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Why Chicago is Getting More British

BY CATHERINE DE ORIO

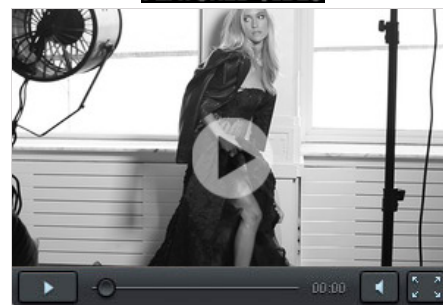
From the summer opening of Soho House to the first Virgin Hotel in the US, British culture is impacting Chicago like never before.



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Behind the Scenes: Kristen Cavallari

Cover shoot: September issue of *Michigan Avenue* magazine.



The Brits have been attracting the world's eye of late with *Downton Abbey* and the birth of Prince George, among other headline makers, but this year their sights are set on Chicago. With Soho House paving the way this summer, Virgin Hotels and a slew of other Brit-cool brands are bringing their unique blend of smart and stylish to our city.

Soho House, an exclusive private-club and hotel group based in London, opens the doors to its first Chicago location in August. In the works for eight years, the project is not the British brand's first foray into the US (New York, Miami, and West Hollywood outposts came before), but it will be the largest North American location to date. "It's got everything," enthuses Nick Jones, the group's founder and managing director. And by "everything," he means the space—a former 1900s-era leatherworking factory—will house a private members' club; a 12,000-square-foot gym, complete with a boxing ring; a Cowshed Spa; an intimate screening room; a variety of food and beverage options, including the London imports Pizza East and Chicken Shop; the Allis Bar, named for the family that owned the factory; a 40-room hotel; and a rooftop swimming pool with sweeping views of the city, sure to have even the most jaded Chicagoans queuing up for membership.

And membership definitely has its privileges—if you can get it. This is not a country club where a recommendation and the willingness to plunk down some cash will gain you access. Nor will the right pedigree ensure entrée, as it does at London's storied gentlemen's clubs. For Jones, it's about creating a place for "creative souls and like-minded individuals." Although "you don't have to be determined by your job," he says, club members are predominately involved in the media, fashion, the arts, and other culturally oriented pursuits. Adds Joey Stevenson, Soho House Chicago's event programming manager, "There's something exciting happening in the Chicago creative community right now, and we wanted to be there as it took off."

Chicago has long had strong business ties with the UK, thanks to Willis Group, Mintel, and numerous other British companies with major offices here, but the arrival of the creativity-focused Soho House indicates that Chicago's cultural cachet is on the rise, and the Brits are flying the flag. The influx of British brands in the Windy City "says as much about Chicago as it does about us," notes Stephen Bridges, Britain's consul general in Chicago. "It's [the UK] seeing Chicago as a serious place, that we should do business here, and we're only going to do that here if the people are going to buy the product."

Fashion brands have led the brigade investing in the Windy City, including AllSaints Spitalfields, Topshop, Ted Baker, and Burberry, whose splashy five-story store with the signature plaid façade is still the buzz of the Magnificent Mile nearly two years after opening in late 2012. With the addition of the heritage brands Barbour and Church's, as well as the suiting essentials of Charles Tyrwhitt, Chicago has officially entered the British conversation, sartorially speaking.

British interest in Chicago makes complete sense to Jessica Moazami, a Windy City–based freelance fashion editor and *Chicago Tribune* contributor who hails from London. “Chicago consumers are more sophisticated and are willing to pay for quality,” Moazami says. And that—combined with the rise of UK style icons like Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge; It girl Alexa Chung; and the Beckhams, all of them providing a showcase for British brands—makes it natural that Brit culture would also appeal to Chicagoans. Bridges adds that while the British may not be credited with the refinement of the French or Italians, there is still a “sense of Brits as cool. ... We are cool in our music, cool in our theater, and cool in our fashion.” And that coolness is infiltrating the city in many ways. For example, Anthony Freud, general director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago; Sir Andrew Davis, music director and principal conductor at the Lyric; and Zoë Ryan, chair and curator of architecture and design at the Art Institute of Chicago, all hail from across the pond. “We have that design, art that runs through us,” says Bridges. “And as Chicago is becoming more global and has embraced it, they’re okay with Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen.” But it’s not just British artistic and sartorial savvy that’s impacting Chicago. With the opening of his new Brit-inspired riverside restaurant, River Roast, Michelin-starred chef Tony Mantuano is bringing a taste of London to the Windy City. “For so long the food in London was the butt of the joke,” he says with a laugh, “but I think it might be one of the most exciting places to eat right now.” Mantuano is putting his money where his mouth is in his first non-Italian eatery, which was inspired by the London restaurant Roast and will serve up homey classics like whole roasted chicken, succulent beef slices, and market-fresh veg. “It’s a return to sitting down at the table and having a great roast and farmers market vegetables,” he says.

