

feature

# Taste of the action

How four **James Beard** finalists (and one winner) are transforming our city's food scene

BY SAMANTHA LANDE

Angel food cake at Blackbird

## Dana Cree

**Outstanding Pastry Chef finalist**  
Pastry Chef, Blackbird and Avec



Although the Seattle native was a finalist last year — she jokes that she “never had a chance against the cronut” — this year could be a different story. A 15-year industry vet at only 36, she’s cooked at some of the best institutions around the world, including Bray, England’s The Fat Duck and Alinea, and found a home at Blackbird (619 W. Randolph) in 2012. “I love the level of creativity I can execute here,” she says, “We don’t go off the deep end, but we get to create delicious desserts, explore and — my favorite part — just play.”

“Chicago diners love to eat and they love to order dessert,” she continues. “There is more of a depth to pastry here than even New York, and restaurants are willing to put the money behind it.”

**A** James Beard Award — often touted as the Oscar of the food world — is one of the highest achievements an American chef can attain. An annual celebration in honor of the nominees is held each May in New York but, for the first time in its 25-year history, the James Beard Foundation is taking the ceremony on the road, proving Chicago is more than the Second City when it comes to food. (Last week, it was announced that we’ll also host in 2016 and 2017.)

This year’s awards will be presented May 4 at the Lyric Opera of Chicago (20 N. Upper Wacker). Eleven finalists represent the city, spanning categories from best new restaurant to stellar service, best restaurateur to rising star chef. Here are snapshots of some of our favorite nominees transforming Chicago’s culinary landscape — and, at right, a few ways you can get a taste of the action (even without splurging for a gala ticket).

For tickets to the JBF Awards Gala May 4 (\$500), visit [Jamesbeard.org](http://Jamesbeard.org).



## Tanya Baker

**Rising Star Chef finalist**  
Executive Chef, The Boarding House

Being nominated for such a prestigious award came as a shock to the Chicagoan, 27, who, in recent years, has quietly worked her way up through The Boarding House kitchen. “I’m still taking it all in,” she says. “It’s really unexpected, to say the least. There is so much talent in the city; very humbling, very motivating.”

A Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts graduate, Baker describes her style at The Boarding House (720 N. Wells) as simple, approachable and stripped down. “I’ve been lucky

enough to have two mentors who really influenced my style. One helped me pay attention to detail — that every plate, every component, should always be the same, regardless of who you are serving. The other taught me how to really elevate simple food without too much fuss.”

For now, the nomination will continue to motivate her. “Nothing is changing for me,” she says. “It just reminds me I just have to push every day and work as hard as I have been and keep my eyes [ahead].”

Venison loin at The Boarding House



## Beverly Kim and Johnny Clark

**Best New Restaurant finalists**

**Chefs/Owners, Parachute**

Kim and Clark’s 40-seat, Korean-American restaurant, Parachute (3500 N. Elston), is a true labor of love. “[Chicago is the] only city in America where people could do a restaurant like this — a passion project — mostly by [themselves],” says Clark. “The neighborhoods in Chicago are so diverse,” Kim adds, “it makes it [possible for] a family-owned, independent restaurant like ours [to] thrive.”

The Avondale spot, which started with a bare-bones budget and a take-it-day-by-day mentality, has been open less than a year and already received great acclaim, culminating



Duck breast at Parachute

in this Best New Restaurant nod. “This is something that has been on my dream list,” says Kim, who credits happiness as her key to success. “Our [staff] are so dedicated, committed and happy to come to work,” she says. Clark adds: “I don’t think of it as a job, we are just living and loving our life.”



## Erling Wu-Bower

**Best Chef: Great Lakes finalist**  
Chef de Cuisine, Nico Osteria

Taking influence from mentors like Rick Bayless and Paul Kahan, as well as his food-writer mom and Creole dad, Wu-Bower always knew he wanted to be a chef, and has worked his way up through One Off Hospitality’s kitchens since graduating from Notre Dame — starting as a line cook at Avec, then a sous chef at The Publican and Publican Quality Meats and now heading up the kitchen at Nico Osteria (1015 N. Rush).

His Best Chef: Great Lakes nomination is fitting, as he utilizes Midwest culinary resources whenever possible and values the seasonality of it all, laughing, “Chicago is the best place to live six months of the year.” Joking aside, though, he says: “The dining community here is competitive enough to drive creativity and quality ... And there is a reality to Chicago that I really appreciate.”



Madai snapper crudo at Nico Osteria



Intro

## Richard Melman

Lifetime Achievement Award winner

Founder and Chairman, Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises

Beginning with his first restaurant, R.J. Grunts, in 1971, Richard Melman created the Lettuce Entertain You empire that now boasts over 100 restaurants across the country — and became a significant player in putting Chicago on the culinary map. This year, the JBF recognizes his achievement. “[The award] means a lot to me — it’s always nice to be recognized by your peers,” Melman says. “But I hope this doesn’t mean I’m done — I have a lot of life left in me!

“People often think of us as a

really creative restaurant group, but in reality, when you peel it back, we’re just a solid, disciplined company that has a very specific culture focused on our customers. We are completely obsessed.” That dedication shines at the restaurateur’s latest concept, Intro (2300 N. Lincoln Park), which spotlights a roster of up-and-coming chefs. As for long-term plans, “Expect us to continue to grow,” Melman says. “We want our company to be around for another 40 years.”

## GET IN ON IT

In honor of the James Beard celebration, don’t miss these culinary events around town:

### JAMES BEARD EATS WEEK:

Choose Chicago and the Illinois Restaurant Association honor the namesake of the awards, James Beard himself, with a week of dining experiences April 30-May 8. More than 30 eateries, including Yusho, The Bristol, Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse and Piccolo Sogno, will offer dishes inspired by Beard’s American classics and — in homage to his nickname, “Dean of American Cookery” — participating restaurants will also donate to the James Beard Foundation Scholarship Program, directly impacting Chicago

culinary students. For a full list of restaurants, visit [Choosechicago.com](http://Choosechicago.com).

### NICO OSTERIA:

The restaurant hosts dual events with Philadelphia native and Outstanding Chef nominee Marc Vetri. On May 3, Vetri hosts a cooking class and lunch, demonstrating fresh pasta dishes from his cookbook *Mastering Pasta* (\$235, includes wine pairings and a signed cookbook); and on May 5, Vetri prepares a four-course dinner (\$190, includes wine pairings and a signed cookbook). To make reservations, visit



Piccolo Sogno

[Eventbrite.com](http://Eventbrite.com).

[Introchicago.com](http://Introchicago.com).

**INTRO:** See what a host of on-the-rise chefs from across the country have cooking at Intro May 1-9. This year’s Rising Star nominees Jessica Largey (Manresa, Los Gatos, California) and Ari Taymor (Alma, Los Angeles), plus CJ Jacobson, Erik Anderson, Ben Sukle and Michael Laiskonis, will collectively prepare a six-course menu. A portion of proceeds benefit the James Beard Foundation. \$95-\$125. For reservations, visit

**HANNAH’S BRETZEL:** On May 11, James Beard nominees Erling Wu-Bower and Beverly Kim join a panel of judges in taste-testing sandwich creations by Kendall College and Le Cordon Bleu students as part of Hannah’s Bretzel’s Emerging Chefs Challenge. The winner will receive a \$1,000 culinary scholarship and see his or her sandwich on the menu this summer. Beginning May 4, cast your vote at [Hannahsbretzel.com](http://Hannahsbretzel.com).