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# "Every Second Counts": Representing Chicago's Urban Identity in the TV Series *The Bear*

ABSTRACT

The article examines Chicago's identity through the portrayal of the city's hospitality industry in the comedy-drama series *The Bear*. The daily operations of the show's main restaurant, *The Original Beef of Chicagoland*, serve as a metaphor for the complexities of work encountered by the entire hospitality sector. The restaurant's staff are presented within the context of the Kitchen Brigade system, with its transparent chain of command outlining the workers' hierarchy. The show's overview of the city's gastronomy reflects Chicago's ethnic history. The article analyses how the series broadens its focus from depicting the hospitality industry to articulating Chicago's identity through portrayals of the city's emblematic culinary locations, visual displays of architectural landmarks, and a soundtrack representing the city's distinctive music. The sense of place conveyed by the sign "Every Second Counts" reflects anxiety in the hospitality industry and signals the characters' adaptation to the city's dynamics.

KEYWORDS: Chicago, *The Bear*, gastronomy, city identity, sense of place

STRESZCZENIE

„Liczy się każda sekunda": Obraz miejskiej tożsamości Chicago w serialu *The Bear*

Artykuł analizuje tożsamość Chicago poprzez ukazanie miejskiego sektora gastronomicznego w serialu komediowo-dramatycznym *The Bear*. Codzienne funkcjonowanie głównej restauracji serialu – *The Original Beef of Chicagoland* – stanowi metaforę złożoności pracy charakterystycznej dla całej branży gastronomicznej. Pracownicy restauracji zostali przedstawieni w kontekście systemu Kitchen Brigade, którego przejrzysta hierarchia odzwierciedla strukturę zależności pomiędzy poszczególnymi stanowiskami. Serialowa wizja gastronomii Chicago ujawnia etniczne zróżnicowanie miasta oraz jego historię migracyjną. Analiza pokazuje, w jaki sposób *The Bear* rozszerza swoje pole znaczeń – od

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realistycznego przedstawienia pracy w branży gastronomicznej po symboliczne ujęcie miejskiej wspólnoty. Poprzez wizualne przedstawienie architektonicznych ikon, topografię miejsc kulinarnych oraz ścieżkę dźwiękową zakorzenioną w muzycznej tradycji Chicago serial konstruuje wyrazistą reprezentację miasta. Specyfika Chicago, wyrażona słowami „Liczy się każda sekunda", oddaje niepokój towarzyszący pracy w gastronomii i odzwierciedla adaptację bohaterów do rytmu życia w wielkomiejskiej przestrzeni.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Chicago, *The Bear*, gastronomia, tożsamość miasta, specyfika miejsca

The realms of the city and film have been inextricably linked since the Lumière Brothers captured the first urban scenes in 1898 (Koeck & Penz, 2003, p. 364). Lukinbeal and Zimmermann claim that the "city film" offers a binary constructed on the "reel" representation of the "real" experience of the city, which results in a "simulacrum of the real" (2008, pp. 18–19). Therefore, cinematic cities are imaginary constructs that allow reflections on the conditions of urban life through powerful images of the city's complexities, diversity, and social dynamism. As observed by Shiel, film is known for "the representation of distinctive spaces, lifestyles and human conditions of the city" (2001, p. 1). The motion picture industry has achieved this by depicting cities through screen renditions of "real cities" (shot on location) or "reconstructed cities" (shot in the studio). The city film not only relates to a particular urban location but also reveals a site's distinctive character, as people identify with a place when it has a unique character beyond its visual image.

Place-related identity has been researched through several overlapping theoretical concepts, such as "sense of place" or "place identity." Sense of place connects architectural and human space and denotes the meanings and emotions associated with a particular location (Krasny, 2020, p. 128; Molavi et al., 2016, p. 64). An emotional bond to a specific place is developed through "interactions between an individual/community and the place over time" (Erfani, 2022, p. 461). The concept of city identity includes exclusive attributes of a given urban location and identificatory meanings that the particular place generates in its relations to people, contributing to "an individual's sense of self or identity" (Krasny, 2020, p. 130). As observed by Solesbury, city identity is

> the product of a unique mixture of a city's characteristics: drawn from one or more of history and geography, its economy, social structures and processes, public behaviour, cuisine, dress, politics and governance, artistic images and accounts, demography, buildings and transport, culture and consumption (2021, p. 12).

