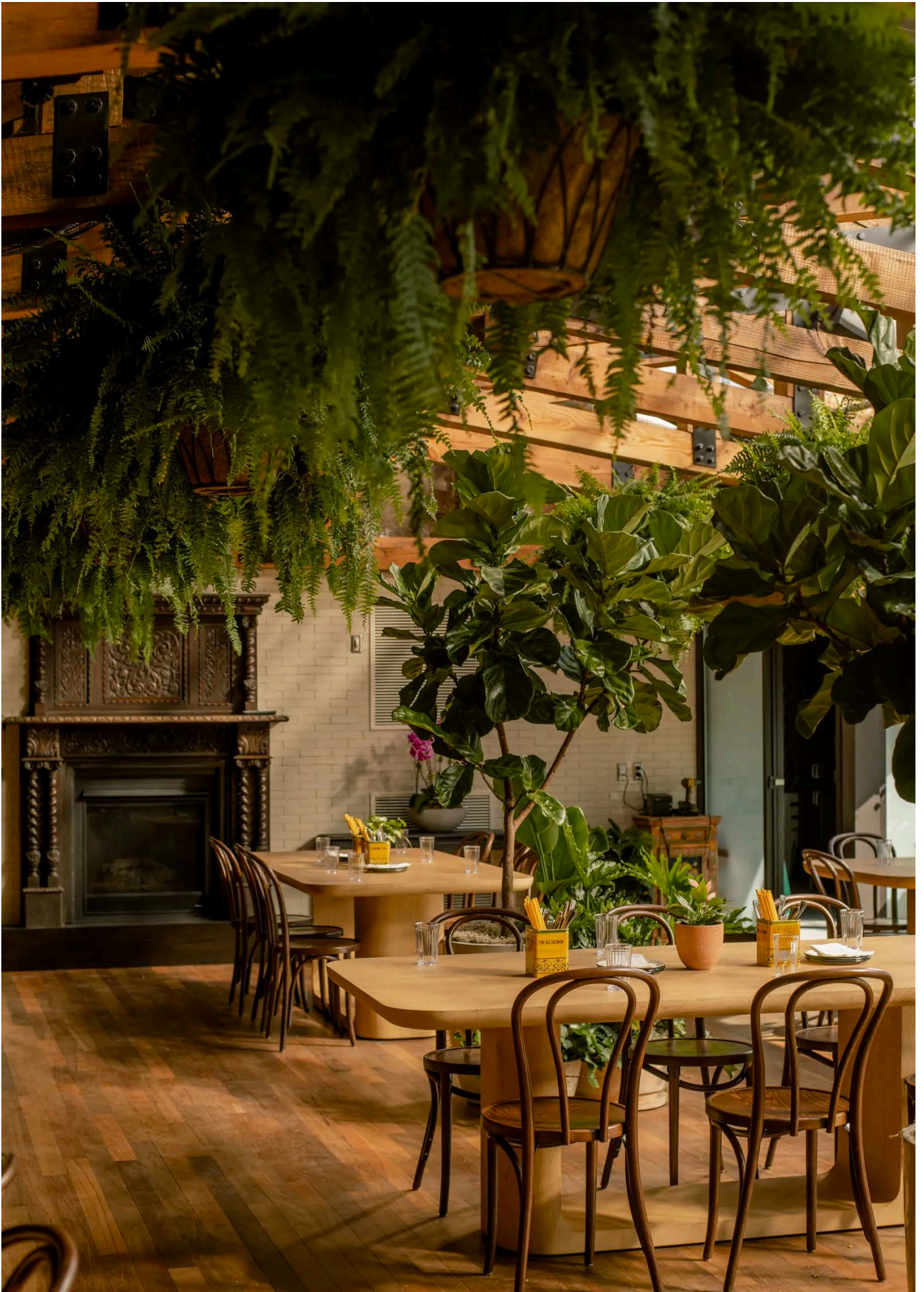
Having traveled to Minneapolis dozens of times, I returned to check in on some of my favorite restaurants, and to find new ones, with one question leading the way: What does it mean to eat in Minneapolis right now?

