

# WINDY CITY WEST

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**I**t started as a barbecue get-together, a way for old Chicago friends trying their luck in L.A.'s cutthroat entertainment industry to swap war stories and relive the old days back home.

But in the six years that Windy City West, as the event came to be known, has been held as an annual bash, it has become one of the hottest tickets in a town where party invitations are status symbols.

Superstars like Charlton Heston and Mel Torme have sent notes regretting they can't attend a party that draws the likes of former Paramount Studio chief Brandon Tartikoff, former network boss and independent producer Fred Silverman, Chicago sports greats Dick Butkus and **Ernie Banks** and Academy Award-winning actress Marlee Matlin.

As in years past, this year's affair—held last month at Ed Debevic's in Beverly Hills—saw medical doctors trying to pass themselves off as network accountants, the uninvited petitioning studio heads to get them in and \$25-tickets being scalped for four times their face value.

"People get desperate about coming to the party," says movie publicist Morgan Moore, who with Ginny Weissman, former editor of the Tribune's TV Week magazine, formed the group that started the event in 1986.

But despite the cachet, this evening of "culinary camaraderie," as it is billed, is simply a chance for Chicagoans to shed L.A. pretension and proudly bear the rough-and-tumble, no-nonsense style of their hometown.

"You don't think you're at an L.A. party," says Weissman, who was a television writer and producer in L.A. before moving her base of operations back to Chicago. "People don't come here to be seen. It's not 'How am I supposed to look? How should I act? Whom can I meet?'

"People come to have a good time. They can be themselves. It's a whole different mind-set. You can take us out of Chicago, but you can't take Chicago out of us."

So every fall, when another Cubless and Soxless World Series approaches and the leaves should be turning red and brown, hundreds of die-hard transplanted Chicagoans gather at Debevic's, turning the '50s-style restaurant into the closest thing to the friendly neighborhood pub they left 2,000 miles behind.

Partygoers eat deep-dish pizza, wash it down with Berghoff's beer and talk about the latest **Cubs** antics as the sound of Chicago blues growls in the background. And they get a chance to catch up with old friends whose faces or credits they have only glimpsed on a TV or movie screen since moving West.

"This year I was able to fulfill a personal quest by talking with Marlee Matlin," Jordana Arkin, formerly of Morton Grove and now a television writer in Burbank, Calif., wrote to the Windy City West group last year. "We grew up a block apart, and I hadn't seen her in 16 years, except on the screen.

"I've wanted to tell her how happy I am for her success," wrote Arkin.

"At the party, I told her. She was very touched. Thank you for this event and for giving me the opportunity to complete my mission."

In an atmosphere reminiscent of a high school reunion, old friends hunker down over a beer and mull over the old days before their names graced the columns of the trade publications and heads turned when they walked by on the street.

It is a night for Shelley Berman and Shecky Greene to swap tales of life behind the scenes on "The Ed Sullivan Show." It's a chance for friends and strangers to mingle with their mentors and peers. Robert Conrad, William Friedkin, Harvey Korman, Ed Asner, Mary Frann, Lois Nettleton, Adrian Zmed, Arte Johnson, Marsha Warfield, Marilu Henner and Joe Mantegna all have attended the party in years past.

In a mistrusting, back-stabbing industry, the sense of camaraderie at a Windy City West party is unique.

"Chicago has an incredible sense of loyalty," says comedian Tom Dreesen, who has MC'ed every Windy City West party. "We're proud of our stars. I don't think there's that much envy."

Legendary Chicago newspaperman Ben Hecht, then a penniless author in New York, may have been one of the first Chicagoans to heed the call to go West after his friend Herman Mankiewicz cabled him in 1925, "Millions are to be grabbed out here, and your only competition is idiots."

Riding that journalistic tradition are two of the latest arrivals, John Schulian and David Israel, who used to compete against each other as sports columnists respectively for the Sun-Times and the Tribune and are now successful television producers-and regulars at Windy City West parties.

In their trek West, transplanted Chicagoans never severed their ties to their hometown. At Cubs-Dodgers games in L.A., it seems that half the crowd is sporting Cubs caps. Early on winter mornings, die-hard Bears fans head out to Tin Horn Flats, a Burbank pub, to catch the hometown team on satellite TV.

Movie publicist Moore has spent much of his life in California but considers himself a Chicagoan and notes that Windy City West is open to other Chicagoans at heart who "worked, were born, lived or did shows in Chicago before moving on to L.A. to work in the entertainment industry."

"Chicago is a very warm and friendly city, and at times L.A. can be as cold and isolating as a Chicago winter," says Mark Kogan, an entertainment consultant who helps organize the party. He moved to L.A. in 1979 and visits Chicago at least twice a year. "Sometimes I find myself getting homesick for Chicago and I suddenly get an urge to get together with a group of friends from back home."

Megan Cavanagh, who played the homely second basewoman in "A League of Their Own," returned to Chicago to have her baby. "I would have stayed on if my agent and manager hadn't called me and said, 'Get back here,'" says Cavanagh, who grew up in Oak Park.

Acting in "A League of Their Own" not only was the biggest break in Cavanagh's career, it also provided a once-in-a-lifetime chance to be on the playing field at Wrigley Field, where scenes for the film were shot, and then sit with her father in the Cubs dugout. "It was a religious experience," she says. "We just sat there for 20 minutes without saying a word."

For some, the Windy City West party is the one time in the year when they can practice the Chicago art of "hanging out." It is a rare pleasure in a sprawling metropolis where "doing breakfast" with a friend usually means going on a one-hour commute in gridlocked traffic.