Belanche et al. link the concept of city identity with city communities and claim that individuals who feel belongingness to a particular city "behave as inner members of such communities" (2017, p. 138). Therefore, city identity helps differentiate residents from others, such as people from outside Chicago, and from internal subgroups within the city whose identification centers on particular social, ethnic, professional, or neighborhood-based aspects of urban identity. In this sense, city identity is not homogenous but layered, allowing multiple forms of belonging and differentiation to coexist. The city is a complex entity reflecting social communication, experience sharing, and relationship building among its residents and visitors (Muktiono, 2024).

This article examines Chicago's identity through the portrayal of the city's hospitality industry in the series *The Bear*. The daily operations of the show's main restaurant, *The Original Beef of Chicagoland*, serve as a metaphor for the complexities of work encountered by the entire hospitality sector. The restaurant's staff are presented within the context of the Kitchen Brigade system, with its transparent chain of command outlining the workers' hierarchy. In contrast to *The Original Beef's* relatively stable, working-class, and broadly accessible culinary identity, the later transformation into *The Bear* exposes tensions within the Kitchen Brigade system. It signals a shift toward a more exclusive, aspirational gastronomic model aligned with a narrower segment of Chicago's urban community. The overview of the city's gastronomy reflects Chicago's ethnic history: *The Original Beef* evokes a communal, immigrant-rooted culinary tradition accessible across class lines, whereas *The Bear* embodies a refined reinterpretation that caters to a more selective segment of the urban population. The article analyses how the series broadens its focus from depicting the hospitality industry to articulating a unique representation of Chicago's identity through its portrayal of the city's emblematic culinary locations, its visual display of architectural landmarks, and its use of a soundtrack representing the city's distinctive music.

*The Bear* is a comedy-drama series created by Christopher Storer. The show's central restaurant, specializing in Italian beef sandwiches, is based on a real Chicago restaurant, Mr. Beef, located at 666 N. Orleans Street in River North. Mr. Beef's first owner, Joe Zucchero, bought it in 1979, and the restaurant has remained in his family to this day. The series' exterior scenes were filmed at *Mr. Beef*, and its interior settings were shot at other locations, including the Cinespace Chicago Film Studios. The show's iconic dish is an Italian beef sandwich, which is a combination of saucy, thinly sliced meat and peppers on crispy Italian bread. The story of the beef sandwich began in the 1920s and 1930s in Chicago's Little Italy neighborhood when poor immigrants organized inexpensive "peanut weddings" as an affordable way to feed large numbers of guests with a tasty beef meal (McClelland, 2023). In this sense, the sandwich functions not merely as a regional specialty but as a symbolic reminder of the value of

one's cultural roots, which in a city like Chicago are deeply embedded in ethnic neighborhoods and historically grounded forms of communal identity.

## Chicago's Hospitality Industry

*The Bear* presents a complex system of kitchen structure originating in Europe and applied to the hospitality industry in American cities. The staff hierarchy in *The Bear* is based on the Kitchen Brigade system, developed at the end of the 19th century by the renowned French chef Georges Auguste Escoffier, who observed a hierarchical military organization while serving as an army chef during the Franco-Prussian War. Escoffier applied a similar structure to the restaurant kitchens to make them operate efficiently and reduce duplication of effort. His brigade system, with its clear chain of command, outlined kitchen positions and chef titles (Rushton, 2020; Muran). Although the original brigade structure has been modified over time according to the size and location of particular establishments (Livert, 2024, pp. 31–32), its emphasis on hierarchy remains central to the organization of labor in professional kitchens.

In the context of *The Original Beef of Chicagoland*, however, this European-derived hierarchy operates within a distinctly Chicago framework marked by ethnic, racial, and class diversity. The head chef, Carmy Berzatto (played by Jeremy Allen White), returns from New York to Chicago to take over the family diner previously run by his late brother Michael "Mikey" Berzatto (John Bernthal). Carmy's Italian American family identity shapes the restaurant's legacy, while other central figures reflect the city's plural social fabric. Richard "Richie" Jerimovich (Ebon Moss-Bachrach), who manages front of house, is of Slavic background. Sydney Adamu (Ayo Edebiri), an ambitious graduate of the Culinary Institute of America who assumes the role of sous chef, and pastry chef Marcus Brooks (Lionel Boyce), are associated with Chicago's Black community. Tina Morreno (Liza Colón-Zayas), who initially worked as a line cook, represents the city's Latino population. The chefs de parte oversee specific sections of the kitchen–such as sauces, entrées, and desserts–while remaining embedded in this socially heterogeneous environment.