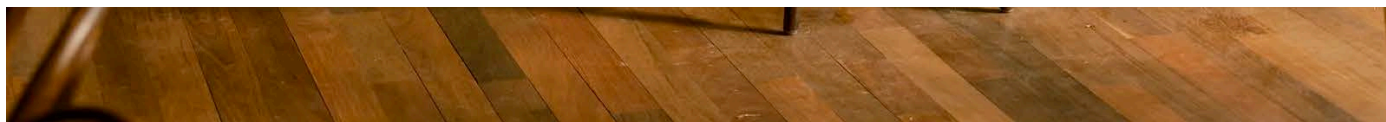




A line of monks in traditional kapota exit Gai Noi, a popular Laotian restaurant in Minneapolis

Monique Souriho





Inside Gai Noi, abundant natural light and greenery create a happy mood. Monique Souriho

A diversity of influences

Minneapolis is demographically unique, but it wasn't always as varied as it is now—there was a time when lutefisk, a Scandinavian lye-treated cod dish, was its defining immigrant dish. In the '70s and '80s, large numbers of Laotian and Hmong emigrants arrived, fleeing the persecution that followed the Vietnam War. Then, the Somali Civil War drove in a large community starting in the '90s, creating what is now the diaspora's largest in the country. As with many cities in the United States, there is also a sizable population of people from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, representing roughly 10% of residents.

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The contributions of these communities to the dining scene have been notable. Somalis have opened up traditional restaurants—[Hufan](#), or [Quruxlow](#), both on E. Lake Street, serve staples like goat and rice as well alongside milky Somali tea spiced with cardamom and ginger—and [Oro by Nixta](#), perhaps the most celebrated Mexican restaurant in the city right now, is joined by a sprawl of taquerias from downtown to the suburbs ([Mercado Centro](#) also on E. Lake counts 11 food vendors serving dishes like heaping barbacoa tortas and cheese bolillos with jalapenos). Most recently, the area's Hmong, Vietnamese, and

Laotian populations have begun opening dynamic Southeast Asian restaurants that offer creative spins on ancestral dishes. It makes Minneapolis the kind of place where the hottest table or most cravable dish often has origins thousands of miles away. It's the kind of city where you never have to eat the same dish twice.



Yia Vang, chef and owner of Vinai, an acclaimed Hmong restaurant in the city, says “So much of the country doesn't know what Hmong is. People often ask me what country I'm from.” Vinai



Gai Noi chef and owner Ann Ahmed came to the Twin Cities from Laos at age five and grew up working in her parents' restaurants before opening her own. *Monique Souriho*

“If you think the Twin Cities are just Scandinavians, then you’re missing out on a huge part of this place—I can’t emphasize enough how much immigrants are important for the Twin Cities dining scene,” chef Yia Vang, owner of the acclaimed Hmong restaurant [Vinai](#)—which made *Condé Nast Traveler’s* [2025 Hot List](#)—told me as I ate a plate of his sticky, fall-off-the-bone braised beef ribs, which were stacked like a Jenga tower. There were also roasted sweet potatoes doused in a curry-laced Panang aioli and sprinkled with roasted peanuts. The Hmong community, specifically, has created a range of culinary offerings not found elsewhere in the US. “So much of the country doesn’t know what Hmong is. People often ask me what country I’m from,” he said, laughing (the Hmong ethnic group don’t have their own country but have resided for centuries in northern swaths of [Vietnam](#), Laos, and [Thailand](#)).

On a frigid winter night, I stepped into [Mara](#), a Mediterranean restaurant in the [Four Seasons Minneapolis](#). There was no ordinary dinner service but instead, a “Heritage Dinner” being curated, with each of the four courses from a different local Hmong chef—Vang of [Vinai](#), but also Diane Moua of [Diane’s Place](#), Marc Heu of [Patisserie Paris](#), and Thony Yang, the Chef de Cuisine at Mara. The sold-out event was a feast of colors—purple sticky rice, green herbs like black sesame leaves and fragrant cilantro, and deeply golden roasted quail, glistening in the light from a black garlic glaze.



A table at Diane's Place includes a whole chicken stuffed with its egg rolls, red curry soup with mussels and prawns, duck stew, steamed pork rolls, a lychee cocktail, and an imported beer. Connor Siedow



Chef Diane Moura of Diane's Place is one of many chefs who came up in the Spoon & Stable kitchen before opening an acclaimed Minneapolis restaurant of their own. Diane's

I was fortunate to be seated next to Lee Pao Xiong, professor and founding director of the [Center for Hmong Studies](#) at Concordia University in St. Paul. “This Hmong dinner, with four great local Hmong chefs, would have never been possible here 20 years ago,” he told me. “Until about a decade ago, it was a challenge to get any Southeast Asian ingredients here. Those days are long gone.”

