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Chicago Specials Relaunches as a Hand-Curated Guide to the City's Real Specials, Gems & Events — Built by a Father and Son, Twenty Years in the Making

CHICAGO, IL — Chicago Specials, the independent Chicago guide to happy hours, hidden gems, and real events across the city, today announced the relaunch of ChicagoSpecials.com with a redesigned site, an expanded editorial voice, and a clearer set of standards for what actually earns a spot on the page.

The project started two decades ago as a single dad and his son walking Chicago's neighborhoods together on weekends, chasing down the next great deal and the next hole-in-the-wall worth trying. That habit never stopped. This year, co-founder Emmanuel Cecilio turned it into a full website — built entirely from scratch, with no WordPress, no template, and no outside investment. Working inside VS Code and connected to GitHub, Cecilio used Claude, Anthropic's AI assistant, as both a build partner and a teaching tool, walking his son through how to connect APIs and stand up the Firebase database that now runs the live site. The approach — sometimes called “vibe coding” or “vibe engineering” — let a two-person team ship a real, working web application without a dev team or an agency behind it.

“This isn't a scraped directory. Every listing on this site got here because we actually went and checked, or because Chicago vouched for it directly. That's slower, and it's the only way we wanted to do it.”

— Emmanuel Cecilio, Co-Founder, Chicago Specials

Built as a Lesson, Not Just a Launch

For Cecilio, the project doubles as hands-on training. His son and co-founder — a business major at Northeastern Illinois University expecting to graduate this spring — executed the day-to-day build work under his father's direction, learning web development, API integration, and database design by actually shipping a production site rather than working through a classroom exercise. He also now carries the informal title of Chief Finance Officer, one of several roles the two co-founders split between them as the business grows. Cecilio's son has asked not to be named publicly yet.

A Curated List, Not an Aggregator

Chicago Specials intentionally keeps its listings small. A business needs four separate nominations from real people before it's added to the site — a deliberate bar meant to keep the list one Chicagoans actually vouch for, not a directory anyone can buy their way into. Once nominated, a business earns its place with a real special worth planning around, or a genuine “Gem” — Chicago Specials' term for a specific dish, drink, or detail worth seeking out on its own, distinct from a restaurant's whole menu. A “Super Gem” designation marks a business the team considers essential outright, chosen by editorial judgment rather than an algorithm.

Chicago's Best, Scored Objectively

The site's Chicago's Best rankings — spanning pizza, burgers, hot dogs, tacos, BBQ, sushi, ramen, donuts, and Italian beef — run on the Chicago Specials Score, a blended methodology built to resist the usual “best of” list problems. The score weights Google, Yelp, and TripAdvisor ratings so a handful of five-star reviews can't outrank a spot with thousands, layers in real member upvotes, factors in how often independent “best of Chicago” sources agree on a place, and gives the team's own Super Gem picks a guaranteed spot in the top tier. The full methodology is published openly on the site rather than left opaque.

I ♥ Chi: The Site's Storytelling Heart

At the center of the relaunch is a new page, I ♥ Chi (chicagospecials.com/i-heart-chi) — part Chicago history lesson, part origin story, and Chicago Specials' clearest statement of what the whole project is actually for. It traces some of the city's stranger, truer history — the Chicago River's reversal, the rebuild after the Great Fire, the 1893 World's Fair's Ferris wheel and its accidental invention of the brownie — alongside the story of how Chicago Specials itself got built. It functions as a love letter to the city, and as an invitation: readers can support the project directly by picking up the site's own I ♥ Chicago trucker hat, subscribing to the weekly newsletter, or following along on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Real Events, Curated by Hand

The relaunch also expands Chicago Specials' Events section (chicagospecials.com/events), built specifically to avoid the sprawl of a generic listings feed. Rather than aggregate every event in the city, the team researches and writes up individual festivals, concerts, parades, and neighborhood happenings by hand, verifying dates and sourcing directly instead of duplicating a syndicated calendar. The stated goal is “no listings dumps, no guessed dates” — a browsable, month-by-month calendar of what's genuinely worth planning around, from the coming weekend through next summer.

What's Next

Chicago Specials describes the relaunch as a foundation, not a finished product. The team is actively refining the site's design and function and expects to roll out new categories, neighborhoods, and features in the months ahead — including expanded gamification (neighborhood badges, a Dish Gems leaderboard) already previewed on the site's About page. On the business side, Chicago Specials has filed to become an LLC; once that's approved, the team plans to bring on Stripe, roll out its own ad placements, and pursue affiliate partnerships — including ticket-sales links for the events it already curates — as new ways to support the business without changing how listings get chosen. Readers are encouraged to send ideas directly; a standing invitation to suggest new features or flag missing spots lives on the I ♥ Chi page. Stay

tuned.

In the meantime, the most direct way to back the project is still the simplest one: buy the hat.

About Emmanuel Cecilio

Emmanuel Cecilio is the co-founder of Chicago Specials and Chief AI Officer at Meliora Integrative Medicine. He brings 20+ years in advertising — including time at Razorfish Health and at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business — plus experience as a front-end web developer and podcast creator. Cecilio credits the Hero Forge AI program and retreat with teaching him how to actually build and ship applications with AI, a skillset he's now passing directly to his son and Chicago Specials co-founder through this project — building it together from design to working web app, with Claude alongside them the whole way.

About Chicago Specials

Chicago Specials (chicagospecials.com) is an independently run, father-and-son guide to Chicago's real food and drink specials, curated dish "Gems," objectively ranked "Best of Chicago" lists, and hand-verified events — built without outside investment, one neighborhood at a time. The project began as a father and son exploring Chicago's neighborhoods together and relaunched in 2026 as a full website built from scratch. New listings can be nominated at chicagospecials.com/nominate; business owners can claim a free listing at chicagospecials.com/claim-business.html.

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