Although the brigade system formalizes hierarchy, Carmy's insistence on addressing every staff member as "Chef" symbolically flattens these divisions. He adopts this form of address as a sign of respect and to acknowledge each person's excellence in their particular specialty, thereby placing individuals of different ethnicities, racial backgrounds, class positions, and even familial ties on equal professional footing. In this way, the kitchen becomes a microcosm of Chicago itself: structured by hierarchy yet simultaneously negotiating the complexities of inclusion, belonging, and shared labor across social difference.

Sense of place is expressed in the series by the frequently appearing sign "Every Second Counts," [S1E1, S1E7, S2E7, S2E10], reflecting anxiety and tension in the hospitality industry. Livert highlights that, contrary to domestic kitchens, professional restaurants have a specific period when the food has to be prepared and served to the customers (2024, p. 18). This framing of time creates a sense of urgency in the storyline and indicates that each character has to act decisively to overcome challenges, while also performing efficient teamwork. Tina's usage of timer to monitor her performance during a three-minute preparation slot [S4E5] does not signal inexperience but rather her transition from a seasoned neighborhood cook to a chef adapting to the intensified, elite standards of *The Bear*. The complex soundscape–such as the constant whir of the receipt printer or the clatter of malfunctioning appliances–reinforces the impression of realism. The sound of a restaurant denotes dynamics, movement, and urgency.

City identity is connected to collectively shared perceptions of the city's ethos (Jones & Svejenova, 2017, p. 2). *The Bear* conveys the idea that Chicago's ethos is grounded in the values of working-class communities, which pursue excellence in their chosen specialties and demonstrate exceptional care and hospitality toward guests and visitors. The issue of hospitality appears in two institutional contexts featured in the series, medical facilities and restaurant ventures. The former is depicted in the opening of season two, with chef Marcus showing loving care for his mother, who lies in a hospital bed. This opening scene presents a problematic family situation as a frequent motive driving individual employees to express care for others by cooking for them and serving them. Sydney, whose mother had died, finds her motivation to care for others in cooking the Boursin-style omelet for Carmy's sister Natalie (played by Abby Elliot) [S2E9]. The omelet scene demonstrates that taking care of others is the essence of hospitality, and serving others helps foster a sense of connection and satisfaction.

The acts of taking care of others are expressed through the notion of nurturing. In flashback scenes, Tina is shown desperately looking for a job and entering *The Original Beef of Chicagoland*. Richie realizes her difficult situation and demonstrates care for a guest in need by offering her a free coffee and a sandwich [S3E6]. The concept of nurturing appears in Carmy's flashbacks from New York, when his mentor, Thomas Keller, says, "We cook to nurture people" [S3E10]. The verb "to nurture" extends beyond providing food to signify fostering growth, development, and well-being within a supportive context (Bowlby, 1988, p. 133). This nurturing is not only professional but also social: the characters constantly address one another with familial terms, such as "cousin," signaling a family-like bond that can be confusing to newcomers or viewers but also reinforces trust, loyalty, and emotional support within the kitchen. In this way, the characters nurture one another both to support them

in times of crisis and to facilitate their future growth, blending personal care with the formal structure of the brigade system.

