

# PAUL KAHAN: CHICAGO'S MOST-LOVED CHEF

For decades,  
Paul Kahan has delivered  
great dining experiences  
by focusing on sustaining  
relationships with diners, staff  
and suppliers. By Amelia Levin

There are celebrities, and then there are legends. In an industry with plenty of egos and patting of backs, Chicago native Paul Kahan became an institution in his own city, yet he hardly even notices it. He's too busy, too focused and having too much fun.

Five restaurants, one butcher-sandwich shop, a cocktail lounge and countless awards after opening his first restaurant, Blackbird, in 1997, his management company One Off Hospitality Group continues to revolve around the classic notion of hospitality – serving people great food and drink in interesting, comfortable spaces and always with a smile. It's a simple

concept that is often forgotten amid the chaos of celebrity chefdom.

Kahan (pronounced Kahn) has been described as a real “dude”: where many chefs and restaurateurs might sport a suit and tie or crisp whites, he's more often seen in cargo shorts, sandals and retro tees, with his light brown hair styled in a semi-spiky do. He likes a good dose of sarcasm, but no BS. He enjoys good music, his motorcycle, time with his wife Mary, gardening, entertaining, and a well-made beer. He's not into the “scene”. In other words, he's a true Chicagoan in the oldest sense of the term.

I feel honoured to be speaking to unquestionably the most loved chef in

Chicago (by staff, colleagues, peers and friends alike); Kahan rarely appears on screen or gives interviews. While countless chefs dive head first into the cooking show and cookbook arena, he's held back. No need to show off talent when there are plenty of businesses to run, cooks to mentor and hungry mouths to feed.

After a brief stint as a computer scientist, Kahan started cooking in the 1980s as a line guy for Erwin Drechsler, then the chef at Metropolis Café and later at Metropolis 1800, which would give rise to other now acclaimed Chicago culinarians.

He later moved over to work as a line cook for Rick Bayless when Topolobampo >

## PAUL KAHAN

### KAHAN AT-A-GLANCE

Name: **Paul Kahan**

Age: **51**

Years cooking professionally:

**More than 25**

Hobbies: **Motorcycles, yoga, gardening in his backyard**

Collections: **Records, good beer and wine**

Awards: **James Beard**

**Outstanding Chef of the Year (2013) and Best Chef Midwest (2004); Food & Wine's Best New Chef (1999), among others**

Recent projects: **Nico Osteria, an Italian seafood concept in Chicago's new Thompson Hotel**

Next projects: **Expanding Big Star's kitchen and opening a "groovy" breakfast-lunch-dinner concept next door; building a bakery on the new office's first floor**



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opened in 1989, and was promoted to sous-chef in just a year. After four years in the kitchen at “Topo”, he re-joined Drechsler as chef de cuisine of his new restaurant, the eponymous Erwin.

In 1997 Kahan was recruited by Donnie Madia, then a bartender, manager and restaurateur-in-training about to open his first restaurant, Blackbird, which would offer upscale food but be open to everyone. It was the first restaurant of its kind in Chicago – and one of the first in the country – well ahead of the trend that celebrates chefs front and centre in more casual spaces. Year after year, Blackbird and its chefs reap nominations and awards for exceptional food, design and service. It has also retained its Michelin star for the past few years.

At avec, Kahan and Madia worked together on the concept creation and culinary direction for the all-wooden, galley-shaped, boisterous eatery; introducing communal dining and “small plates” to Chicago and the greater culinary community. Where Blackbird entertained a business professional-meets-special occasion affluent foodie crowd, avec quickly became its younger, hipper sibling.

What started as a dual partnership with Kahan and Madia has grown into a foursome that includes Edward Seitan, a sommelier for the group’s various

restaurants and former floor manager at Blackbird, and Terry Alexander, a nightlife and restaurant guru responsible for The Violet Hour, Chicago’s first no cell phones “speakeasy” craft cocktail lounge in 2007. Though One Off Hospitality Group was officially formed in 2011, the impressive portfolio already included The Publican, Big Star and Publican Quality Meats.

“We’re proud to say we don’t feel pressure to keep up with anyone,” says Kahan. “We’re about quality and want to continue and grow our business, but just because others are opening this or that, we don’t feel the need to be the same. We just want to do what we do well and be happy.”

Those concepts also reflect what they like, Kahan included. He loves craft beers and pork galore (The Publican), fresh-baked bread and well-made charcuterie (Publican Quality Meats), and a good taco and a good whiskey (Big Star).

Kahan says hospitality is the tie that binds all his restaurants and never has there been a time it seems when a server wasn’t extremely attentive, smiley and grateful for your patronage.

“I learned from people like Erwin and Rick that it’s all about respect,” he says of his early mentors. “We throw the word ‘sustainability’ around a lot, but that’s not just in terms of food – it’s about people as well. We try to nurture relationships with farmers, restaurateurs and cooks. You can

**Farm to table**

**Blackbird and avec were among the first restaurants in Chicago to showcase farm-to-table cuisine. In particular avec didn’t just use produce from local, Midwestern farmers, it told people about those producers through its menu descriptions. This education of the general public has helped add a farmers’ market mentality to the modern, Midwestern cuisine that continues to prevail.**

**Kahan’s dedication to local farmers began more than two decades ago. You can often spot him perusing the stalls at Green City Market, Chicago’s largest farmers’ market, and in his spare time he enjoys gardening at his own North Side home.**

**Sourcing direct from farms is just “what we do”, he says. “We don’t call up a big distributor and get a delivery. We go crazy waiting for the farmers’ market instead. It’s the way we cook and totally inherent in what we do.”**

clearly see how everyone who works in our company loves their job and is passionate about what they do. We want our people to have a great, well-balanced life. This is something very special about our company.”

