

# The Oscars of food took place in Chicago.

"We ordered a skillet of monkey bread and shrimp and grits and mortadella eggs Benedict and a Bloody Mary and a matcha, because when in Rome, and a Diet Coke, of course."



EMILY SUNDBERG

JUN 19, 2026  PAID

Good afternoon, everyone.

We have a pretty exciting [Guest Lecture](#) today: Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Meta. Paid subscribers can ask him anything about building Meta's wearables technology, what he looks for in great hires, how he uses AI in his own life, or how his growing interest in fashion has influenced the products he's building.



↳ From Emily Sundberg's subscriber chat

SUBSCRIBERS ONLY

Reply...

Next week, I'll be writing the newsletter from the Cannes Lions festival. I'm excited to see some of you in the South of France. You can expect daily dispatches from panels and parties and bakeries and the beach, in addition to the regular Feed Me commentary.

**Today's newsletter includes:** [J Lee's](#) dispatch from the 2026 James Beard Awards (congratulations [Cake Zine](#)), Puck is expanding in D.C., and the brands who have abandoned their Substack newsletters.

---

Upgrade to paid

---

## The Oscars of food took place in Chicago. *By J Lee*

"Instead of Leonardo DiCaprio (Alison Roman is the Leonardo DiCaprio of food), it's a beverage director from LA."

*Expense Account is a series on Feed Me by semi-anonymous restaurant critic J Lee. He hosts a podcast with the same name. Today, he wrote about his first time at the James Beard Awards.*



Chicago is the most beautiful city in the world, and my hometown. I'm here for my first, and hopefully not my last, James Beard Awards. I'm not nominated, not this time, I don't deserve an award, I've been a very bad boy, but I am here to hangout and observe. I'm here to shake a few hands, eat a few tacos, drink a few cocktails, and get a sense for what this weekend is all about. The biggest weekend in American food, and little old me.

## Friday

I arrived in Chicago Friday evening. I missed the **Kiko** dinner at **Mirra** because I accepted a \$1,000 credit to delay my flight out of Austin. That's OK, we've got Kiko at home (you should go if you've not been). The city is buzzing. There's something in the air. I'm not quite sure what it is, but there's a palpable sense of anticipation, a feeling that a storm has passed or a storm is coming, maybe both, you can smell it in the air. Or it might just be Puerto Rican Independence weekend, which means the entire west side of the city is shut down, and police are out and about in full force. It also means that Ubers are expensive. I've been given a very generous Uber credit, but my dad picks me up from the airport, and we bicker all the way to my hotel. Every time I come back to Chicago I feel like a little kid, and I sleep like a baby.

---

*"I'm not hungover, but I'm pretending that I am. I order dim sum from Ming Hin, my favorite place, to eat in bed as a treat. I've forgotten that there's a James Beard Bacon and Bubbles brunch event in my hotel today. I'm an unkempt pajamaed mess on my walk of shame to pick up my Uber Eats.*

*On the way down to the lobby, I run into the owners of Russ & Daughters who ask me if I work at Apollo Bagels because I'm wearing an Apollo Bagels shirt."*

---

## Saturday

**10 a.m.**

I visit Chicago a few times a year, but this is only my second time staying in a hotel, it's fun. I'm staying at the [Chicago Athletic Association](#), a historic gothic sports club turned Hyatt, clad in sexy dark wood paneling. I love it here, most of all because I love bocce and you can play bocce here, and my room has a beautiful view of The Bean in Millennium Park, which is right across the street. The Art Institute, the site of this year's James Beard Media Awards, is also right across the street.

I eat brunch at Cindy's, the rooftop restaurant at the Chicago Athletic Association. Brunch is a weird meal, which I don't normally allow myself to indulge in. I don't drink coffee, I never need French toast, or eggs Benedict for that matter, I'm bad at day drinking, but I'm on vacation, and Cindy's has the best view of The Bean; the lake looks nice today, too. We ordered a skillet of monkey bread and shrimp and grits and mortadella eggs Benedict and a Bloody Mary and a matcha, because when in Rome, and a Diet Coke, of course. After brunch, I've got a meeting at the Skylark, one of my favorite bars in Chicago. The tater tots here are fantastic, but today I'm just getting a Fernet and Coke, to help me digest that brunch. Before I leave, I spend some time in the photobooth. I always have to pay tribute to these beautiful machines still chugging along, flaws and all.

**4:30 p.m.**

It's a hot day in Chicago, and everyone's a bit sweaty in their suits and gowns. I'm surprised there's no booze at the Media Awards, just lots and lots of mini bottles of San Pellegrino. I'm not nominated, so I guess I don't need or deserve bubbles, but I'd like some. Bubbles are always nice. Today I'm the media covering the media, today I'm the help, and I look the part; someone asked me to show them to the bathroom. The Media Awards celebrates all forms of food media, from books to photography to video to podcasts. Sadly, there's no category for food-related song. Would love to have seen a runoff between "Espresso" and

“Diet Pepsi” (both came out in 2024). My station for the evening is not in the auditorium with the honorees and the glitz and the glam. Tonight, I’m in the basement. I’m in the press room with other media members who were not nominated. While they celebrate, we “work.” And by “work,” I mean we watch the awards via live feed on a screen, we look at our phones, we play a game trying to guess the winners of each category, and when someone wins, they’re brought downstairs to take photos, and we can interview them if we want. It’s kind of fun. Me and my fellow media b-team develop a sense of camaraderie. We’re on this ship together. We’re hungry, and we pass around a bag of Trader Joe’s shrimp chimps, someone brings out a Butterfinger bar. I can’t remember the last time I saw a Butterfinger bar. We talk about the outfits of the evening. Gregory Gourdet, of Top Chef and Maison Passerelle fame, looks fab in his pink caftan-esque ensemble. Ryan Sutton collected his award for best column/newsletter wearing skinny jeans and large iridescent Nike basketball shoes. Hailee Catalano’s speech almost made me cry. This is what award shows are all about. There are a few mentions of Palestine, and more than a few mentions of Knicks in five. There are bubbles down here in the press room, but they’re just for winners.

To be honest, I was not so familiar with a lot of the **nominees** and **winners**. I’m new here, but it’s nice to be reminded that the food world is large, and that I am small. Not everyone spends their time pontificating on slop bowls, Hillstone, and steak au poivre. Many of the nominations are celebrations of culture, and ruminations on food and its impact on the world at large. The view of the James Beard Foundation is that food media is and must be serious, and that food media can and should change the world. As the media landscape and culture at large continues to evolve, I’m curious to see how the James Beard Awards keep up. The Emerging Voice in Broadcast Media award went to Nasim Lahbichi, whose primary platform is Instagram. Is Instagram “broadcast media”? I guess for lack of better words. Michael Ligier won the award for Social Media Account, for his YouTube channel. Is YouTube social

media? I guess for lack of better words. The biggest applause of the evening came toward the end, when Sithara Ranasinghe won the award for Best Profile, for her piece “No Papers, Just Peaches,” in Cake Zine. It’s nice to see friends and colleagues win, it feels as good as winning yourself. Almost...