Every staff member is striving for greatness in their chosen path. Excellence in the culinary craft is achieved through training, internship, and mentoring. The manager, Richie, becomes an intern at *Ever*, a three-Michelin-star diner in Chicago, and the pastry chef, Marcus, is sent for an apprenticeship in Denmark. Carmy's dedication to achieving excellence in culinary craft is emphasized with the motif of "The French Laundry." The flashback scenes highlight the high standards of Carmy's rigorous training in New York, where he learnt from a renowned chef, Thomas Keller [S3E10]. Keller is known for developing a unique style of cooking, The French Laundry, which combines French techniques and American influences. His original restaurant is located in California in a building that used to be a French steam laundry (Latreille, 2024). This experience is highly symbolic in the context of *The Bear*: Carmy's exposure to world-class culinary standards contrasts sharply with the humble, blue-collar environment of *The Original Beef*, highlighting the series' narrative of transformation, as a modest neighborhood restaurant gradually reimagined into an establishment that aspires to excellence on the level of elite cuisine. Carmy keeps notebooks with recipes and his drawings of the dishes prepared during the internships, which remain visual statements of his striving for perfection. The pursuit of excellence is connected with the theme of legacy explored in season three of the series, understood here as the transmission of knowledge, skills, and values from one generation of chefs to the next within the professional kitchen (Fischler, 2011, pp. 528–548).

The pursuit of excellence in the hospitality business is demonstrated in the episode "Forks" [S2E7], which depicts Richie's internship at Chicago's renowned diner, *Ever*. This episode is highlighted here because it vividly illustrates the rigor, attention to detail, and anticipatory service practices that underpin professional kitchens. The realness of the setting is emphasized with the appearance of Amy Cordell, *Ever's* director of hospitality. The episode reveals the logistics behind the superb service of a fine dining establishment: the restaurant staff conduct background checks on the guests, scan their social media, and eavesdrop on table conversations to gather information that could enhance the dining experience. The viewer sees the communication through little notes between servers, double-checking the dishes for allergies, and adjusting the timing of the courses for guests who either hurry or revel in the moment. The employees hold pre-service meetings to discuss a list of PONs (Persons of Note), to customize a dining experience for the selected guests. While other episodes also address themes of precision, timing, and professional discipline, "Forks" is singled out here for directly demonstrating how training in elite kitchens shapes characters' understanding of efficiency and excellence. The series articulates that the fine-dining sector does more than serve food to its guests; it aims to provide an unforgettable experience.

The practice of creating surprises for the guests is another way of showing customer care. A client who has never tried deep pizza before gets a customized version ordered from *Pequod's* [S2E7]. The custom of creating little surprises for guests has been popularized among fine diners. These acts of hospitality were pioneered at Eleven Madison Park, where a person, dubbed the Dreamweaver, was enlisted to research guests and offer them customized service. After witnessing the transformation of *Pequod's* pizza, Richie reads a yellow book, *Unreasonable Hospitality* (2022) by Will Guidara, the former co-owner of Eleven Madison Park and the pioneer of creating memorable experiences for guests. Richie acknowledges that long work experience does not guarantee good customer care, so he introduces changes to his work routine by instituting the "Thursday Surprises" tradition and even creating artificial snow for a customer who wished to see Chicago in the snow [S4E4].

The series connects the recurring sign "Every Second Counts" with respect for work. When Richie shows a disrespectful attitude towards the task of polishing the silverware, his supervisor, Garrett (played by Andrew Lopez), reprimands him: "You don't have to drink the Kool-Aid, Richie. I just need you to respect me. I need you to respect the staff. I need you to respect the diners. And I need you to respect yourself" [S2E7]. This instruction resonates not only as a lesson about professional conduct but also as a challenge to Richie's insecurities. As an outsider to the Berzatto family, struggling with a divorce and unsure of his contributions to the restaurant, Richie initially sees his menial tasks as beneath him. Recognizing that polishing forks and performing other seemingly minor duties contribute to the kitchen's efficiency and excellence allows him to reclaim a sense of competence and self-respect. Richie's encounter with Chef Terry (played by Olivia Colman), the mysterious owner of the restaurant *Ever*, makes him willing to improve his work ethic. Chef Terry is depicted attentively peeling the mushrooms in the restaurant kitchen. She does not consider this job beneath her dignity and explains, "I think time spent doing this is time well spent" [S2E7], modeling that no task is too small when approached with care. In this scene, Richie learns that respect for work—and ultimately respect for himself—is inseparable from discipline, humility, and attention to detail. A *real* Chicago restaurant makes Richie understand the genuine purpose of perfectly polished forks and precisely peeled mushrooms, as those seemingly menial tasks prove vital for achieving excellence in the hospitality business. The sign "Every Second Counts" takes on a broader meaning: it signifies both urgency and the opportunity to slow down and appreciate your work.

