

DINING

## Fresh off 'Chopped' win, Seattle chef Kaleena Bliss lands at Chicago Athletic Association

By Nick Kindelsperger  
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Kaleena Bliss will be the new executive chef for the Chicago Athletic Association. (Chicago Athletic Association / HANDOUT)

When searching for its new executive chef, the Chicago Athletic Association certainly didn't mind looking afield.

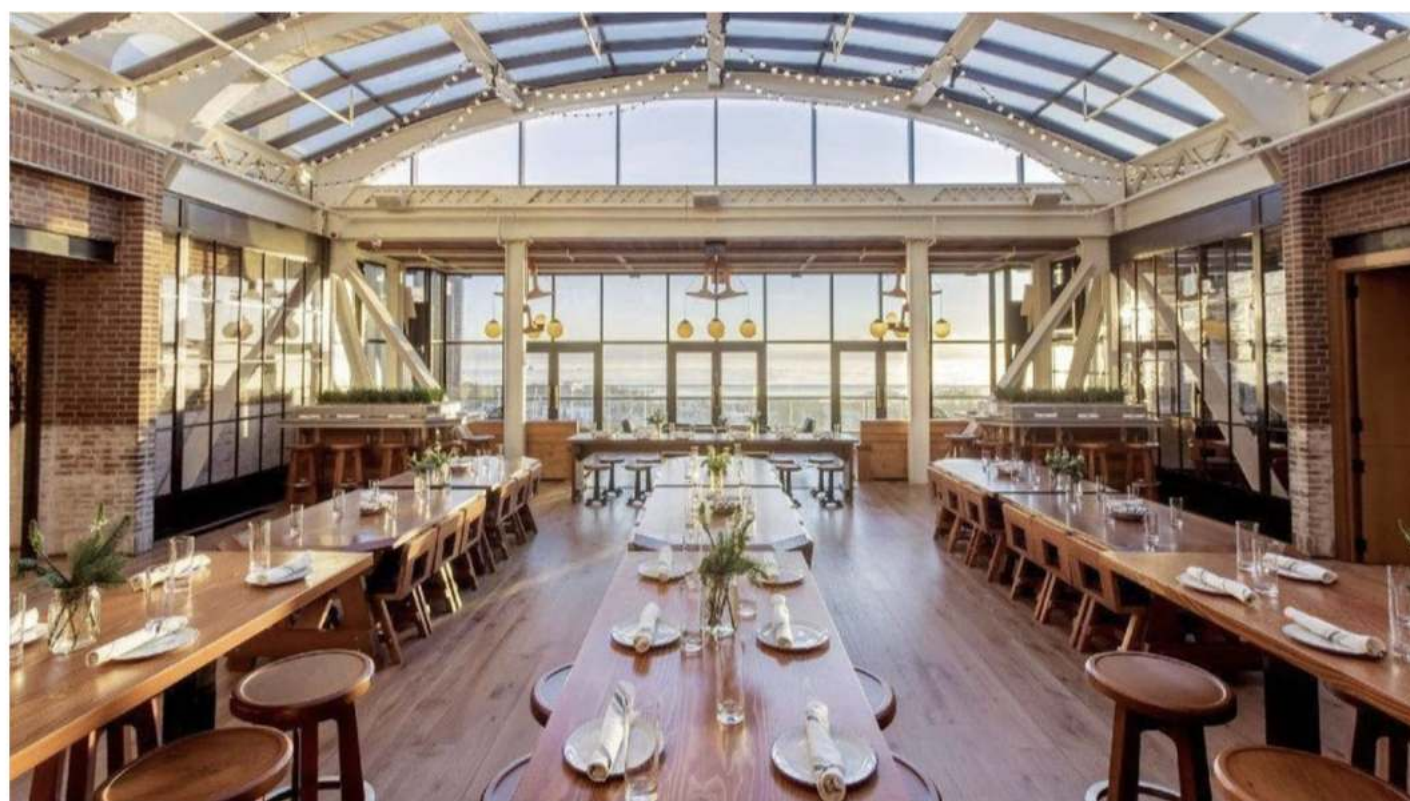
The Loop hotel, at 12 S. Michigan Ave., just hired Kaleena Bliss, who most recently was the executive chef at the Thompson Seattle. She'll officially start March 1.

Along with being an acclaimed chef in Washington, fans of the Food Network will recognize Bliss for her recent wins on "Beachside Brawl" and the "Chopped: Casino Royale" tournament.

This will be a big move for Bliss, too. Besides her time attending the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, Bliss has called the Pacific Northwest home. That includes time in Portland before she moved on to Seattle.

But thanks to a program from Hyatt, which owns both the Thompson Seattle and the Chicago Athletic Association, she was able to lend her help to the Chicago property. "I went for three weeks with the full intention of coming back to Seattle," Bliss said. "But I was very surprised. I fell in love with it and the team. I came home to my boyfriend and said, 'I think we are moving to Chicago.'"

Much of her focus will be on Cindy's, the hotel's stunning rooftop restaurant overlooking Millennium Park. She won't have any involvement with the other restaurants in the facility, including Cherry Circle Room, Drawing Room, Game Room and Milk Room, which are run by the Land and Sea Dept.



A view of Cindy's Rooftop Restaurant, on the top floor of the Chicago Athletic Association building, 12 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. (Nick Gerber)

Though she's still working on the menu, Bliss wants to incorporate her love of the Pacific Northwest. That will include more seafood dishes, though she's also looking forward to exploring what's available locally. "My brain is very Washingtonian," Bliss said. "I'm used to a forest and a mountain range. But I'm really excited to take my cooking style and bring it to a different terrain. I'll need to get to know different products that are local to this region."

While Bliss is thrilled about her recent wins on the Food Network, she is also proud she was able to discuss issues in the restaurant industry. "I got to talk openly and honestly about my own struggles being brought up in the industry, where things like mental health weren't priorities. I had a lot of anxiousness and anxiety," she said.

Now that she's in charge, she wants to create a different atmosphere for her employees. "I want to present a kitchen where people can be successful," Bliss said.

Along with running Cindy's, Bliss will also be in charge of the banquet and events program for the entire hotel. "That's part of the reason I fell for this job," Bliss said. "I was just in awe of the history of the hotel. It kept so much of the original art and architecture."

But she's also happy that she gets to add some new history to the property, which from its opening in 1893 until 1972, didn't allow women members. "It used to be a males-only athletic club, but now there are a lot of women in leadership positions," Bliss said.

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