

## The ultimate alfresco pop-up, with 3,600 other diners

By: JEAN IVERSEN August 23, 2017

On Aug. 24, some 3,600 people will descend upon the city, all dressed in white. They will assemble in groups at assigned locations, where clad-in-white volunteers will usher them to an undisclosed public venue by bus, train, trolley or foot.

No, it's not a cult or the filming of "The Leftovers." It's **Diner en Blanc**, an annual pop-up event in which people travel to a mystery location to eat, drink and dance, dressed head-to-toe in white, toting white chairs, folding tables, linens and food, and paying \$39 for the privilege.

Now in its sixth year in Chicago, Diner en Blanc originated in Paris in 1988 and has spread to more than 70 cities worldwide. Chicago's version has been held at such public spaces as the Art Institute's South Gardens, Pioneer Plaza, Lincoln Park Zoo's Nature Boardwalk and Queen's Landing. The 2017 event is expected to attract 3,600 participants. Some 15,000 are on a waiting list.

It all started when founder Francois Pasquier spied an older couple sipping Champagne one day sitting in the Bois du Boulogne, a public park in Paris, dressed all in white. Inspired, Pasquier invited friends to picnic at Jardins de Bagatelle, with subsequent annual events at the Louvre, Eiffel Tower, Trocadero Gardens and Notre Dame Cathedral, crowds swelling to as high as 15,000.

"These places were made for the people," said Roger Hobby, who organizes Chicago's event with four other directors. Originally from France, Hobby co-hosted 17 Diner en Blanc picnics in Paris before bringing the tradition to Chicago in 2012. "We want to take these spaces back, if only for one night, and truly enjoy them."

The Chicago team chooses outdoor venues based on two main criteria: It must be available to rent, and it must be considered underutilized (or not utilized at all) as event space. "We had the event at Pioneer Plaza, where the Apple store is going, and so many people said, 'I had no idea this was here,'" said Chicago director Lauren Haras.

A second all-white fete, **Chicago in White**, spun off of Diner en Blanc. Organizers Kelly Williams and Jen Luby, who co-hosted Diner en Blanc in 2011 before striking out on their own, have hosted pop-up dinners at Daley Plaza, Merchandise Mart South Drive, Randolph Street Market, Ravinia Festival and Midway Plaisance. They've sold out every year, including last month, when 700 people attended.

Chicago in White provides tables, chairs and linens. The location is disclosed by email the morning of, allowing guests to find their own way to the site. Tickets range from \$40 for a "DIY general" to about \$140 for an all-inclusive seat at the founder's table.

Both pop-ups allow attendees to BYO food but not booze (per local ordinance), with wine and picnic baskets available for pre-order. Both provide entertainment.

Noelle Minchin and her husband have traveled from Romeoville several years in a row to attend Chicago in White with college friends. "I think it's great not having to lug tables and chairs," she said.

Sharon and Al Geiser are preparing for their fourth Diner en Blanc Chicago. "Yes, you can do Millennium Park, you can do Ravinia," Sharon Geiser said, "but at Diner en Blanc, everybody gets dressed up. People walk around, they mingle. We've met some great people."

The Geisers have spotted tables festooned with candelabras, feathers, crystal and china. One year a woman wore a wedding dress. "Diner en Blanc really is a magical event," Hobby said. "Once set up, Champagne corks fly, dishes are passed around and shared, and people take a moment to sit back and enjoy where they are."