The U.S. hospitality industry is symbolically represented in the episode "Forever" [S3E10] featuring legendary American chefs and restaurateurs who make cameo appearances at *Ever's* closing dinner. Two chefs—Grant Achatz and Genie Kwon—are active in Chicago's hospitality sector, which demonstrates that the series is rooted in a specific culture and community. Cameo

appearances by other celebrity chefs renowned in the USA—Thomas Keller, Daniel Boulud, Christina Tosi, Kevin Boehm, Wylie Dufresne, Will Guidara, and Anna Posey—metaphorically allow them to stand in for the entire American hospitality industry. Three pastry chefs—René Redzepi, Malcolm Livingston II, and Rosio Sanchez—illustrate the global world of fine cuisine through their connection with the Copenhagen-based restaurant *Noma* and epitomize the importance of an internship in mastering culinary craft (Zawila, 2024). This elite, internationally recognized training stands in stark contrast to the local, blue-collar environment of *The Original Beef*.

The famous restaurateurs recount the moments that remind them that excellence in the culinary industry is achieved only through meticulous care toward customers. After dinner, the staff remove the "Every Second Counts" sign from the wall, symbolizing the restaurant's closure and a new beginning for Terry and her staff [S3E10]. In her closing speech, Chef Terry emphasizes the crucial bond between restaurants and the community: "There's nobility to let people celebrate the most important moments in their lives" [S2E10]. Terry's words refer to the transformation of food into cultural heritage, which aligns with Brulotte and Di Giovine's affirmation that "individuals collectively remember past experiences with certain meals" (2014, p. 1).

## Chicago's Identity

The reshaping of the Italian sandwich shop—*The Original Beef of Chicagoland*—into a fine dining establishment parallels the economic transformations of Chicago. The changing dynamics of the restaurant reflect large-scale urban and demographic transitions connected with gentrification, a process that is particularly visible in the Near North of Central Chicago. Gentrification is defined by Lees et al. as "the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use" (2008, p. xv). The positive side of gentrification is the revitalization of previously derelict neighborhoods and improvement of public safety. The critics of gentrification indicate that the process results in the displacement of low-income residents who can no longer afford rising rents and property taxes (Miller, 2019, p. 26). The issue of gentrification is illustrated by Tina's insecurity, as rent increases may force her family to move out of the district [S3E6]. Beyond residential change, the transformation of *The Original Beef* into *The Bear* also risks gentrifying the local food culture. The shift toward higher prices, aspirational culinary techniques, and exclusivity makes the restaurant less accessible to everyday Chicagoans, highlighting a tension between preserving affordable neighborhood dining and catering to elite tastes. Weiner (2004) compares the history of Chicago to "a larger saga of American economic and social development—continually

changing and reflecting complex interactions between people and their workplaces," a dynamic that is mirrored in both the neighborhood and its evolving food culture.

*The Bear* explores the concept of culinary tourism to articulate Chicago's multiculturalism. According to Abbey, culinary tourism involves "approaching cultural otherness through food of an ethnic restaurant or an ethnic cookbook" (2006, p. 20). All of Chicago's immigrant groups have contributed to the city's rich food culture, which is reflected in a variety of dining establishments (Poe, 2004). Parham uses the concept of "gastronomic townscape" to examine food culture in an urban context, and claims that "specific dishes contribute richly to urban vibrancy and sense of place, providing a heady mix of tastes, smells and sounds" (2015, p. 104). Emblematic culinary locations, particular dishes, or the city's food culture in general can serve as representations of the city. The series highlights culinary landmarks that reflect Chicago's ethnic cartography in the episode "Sundae" [S2E3], offering a sightseeing tour of the city's gastronomy. The sous chef, Sidney, conducts research among diverse restaurants located in Ukrainian Village, Little Sicily, and Chinatown to find inspiration for a new menu. Her tour highlights Chicago's "ethnoscape" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 297) because culinary traditions are intertwined with the city's ethnic populations, which aligns with the metaphorical title of Gabaccia's book, *We Are What We Eat* (1998).

