





# Inspiration in Windy City

America continues to surprise us with new, innovative, and downright awesome businesses. Like the corner store with a bike-through window, a mobile shop that sells vintage clothing from a 60s trailer, a pizza museum, and a Chinese restaurant that serves Pac-Man-like dumpling characters—not forgetting the food trucks and mobile shops that sell their wares on wheels.

by Cindy-Lou Dale

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In Chicago, creativity knows no bounds and enables entrepreneurs to identify new opportunities to grow their businesses, further generating innovation. These are the top three on the Cool Business List.

## THE BAG LADIES

You'll stop and stare at the stylish handbags displayed in the window of Laudi Vidni on West Armitage Avenue—a Chicago-based boutique that believes every woman should love her handbag, not just like it. The way they see this happening is for women to design it themselves.

"Talk to a woman about her handbag," says Laura Kofoid, "and she will likely say, 'I love this bag, but...,' which is why Grace Tsao-Wu and I created Laudi Vidni. We want women to love their bags, with no 'buts' to speak of. We've become good listeners and know that every woman's handbag-needs differ and that they have a desire to create their own—which is why we created our Chicago-based boutique where you can do just that."

Should you not be based in Chicago, fear not. You can design your custom bag online! First select one of 26 base styles—small bags, crossbodies, totes and shoulder bags. Now choose from 50+ types of leather. Everything from soft grain metallics to fuchsia snakeskin and leopard print. Depending on your design, you can select leathers for the body, the handle and the strap. After your leathers, pick a lining—basically, you decide what color you want to pop when you open your bag. Finally, choose from silver or gold hardware.

If customizing isn't your thing, you can also shop their online collection of beautifully curated pre-made handbags.

[www.laudividni.com](http://www.laudividni.com)

## THE HAT MAN

Walking through the doors of Optimo Hats (West Jackson Boulevard), you at once sense you've entered the last surviving bastion of another decade—a time when Chicago men traditionally wore custom-made hats.

As an apprentice, Graham Thompson worked in the shop of legendary Chicago hatter, Johnny Tyrus. The shop was small and packed with hats—and sometimes he'd be allowed to hang out behind the

counter to observe the mix of customers, which occasionally included famous blues musicians. Having bought the business from his retiring mentor, Graham continues to provide custom-made hats to enthusiasts around the world and performs fitting in his shop and over the phone.

Set up in a converted Chicago firehouse which opened at the height of hat wearing in 1915, and using original equipment, his team create hats working artifacts dating back to the 1920s. Optimo's customers see a hat as something more than a fashion statement and wear their hats with style and panache, despite fashion trends.

[www.optimo.com](http://www.optimo.com)



## THE BICYCLE GUY

Since Schwinn left the city in the 70s, Heritage Bicycles are the only outfit in Chicago to hand-make bicycles. Their hand-built works of design art have earned them an international reputation as a mecca for discerning cyclists.

Here we're talking fully-customized, all American-made, hand-welded bikes created inside—wait for it—a trendy coffee shop. Merging Chicago's manufacturing industry with a contemporary space where lovers of good coffee amass must surely be every hipster's dream.

Whether you pop in to do some work, to hang out, or peruse the Heritage shop (stocked with brands like Brooks, Yakkay, Lezyne, Velo-Orange, Abus, as well as jewelry crafted out of recycled bike parts) be sure to watch the mesmerizing show put on by the bike mechanics in the "garage." It's a classic "Proud to be American-made" storefront, transformed into a sanctuary for coffee aficionados that's much loved by the locals and a few celebs like Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

[www.heritagebicycles.com](http://www.heritagebicycles.com)

Pack a bag, put a hat on and pedal over to Chicago to meet its innovative designers.

**WOW** WOW air offers cheap flights to Chicago every day of the week, all year round.