Nick Spencer, owner of the recently expanded Lakeview grocery store and restaurant Spencer’s Jolly Posh Foods, echoes Mantuano’s sentiment, explaining that he’s not necessarily on a mission to change Chicagoans’ minds about British food; he just “wants to give them a taste of home.” And home seems to be the thread connecting the two cultures. Despite the stereotype of the chilly Brit, creating a warm, inviting feeling of comfort is part of the core philosophy of the British brands arriving in Chicago. Case in point: Virgin, which is set to unveil the first property in its new boutique hotel line in the Loop this autumn. Says Doug Carrillo, vice president of sales and marketing for Virgin Hotels North America, “Elements throughout the hotel will take you through Virgin’s British heritage and British heritage overall.” Just as important, the hotels are designed to offer “homey intimacy and heartfelt service.” Carrillo explains that like Virgin’s Limited Edition properties, the Chicago hotel will be like an extension of home—but with all the innovations and cheeky touches for which Virgin is known. Similarly, Jones touts Soho House as “a home away from home” for its members. To that end, Vicky Charles, the company’s head designer, is devoting 30 percent of the furnishings to vintage and reclaimed finds, to give the space a comfortable, eclectic vibe. “That’s the way you decorate your home,” she says. “Your most comfortable chair may be a bit faded.” It’s an aesthetic that appeals to Midwestern sensibilities.

“I think Brits see kindred spirits in Chicago,” says Soho House’s Stevenson. “Chicagoans have a great sense of humor, they’re drawn to authenticity and shy away from anything that’s too flashy—it feels like British brands fit right in.” Perhaps we are, after all, simply two nations divided by a common language.



The Curator

Zoë Ryan, Chair and John H. Bryan curator of architecture and design, the Art Institute of Chicago

London-born Zoë Ryan, chair of the Art Institute of Chicago and its John H. Bryan Curator of Architecture and Design, takes a forward-thinking approach to her exhibitions, giving them both experimental and experiential components and stimulating dialogue on how society relates to design and architecture. Ryan’s career has taken her from London’s Victoria & Albert Museum to New York’s Museum of Modern Art to the Van Alen Institute, a nonprofit committed to improving the design of the public realm. Since she arrived at the Art Institute in 2006, she has built its contemporary design collection and spearheaded the acquisition of more than 1,500 pieces. 111 S. Michigan Ave., 312-443-3600.

On design: I talk about design in very broad strokes. I’ve done exhibitions on graphic design, fashion, furniture, product design, and multimedia design.... I try to be as open-minded as possible, because the discipline is moving in really exciting directions.

Dream exhibition: Kate Bush is touring again, and a show about her—about British music and design—would be really cool.

Working in Chicago: In New York there is so much going on, and sometimes you feel like your project is one among so many others. In Chicago there are only a handful of museums taking on architecture and design, so the

platform is much bigger and you feel like you're making a contribution.

Civic pride: Chicago is proud of its architectural and design heritage. It's fantastic to work in a place where that's a given, without having to explain why architecture and design and the arts are important.

Sweet tooth: I really miss English chocolate—I've got to have Cadbury's.

Missing home: I miss pub culture—a lunch at the pub with family and friends.

Humor: British humor is very silly and dry.... It can be very cynical, but there's lots of playfulness.



The Diplomat

Stephen Bridges, UK Consul General Chicago

Although Stephen Bridges, Britain's consul general in Chicago, arrived in the Windy City a scant year ago, the career diplomat, former British ambassador to Cambodia, and renewable-energy entrepreneur has hit the ground running. Strategically targeting cities in his 13-state territory, he fosters opportunities for trade and investment, manages long-held business relationships, and promotes implementation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, a proposed free-trade agreement between the US and the UK that would create as many as 30,200 jobs in Illinois alone. Rest from his formal responsibilities usually involves entertaining visitors and promoting British culture—from Shakespeare to the Beatles to *Downton Abbey*—in the stunning official residence just off Michigan Avenue, where he lives with his wife, Kim, and two dogs, Coco and Montague.