Sydney visits the Filipino restaurant *Kasama*, the Chinese *restaurant Leo Peng You*, and the famous Mediterranean menu diner *Avec.* The gastronomic townscape of the series also includes Chinatown Market and its extensive food court, featuring sushi, Hong Kong-style barbecue, Vietnamese pho, and Chinese baked goods. Italian cuisine is represented with the iconic Chicago pizza places like *Pequod's* in Lincoln Park and *Pizza Lobo* in Logan Square. Sydney continues her culinary sightseeing tour and visits *Margie's Candies*, an iconic 90-year-old ice cream parlor known for homemade ice cream, milkshakes, and hand-dipped candies. The sweetshop is primarily considered a "Chicago Legend" and was founded in 1921 by a Greek immigrant, Peter George Poulos (Chicago's Staple: Margie's Candies in Bucktown). Inclusion of the city's real restaurants and iconic food destinations onscreen adds realness to the series and anchors it in Chicago's neighborhoods with ethnic populations. While *The Bear* depicts multicultural gastronomy, as noted by Chicago's food historian Bruce Kraig, who calls the city "a great ethnic food town" (McClelland, 2023), it also highlights the contrast with downtown fine-dining spaces, which are less ethnically grounded and more tourist-oriented.

Diverse foods with their distinctive tastes, textures, and smells exhibit variations in particular regions, and the connection between culinary heritage and a specific environment creates a "taste of place" (Trubek, 2008). The minor subplots in *The Bear* occasionally refer to Chicago's culinary heritage. In the

episode "System" [S1E1], the viewer sees in Carmy's apartment a receipt from *Potash Markets*, a specialty grocery store founded in 1950 on the Near North Side of Chicago (Mortel, 2024). The episode "Pasta" [S2E2] presents another example of a food-related detail, when the restaurant staff find a hat commemorating an iconic summer food festival, *Taste of Chicago*. It is the world's largest outdoor food festival, established in 1980, and showcases the city's culinary excellence and diversity (Taste of Chicago). In the episode "Pop" [S2E5], Clare takes Carmy to a house party, where the guests are served *Superdawg* hot dogs with signature pickled tomatoes. Chicago is known for its fast-food stands, particularly those serving hot dogs. According to Kraig, an emblematic drive-in hot dog shop—*Superdawg*—is considered to be one of the few original drive-in restaurants in the USA. This landmark location features hot-dog figures of "Maurie and Flaurie" on the roof and retains a 1950s-style method of delivering food to the car window (Arseneau, 2023). Apparently trivial elements, such as a receipt, a hat, and a hot dog, which appear in minor subplots of the series, articulate "heritage cuisine," which conveys "a distinctive, taste-based experience of the place" (Brulotte & Di Giovine, 2014, p. 18).

The show's creators convey a sense of place, location, and geography through the episodes' opening scenes, displaying Chicago's downtown skyline and the river cruise perspective on the city's architecture. Each episode of *The Bear* contains at least one montage composed exclusively of skyscrapers, articulating the iconic constituents of the metropolis. Images of neighborhoods undergoing gentrification capture urban dynamics and juxtapose new designer stores with 75-year-old diners. The series offers numerous images of Chicago's rapid-transit system of elevated railways, officially known as "L," which symbolizes the arduous nature of work in the hospitality industry, including late shifts, long commutes at odd hours, and travel in difficult weather conditions. The multiple shots of the cityscape include recognizable landmarks, such as the Art Deco-style Carbide and Carbon building, which was designed as office space and, after the market crash in 1929, restored as a boutique hotel (Matavulj). The building's history, from its construction to its current status, reflects the theme of transformation that is frequently explored in the series. The scenes with Chicago's lakefront juxtapose the closed space of the bustling restaurant with the expanse of Lake Michigan. Chicago's lakefront serves as a place where the characters find peace and process their emotions while considering their futures, as in Sydney's case, when she has to decide whether she accepts a competitive job offer or stays in *The Bear* [S4E8]. The iconic piece of architecture—The Chess Pavilion—is also used as a place of reflection for characters struggling with emotional challenges, like Carmy, who is reflecting on the past to decide about his future [S1E8]. The historic home of Frank Lloyd Wright is used to show how Chicago's heritage inspires Carmy's creativity [S4E5]. While such visits might be significant diversions in real life, their inclusion in the

series functions as a deliberate narrative device. The scenes of Carmy exploring restored rooms and appreciating the architectural details symbolize his pursuit of perfection in culinary craft.