"Chicago people are hangout people," Dreesen insists. "You gotta be able to hang out, and the key to hanging out is being able to tell funny stories and being able to listen to the funny stories 500 times and still laugh."

And with that, Dreesen launches into a joke his friends have heard dozens of times at all six Windy City West parties.

A Windy City West party often brings out all the pentup contempt for their present environs that transplanted Chicagoans might have felt but successfully repressed while frolicking in the sunshine.

Butkus, who won this year's Windy City West Award, a recognition of the recipient's professional accomplishments, was blunt about the phoniness of L.A. in his acceptance speech. "I'm speaking sincerely and not the Hollywood bull---," the actor, sports commentator and former Chicago Bears linebacker told a cheering crowd. "This means a lot to me."

Eric Boardman, a Second City alumnus who moved here in 1978 and became a successful commercial writer, recalled an L.A. epiphany that finally shook him out of his complacency and forced him to consider returning home to the Midwest.

"I had a leak in my roof, so I called my roofer, expecting that he would take care of it right away," said Boardman, who has been offered a teaching job in Chicago. "He told me he had just had plastic surgery. He had implants inserted so his chest would look bigger. The (roofing) job would have to wait. That's when I realized something was severely wrong.

"It's not the earthquakes, it's not the riots, it's the fact that the roofer is having pectoral implants. Vanity. That was the moment I decided I had to move back."

When Marlee Matlin received the Windy City West Award last year, she couldn't help taking a shot at her adopted town by conjuring up a Hollywood-style recipe for a Vienna red-hot. "They probably cut them up in tiny pieces, cover them with raspberry, some endive and chutney and charge 45 bucks at the Ivy," she said through a sign-language interpreter, referring to an elite L.A. eatery.

The first Windy City West affair, in 1986, was a keep-your-fingers-crossed grassroots effort. Moore and Weissman's barbecue plans were happily set aside when restaurateur Rich Melman offered to provide the food and the small parking lot at Ed Debevic's.

A tent was pitched, and food was flown in from Chicago-deep-dish pizza, Vienna red-hots, Italian beef sandwiches from Mr. Beef, Eli's cheesecake, Don Carson's ribs and Lake Michigan smelts from Chicago Fish House.

To add to the Chicago flavor, centerpieces were fashioned from empty Frango mint boxes, and an audiocassette tape of hometown acts was slapped together, among them The Buckingham; Aliotta, Haynes and Jeremiah; and Chicago.

"It was a real hometown party," Moore recalls. "People used their own decorations. Everybody chipped in and put stuff up."

Invitations were sent out, but by the day of the party, word-of-mouth had swelled the number of guests to more than 400, including a slew of transplanted celebrities.

"We learned that there were a lot more people from Chicago working in the entertainment industry than we imagined," Moore says.

The 1987 party proved bigger, but not better. "It was totally out of control," Weissman recalls. Word of the free Chicago-style food and access to celebrities had spread all over town. Some 1,200 "guests" showed up, many of whom, it seemed, had never been to, let alone come from, Chicago.

"Because it was limited to Chicagoans, it became intriguing to people in L.A.," Weissman says. "Because it was exclusive, everyone wanted to come. You could tell the interlopers by the way they gawked at the loyal hometowners singing 'Take me out to the ballgame' as if it were the national anthem,"

Moore recalls.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation of the first Windy City West Award to Tartikoff, who was then head of NBC. Tartikoff, a native of Long Island, had spent three years-1973 to 1976-in Chicago as head of dramatic programming at WLS-Ch. 7.

The overcrowded fiasco taught the organizers that they had to screen the guests and charge a \$25 cover fee.

Soon, prospective guests were trying to "prove" their Chicago credentials, often with little success. Letters poured in claiming tenuous ties to the city and the industry. Wary organizers began trying to test a caller's legitimacy with simple questions any Chicagoan could answer.

The woman who claimed Chicago was the capital of Illinois was easy to screen out. So was the man who didn't know that Chicago's CTA train system is called the "L."

Applicants had to name their favorite Chicago restaurant, the hotel they stayed in when they visited, the schools they attended or the jobs they held back home. By the time all the screening was done, the applicants had been winnowed from 1,000 to 500.

By the third party, the event had become an L.A. institution. The party was moved indoors, where the walls were draped with banners announcing the Taste of Chicago. A computerized mailing list was compiled and the award professionally designed, with the Windy City West symbol etched on an illuminated acrylic trophy.

But as expectations grew, the guests became more picky. After a complaint that the hot dogs weren't garnished in the proper Chicago style, Fluky's hot dogs were flown in for the event. The proprietor of Fluky's himself served the dogs from a cart he brought along.

"It's hard to imagine another city that has such a culinary identity,"

Moore says. "We don't just have pizza, we have deep-dish pizza. There's an identity even with the hot dog and an incredible loyalty to Italian beef. We get all sorts of suggestions: Whom are we using? Why don't we use so and so?"

The fourth and fifth parties went off without a hitch. "Chicago in Hollywood," a half-hour special on WMAQ-Ch. 5 produced by Weissman and hosted by Robb Weller, took the event to Chicago's living rooms two years ago, receiving high ratings.

Every year, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and Chicago Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) officially proclaim the day of the party "Windy City West Day."

Still, despite the formal recognitions and high profile, the gathering has managed to retain the feeling of an annual family reunion.

"It's like any club-there's a kind of camaraderie," Melman says. "It's hard to leave Chicago behind. I've heard people say that if there were more entertainment work in Chicago, they'd stay."

Dreesen believes that many have, at least in spirit. "Thomas Wolfe said you can never go home, but you can," Dreesen says. "If you're from Chicago, you can."

At least for one night every autumn in Beverly Hills.

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