Chicago's best: The people—they made us welcome from day one: People from the building found out my wife is Asian, so they brought moon cakes.

Perception of Chicago in the UK and vice versa: Al Capone and Michael Jordan. And people's image of the UK is still soldiers with big fluffy hats and red tunics and inedible food. [Changing perceptions] is something I am going to be working on.

Diplomatic approach: Too many diplomats remain aloof and detached—almost tangential to Chicago society. We want to be part of it. It's a lot easier if we are part of your society and we go to your parties, rather than you go to ours once a year and stick a flag up the pole and sing "God Save the Queen." Integration is key.



The Creative Catalyst

Joey Stevenson, Event Programming Manager, [SOHO House Chicago](#)

It's no wonder that Soho House Chicago tapped Joey Stevenson—its London-born, Singapore- and Hong Kong-raised, Chicago-based former membership launch manager—to head up the new location's event programming. With a résumé that boasts positions such as editor at the British style magazine *The Face* and head of San Francisco's hip event-curation site Flavorpill, Stevenson has something worthwhile to say on almost every topic. With her finger firmly on the city's pulse thanks to meet-ups with nearly 500 local creatives in advance of Soho House Chicago's opening, her task is to ignite conversations among club members through collaborative events, and it's a safe bet that she'll dream up some doozies. *Soho House Chicago, 113–125 N. Green St.*

She's a wanderer: Chicago is the 10th city I've lived in, but it's the first place where I'm buying a home. I'm besotted with this city.

London–Chicago parallels: There's a similar attitude. People in Chicago and London aren't as nakedly ambitious as, say, those in New York or Los Angeles. There is a sense that people are less defined by their job and more interested in a balanced work life that allows for additional creative side projects.

Chicago's best: Chicago folk are the nicest, most humble, and most creative people in the world. I love the "hard work will get you far" attitude. Everyone is extremely genuine and friendly. And you guys sure love meat.

Chicago weather: Obviously, winter here is a bit of a shocker. Brits are used to crap weather, but the last winter here was like being stranded on the surface of Pluto. To get through it, I started drinking a lot of bourbon. My current favorite is FEW, distilled in Evanston.

Brit bites: My favorite British trend in Chicago is Scotch eggs. Imagine an egg wearing a comforter made of sausage. Dusek's is the place that I think has really nailed them.



The Purveyor

Nick Spencer, *Spencer's Jolly Posh Foods*

Leeds native and former Ernst & Young consultant Nick Spencer met his wife, Connie, a Chicagoan, in London, fell in love, and eventually landed in Chicago in 2009. With his country's bangers and bacon as inspiration, he founded Spencer's Jolly Posh Foods two years ago. What started as a farmers market stand in Lincoln Park has blossomed into a full-scale wholesale business, supplying rashers and sausages to markets such as Mariano's and restaurants like Paddy Long's and Bangers & Lace, as well as importing specialty foods from the UK. This summer, an expanded Spencer's Jolly Posh Foods debuted, complete with a full-service restaurant and a Pimm's patio. 3755 N. Southport Ave., 872-802-3840.

Bacon bits: In the British mind, there are two types of bacon: American or streaky bacon and proper bacon, which is what all the expats call British bacon here in America. I make the latter. It comes from the back instead of the belly, and it's not crispy like American bacon.

Chicago love: When people come here for the first time, they are blown away by what a cool city it is. I feel similar living here as I do in London, actually.

Tastes of home: What we are looking to do is make basic food done really well—home-style British food. It's the kind of food your mum would make for you, so treacle tarts, shepherd's pie, homemade shortbread, or Battenberg cake.

British spirit: Our patio is called a Pimm's patio because the focus is like in England when it's finally warm and the sky is not gray, you can go to any pub and sit outside and get a nice big jug of Pimm's.

Chicago style: Well-tailored clothes are definitely part of the suit set here, but Chicagoans wear brown shoes with their suits all of the time. Can someone please tell them it's wrong? Please don't wear brown shoes with a suit. Ever. It's a fashion no-no.

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