Similarly, depictions of iconic locations such as Wrigley Field ground the narrative in a familiar urban context and represent the city inhabitants' sense of belonging to the Chicago community. The competitive nature of sport mirrors the characters' determination to overcome challenges and succeed in their professional life. In this way, the series strategically employs Chicago's "greatest hits" to reinforce character arcs and highlight the symbolic interplay between personal growth and the city's cultural heritage. The recognizable landmarks instantly signal to the viewer that the show's plot is set in Chicago, not in other urban environments. More importantly, the protagonists' personal stories, professional ambitions, and social identities are deeply intertwined with the city's specific neighborhoods, institutions, and cultural practices. This intimate entanglement between character development and urban space elevates Chicago beyond a mere backdrop; it becomes an active narrative force shaping the characters' trajectories. In this sense, the series aligns with Nowell-Smith's observation that "The city becomes a protagonist, but unlike the human characters, it is not a fictional one" (2001, p. 104).

The sense of place and city identity are also shaped by city mythology, which refers to cultural narratives associated with urban spaces. Chicago is associated with a thriving urban stronghold that offers its inhabitants opportunities to follow ambitious plans, even those involving illegal practices. The gangster Al Capone strengthened the perception of Chicago as a city of crime, a perception further cultivated in films like *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987). Chicagoans have long associated the city with gangsters who bend rules and blur the boundaries between legitimate and illicit enterprise. Some residents nostalgically evoke the city's criminal reputation as part of its mythology (Ruth, 2004). The series touches on the normalization of turning a blind eye to questionable practices in the scenes depicting Richie selling cocaine in the alley behind the restaurant. Upon discovering this activity, Carmy pragmatically considers it beneficial for the restaurant, which is struggling with financial instability [S1E5]. This ambivalence toward legality is further embodied in the character of Jimmy "Cicero" (Oliver Platt), the restaurant's investor, whose nickname evokes a Chicago suburb historically associated with organized crime. His investment in *The Bear* suggests the fluid boundary between informal and potentially dubious capital and "legitimate" entrepreneurial ventures. In this way, the restaurant's transformation is sustained not only by culinary ambition but also by financial networks that reflect Chicago's longstanding entanglement of commerce and criminal mythos.

Another crucial element of Chicago's identity, deeply embedded in the city's mythology, is the legendary football team—the Chicago Bears. The reference to

the team appears in a flashback scene in which Natalie is wearing a Chicago Bears shirt and her brother Mikey is telling a story about the city, underscoring the football team's permanent place in Chicago's history [S1E6]. The series offers multiple references to the Chicago Bears, such as the titular "Bear" representing the restaurant, the Berzatto family (the "Bears"), and Carmy himself as the "Bear." Beyond signaling collective civic identification, this motif also carries connotations of classed and ethnic belonging. The longstanding cultural association of the Bear with Chicago's working-class neighborhoods—satirized in the "Da Bears" sketches on *Saturday Night Live*—evokes a distinctly local, blue-collar identity shaped by immigrant communities.

Chicago's identity is expressed through its distinctive music. The sound of the city combines ethnic musical traditions with the vitality of urban culture, demonstrating a solid emotional link between places, their sonic representation, and people who value the particular sound of music. As a destination of the Great Migration and home to a vibrant African American community, Chicago developed a unique sound that combines urban blues, jazz, electric guitar, and harmonica (Connell & Gibson, 2006, p. 98; McAllister, 2024). The soundtrack of *The Bear* complements the narrative and evokes a sense of place through songs reflecting the city and its atmosphere. Numerous songs are composed by Chicago-based artists and bands, including R&B and gospel singer and civil rights activist Mavis Staples and the alternative rock band *Wilco*, alongside heartland rock artist John Mellencamp, who, though more closely associated with Indiana, embodies a white, blue-collar Midwestern identity that resonates with the series' portrayal of working-class culture. The lyrics of "You Are Not Alone" and "I Like the Things About Me" by Staples are supposed to offer consolation to people who feel lonely and need self-acceptance. Mellencamp's song "Check It Out" confronts the reality of aging and the changing perspectives that come with it. The lyrics "On a private beach in Michigan" from *Wilco's* song "Spiders (Kidsmoke)" nostalgically evoke Chicagoland. Another *Wilco* song that directly references the city is "Via Chicago." A similar case is exemplified by "Tonight, Tonight" by *The Smashing Pumpkins*, which references Chicago Lake with the words, "In your city by the lake. The Place where you were born." The song "Chicago" by Sufjan Stevens, repeatedly played through the series, relates to the artist's own experiences while traveling in Illinois (Donovan, 2024), and reflects on Chicago and its inhabitants. Curtis Mayfield's song "So In Love" plays during a scene in a Black Chi-town neighborhood [S3E7], showcasing the city's ethnically diverse communities. Moreover, the series uses the official fight song of the Chicago Bears, "Bear Down, Chicago Bears," to emphasize determination, resilience, and Chicago pride.