It's true: As Minnesota's farms have adapted to new communities and their needs, many have benefited. Chef [Ann Ahmed](#), who was born in Laos and arrived in the Twin Cities in the early 1980s at age five, grew up working at her parents' restaurants, like the now-shuttered Lao Market & Deli in Minneapolis. She continues to showcase Laotian flavors, though: She has since become the celebrated chef-owner of Southeast Asian-accented [Lat14](#), elevated Laotian spot [Khâluna](#), and her newest Laotian restaurant, [Gai Noi](#), which was named the [best restaurant of 2023](#) by *Mpls. St Paul Magazine*. “We've really begun celebrating diversity here and it's become the strength of our dining scene,” she said when I met her in Gai Noi's light-filled dining room across from Loring Park. “We all have our own stories to tell—and we're telling our stories through our food.”

Homeward bound

This is Minneapolis's key: There are not just a range of influences in the city, but a remarkable agricultural landscape from which to draw on. Few metropolises have such a bounty of fresh ingredients and close proximity to the farms that produce them as the Twin Cities. [Dara Moscowitz Grumdahl](#), restaurant critic at *Mpls St. Paul Magazine*, told me over the phone that while the farm-to-table movement might feel like a constant buzzword these days, the concept is of particular importance here. “What makes us stand apart from New York and Los Angeles is that we are so much more interconnected to farms,” she said. “You can get in a car and drive for 20 minutes and you'll be in farm country. Every chef here uses 20 different producers and here you can call a farmer and have whatever you want that day.”



Chef Gavin Kaysen in his restaurant, Spoon & Stable, which has become a percolator for culinary talent in the Twin Cities and an excellent place to dine in its own right. Sarah Corder

Unlike other parts of the country, “we never gave up on gluten here,” she added with a laugh, referencing Minneapolis’ nickname of “Mill City” and long history of flour production. There’s also the high quality dairy: “We never became an oat milk town [either].”

It may be one of the reasons that homegrown chefs who previously thought they had to leave the Midwest for a career in fine-dining have finally returned. Chef Gavin Kaysen is one of them: After leaving his hometown of Minneapolis in 1999 and working his way through Chef Daniel Boulud’s culinary empire in New York, he ultimately returned to Minneapolis over a decade ago. “Around 2012, I tried getting a table at [Bar La Grassa](#) in Minneapolis and the only reservation I could get was 9:30 p.m. on Tuesday night,” he said. “That’s when I said to myself, *Hub, it’s really happening here.*”



Outside [Bûcheron](#) on Nicollet Ave, a French restaurant that won the James Beard Award for best new restaurant in 2025. Chad Holder

In 2014, Kaysen opened [Spoon & Stable](#), which married his French technique with a menu that highlighted Minnesotan seasonality. It also added something much more meaningful to the Twin Cities—an incubator for the generation of chefs currently making waves in the city. Sean Sherman, the aforementioned Moua of [Diane's Place](#) and Vin of [Vinai](#), and Adam Ritter of [Bûcheron](#) (James Beard Award winner of Best New Restaurant in 2025) all logged time in the kitchen at Spoon & Stable. And yet Kaysen is the first to admit that the dining scene only gets better as his colleagues open places of their own. He continues to look for ways to spotlight talent beyond his own (the aforementioned Mara is one of his restaurants, and the Heritage Dinner is just one of those platforms).