Kahan’s appreciation of his partners and staff doesn’t go unnoticed. In addition to scores of loyal servers, bartenders and line cooks who have stayed within the group for many years, rarely do his chef de cuisines move on. “I try to instil the culture and vision for each restaurant in our chef de cuisines, but let them roll with their talents,” says Kahan. “They are far more talented than I ever was as an individual.”

Though Kahan labels himself as executive chef, he admits his role in recent times has been more that of a consulting chef and business developer while his chef de cuisines at each of his concepts run the



The kitchen bar at Nico Osteria gives the restaurant a community feel which is echoed in the menus

## PAUL KAHAN

kitchens. “In a nutshell I feel I’m one part of a larger group that forms One Off Hospitality and everyone’s contributions are huge,” he says. “I wouldn’t be able to do what I have done over the years without my business partners and team.”

Last year, Kahan took the James Beard Foundation’s top honour – Outstanding Chef – following more than a decade’s worth of other Beard awards and nominations. This year he was inducted to the James Beard Foundation Who’s Who of Food and Beverage in America – the industry’s hall of fame.

Kahan doesn’t see his own accolades as anything special, however. “I can name 10 chefs around the country who I think are every bit as influential and talented as I might be,” he says, giving nods to Suzanne Goin and John Besh, among others. “There is a slew of people who I share ideas with and we have a great deal of mutual respect for each other. I’m excited and proud that people notice the creativity that is One Off Hospitality Group.”

**K**ahan’s recent travels have taken him to Italy, where he enjoyed the seafood dishes. Add to that Madia’s Italian background and there you have Nico Osteria, which opened last year at the new Thompson Hotel in Chicago’s ritzy Gold Coast neighbourhood.

One Off’s latest concept, Nico Osteria, has the makings of yet another famous Chicago institution, though it is, surprisingly, set in a hotel. Kahan has taken the stance that simple is better when developing the menu with Erling Wu-Bower, previously at avec.

The team spent countless hours researching Italian cuisine and techniques, with Wu-Bower spending a month with the famed Vetri family in Philadelphia, learning pasta-making from the experts. The result is classic Italian cooking, with a creative spin through interesting ingredient pairings and some Midwestern finds.

“A lot of restaurants in this day and age like to present a collection of ingredients on a plate,” says Kahan. “There might be a ton

of skill and technique that goes into it, but ultimately they’re just a collection of things. There’s a certain soulfulness we have with the food at our restaurants that’s more about developing flavour and being very respectful of classic cooking and technique.”

At Nico’s, an extensive antipasti menu features plenty of crudo and fettunta, a lighter, more creative take on the bruschetta with combinations such as beef tongue and sea urchin, Brussels sprouts, hazelnuts and homemade ricotta, or baccalà and Jonah crab meat. There’s pasta, made fresh daily, an amazing selection of fish flown in every day and a dry-aged steak for meat lovers. A seafood stew comes with swordfish meatballs and pork belly.

“The menu offers a great opportunity to share and have that kind of communal meal,” says Kahan, explaining how the menu was modelled in part on the family-style dining menu at avec. “We got lucky with avec,” he adds, saying the menus there and at Nico Osteria resemble “the way I like to eat – it’s more about community and the shared experience than anything else – with great wines, of course”.

**F**or years Kahan and Madia have contributed to Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation for paediatric cancer research, but he’s most proud of his work with Pilot Light, a non-profit organisation he co-founded with fellow chef-restaurateur Matthias Merges. Acclaimed Chicago chefs prepare delicious, nutritious lunches and teach children in Chicago’s public schools healthy cooking.



The Tara Bernerd-designed Nico Osteria dining room

### Decoding design

**Beginning with Blackbird’s all-glass façade and clean, sleek, minimalist decor, Madia has earned accolades for his visionary aesthetics propelled by One Off’s partnership with famed designer Thomas Schlessler and graphic designer Jason Pickleman.**

**The Publican was built to resemble a 19th-century beer hall, complete with high-backed wooden chairs, a long bar and stand-up, circular “stations” for congregating over Belgian, German and other craft brews. The Big Star goes for more of a “down and dirty and fun” look, says Kahan of the indoor-outdoor whiskey bar and tqueria.**

**For Nico Osteria, Schlessler was replaced by Tara Bernerd, but Kahan was pleased with the front-to-back, floor-to-ceiling windows, an open kitchen, “chef counter” seating, and a loungy bar area flanked by a wall with living ivy for an elegant yet casual approach.**

“There are so many great children’s groups out there that do wonderful things but our thought is about the school curriculum and where the education about food needs to be coming from,” says Kahan.

As for his next business step – aside from an office move and plans to build a bakery on the first floor – the team is cooking up a kitchen expansion for Big Star to serve as another commissary and the kitchen for a 40-seat, “groovy” breakfast-lunch-dinner concept to open next door this summer.

“We have a lot of fun doing what we do and will continue to grow,” he says. “Life is short.” Spoken by a true icon who has been around the block a few times. “Other than that, I’m just enjoying cooking and living with my bride,” he says with a smile. ■