The soundtrack of *The Bear* delivers emotions familiar to the city's inhabitants and expresses a sense of place that contributes to Chicago's distinctive identity. Although not all the music featured in the series is exclusively about

Chicago or performed by native-born Chicago artists, its careful selection functions as a cultural signifier. Much like the visual inclusion of Wrigley Field, Lake Michigan, or a Frank Lloyd Wright house, the soundtrack operates as a collection of sonic references that evoke the city's emotional and cultural landscape. Through this deliberate selection, the series constructs a recognizable Chicagoscape that resonates with viewers, even when the musical origins extend beyond the city's geographical boundaries.

## Conclusion

*The Bear* presents a working-class perspective on urban life, emphasizing that blue-collar workers focus on their work and are determined to succeed despite financial difficulties and the pressures of a rapidly developing city. Pursuing excellence, they constantly improve their craft and demonstrate meticulous care for customers. Chicago's multiethnic communities, restaurant chefs, customers, and tourists display interconnectedness through the food they either prepare or consume. The series illustrates a connection among the narrative, the complexity of working-class structure, and the city's dynamics. While the restaurant is situated in the River North neighborhood, its transformation from *The Original Beef* into *The Bear* can itself be read as an act of culinary gentrification. The characters elevate a modest, struggling, and hardworking neighborhood restaurant into a space of elite gastronomic recognition. Through this transformation, the show demonstrates that hardworking, blue-collar staff deserve inclusion in the world of fine dining, showing that both they and their values are worthy of recognition. Although *The Bear* focuses on the establishment in the River North neighborhood, its portrayal is representative of the hospitality industry as a whole. Recognizable urban locations narrate a story about the city's dynamics and the effects of those transformations upon the city's diverse communities.

The sense of place expressed through the sign "Every Second Counts" acquires complex meanings, such as commitment to working efficiently, respect for co-workers, and appreciation for one's performance. Additionally, the reappearing sign denotes acceptance of change, as the closure of one's workplace signals the challenges of a new beginning. The characters in the series confront challenges different from those faced by staff in elite kitchens such as *Ever*. They are a diverse, working-class team who initially seem excluded from the world of fine dining and Chicago's culinary hotspots. Yet, by overcoming barriers related to class, education, finances, and ethnicity, they create a family-like establishment that is both excellent and representative of Chicago.

The city of Chicago and its filmic image in *The Bear* intertwine to the point where reality and its image blur. The city reflects on the film characters and leaves

its mark on the narrative by being indispensable to the development of the storyline. The show does not offer an unfiltered sociological account of urban life, but rather constructs a televisual Chicago shaped by symbolic landmarks, carefully selected music, and heightened dramatic conflicts. In this sense, it participates in the broader tradition of screen representations that transform cities into cultural texts. Yet, the show's power lies precisely in how it stages Chicago as a city of contrasts. Through the transformation of *The Original Beef* into *The Bear*, the narrative dramatizes the tension between global culinary ambition and a blue-collar, multiethnic foundation. Fine dining, often associated with exclusivity and cosmopolitan prestige, is here built upon the labor, loyalty, and resilience of a diverse working-class team. Rather than simply reproducing a Hollywood fantasy of Chicago, the series foregrounds the friction between aspiration and rootedness. *The Bear* acknowledges the city's global reputation while insisting on the value of its neighborhood cultures and working-class ethos.

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