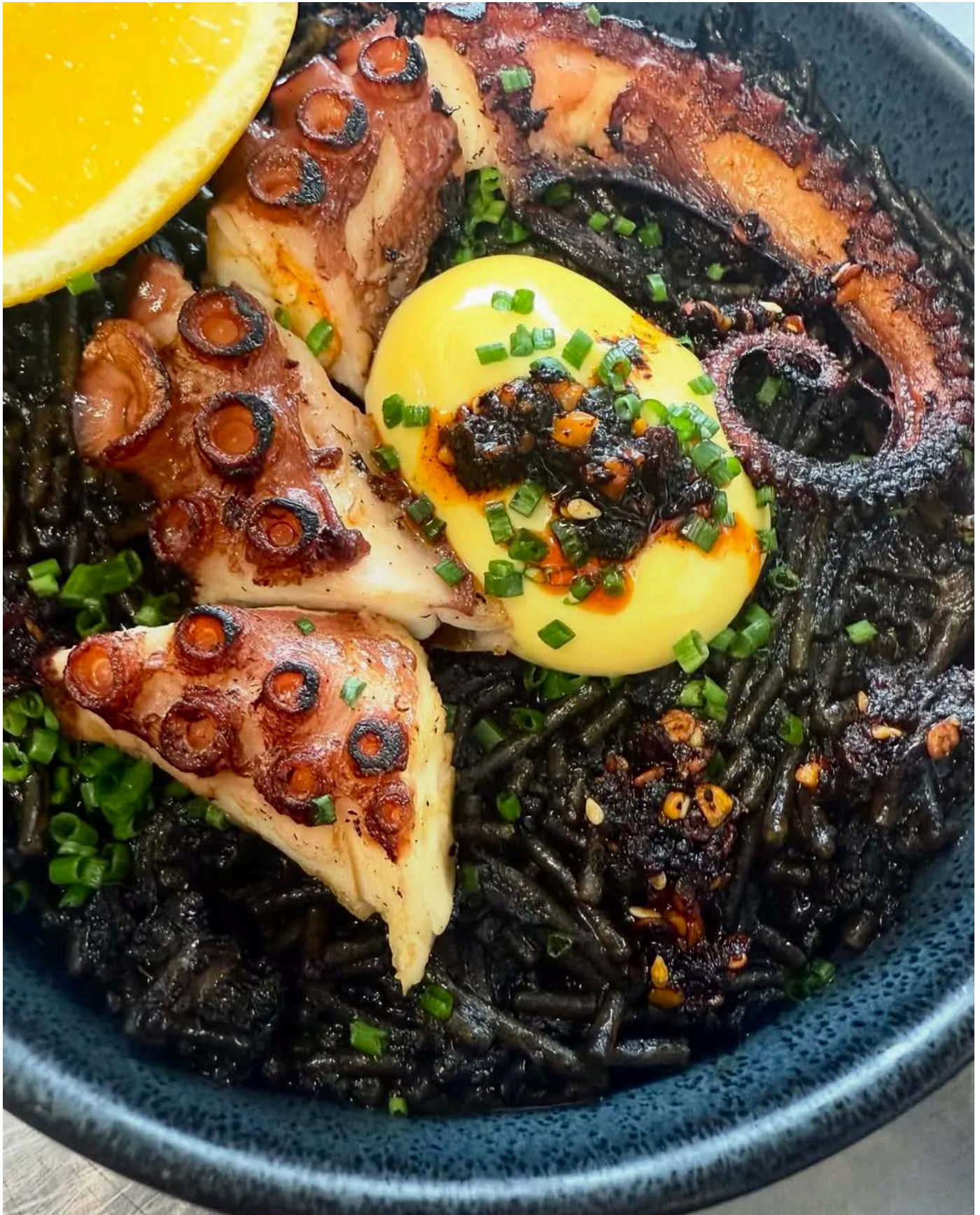
Mixing and mingling

“Unlike some other cities in the country, we don’t have ethnic enclaves here,” says Kaysen. “This means that if you’re opening, say a Hmong or Laotian or Vietnamese restaurant, it’s not confined to a certain part of town with just people from that respective part of the world.”

“I rub elbows with people like Sean Sherman of [Owamni](#) and it turns out, even though Native American and Hmong cooking are thousands of miles apart, we use the same traditional techniques such as the way we both grill and smoke meats; it’s very similar,” says Vang. “We learn from each other.”



The dining room at Oro by Nixta, which is perhaps the most celebrated Mexican restaurant in the city at the moment. Kadi Kaelin



A corn-based pasta special at Oro by Nixta comes together with squid ink, octopus, 'nduja sausage, lemon aioli, and salsa macha. Oro by Nixta Tortilleria

It's this tightness that the culinary community will rely on to make it through the test of recent months. Even the most resilient communities are not immune to damage. At Oro by Nixta, co-owner Kate Romero stopped by my table and told me that, like a lot of restaurants in the city right now, the restaurant's front door is locked. Customers have to be buzzed in by employees. "I not only did this to keep federal agents out of the restaurant, but it was one of the ways I could get my employees back to work—the only way they'd feel comfortable coming here again," said Romero. The restaurant was packed.

It remains true that there's never been a better time to dine in Minneapolis. But now, doing so is vital to the city's recovery. As people get back out there—both to eat at restaurants and work in the kitchens that fuel them—it's about more than just enjoying a deliciously singular meal but arguably contributing, plate by plate, to the return of vibrant public life and the resumption of this culinary evolution. Because even while this city tries to keep out the bad, it will never turn away the good.

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