Las Vegas for the hungry

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Las Vegas hotels have been opening outposts run by some of the world's top chefs at such a pace that I felt the time had come to eat in them rather than just read about them.

It was a lugubrious waiter at Bartolotta, the excellent Italian seafood restaurant in the Wynn Hotel which came highly recommended by a New York restaurateur, who noted the specific time the city changed. "I've been here 13 years," he explained as he delivered a particularly authentic Ligurian octopus salad, "and until five years ago Las Vegas could still have been called a 'buffet town'. But now people definitely come here for the restaurants."

He went on, "Although we were very busy last night serving about 500 customers, this isn't really the limit of our business. We're all here because of the conventions when the higher spending executives are in town. Vegas wouldn't be Vegas without the convention business."

Judging by the queue I saw outside the entrance to the buffet at the Bellagio Hotel, which must have been several hundred long one Sunday lunchtime, bufffets seem no less popular than they have ever been with some serving up to 1,500 meals. This, however, only served to underline what had made Jean Philippe Teresi, born in St Tropez and formerly at the Louis XV in Monaco, leave the Mediterranean to become General Manager of Bradley Ogden's restaurant in Caesar's Palace.

"There's nowhere else in the restaurant world that has the same concentration of visitors in such a small area. About 40 million come here every year and most of them spend their entire stay within two miles along the strip where there are four hotels - here, the Bellagio, Wynn and the MGM Grand - each with annual revenues in excess of a billion dollars. No other city in the world can match that. Not New York, Paris nor even London, I would guess. And we are hardly ever quiet. It's a little less busy from now until September because it's so hot here now but just look around, we're pretty full," he said with more than a touch of Gallic pride.

The emergence of these restaurants has added an extra competitive edge to the hotels which are investing heavily to outdo one another. Building costs were authoritatively quoted to me at between $800-$1,000 per foot, which equates to overall costs of between $8-10 million for the more luxurious restaurants.

I certainly could not say that the interiors of either Bartolotta's restaurant or Joel Robuchon's tenebrous restaurant in the MGM Grand excited me as much as the food, but in both instances the hotel's management have had the foresight to let each chef be distinctive.

Bartolotta may be many times bigger, and considerably further from the sea, but the octopus salad, the grilled squid, the seafood risotto and the lemon sorbet that were served there took me straight back to a table in one of those romantic small, coastal restaurants in southern Italy.

Chez Robuchon, you would hardly know you were on the Strip. There is the black and red interior that has become the leitmotif of his restaurants worldwide, and the approach to service is quintessentially French, something which its highly experienced Breton general manager, Loic Launay, insisted upon when he too left France to open here three years ago. The quality of the ingredients, the precision of the service and the artistry of the bread and desserts which emanate from Kamel Guechida's pastry section are exceptional. And while the menu prices are high, from $250-$385, the current weak dollar softens the bill, as does the generosity with the caviar servings.

Two days on the sizzling strip, with the outside temperature at 118 degrees F, prompted two short excursions. The first, a 15 minute taxi ride, was on the recommendation of a wine merchant in San Francisco and confirmed a local's description of the Las Vegas as a 'strip surrounded by strip malls'.

My destination was Saipin Chutima's Lotus of Siam, located amongst a plethora of Asian restaurants in a most unassuming lot. But this small restaurant has been a beacon for over a decade, not just for its Thai food but also for its wine list with its particular emphasis on German rieslings. We joined the noon rush for a table and after a 15 minute wait sat down to spicy Thai fish cakes, fried tofu, rice with Thai sausage, peanuts, chili and ginger and a deep red rice vermicelli curry from the north of Thailand, a dish which, our Bangkok born waiter explained, was so specific to that region that he had never eaten it until he came to work here. Lotus of Siam's interior is basic but the combination of Thai cooking and its wine list, all served with Thai warmth, is exceptional.

My appetite whetted for the city's local restaurants, I subsequently set out for Summerlin, 2,200 acres owned by the Howard Hughes Corporation a 25 minute drive from the strip. Originally intended to be the site of an airline factory, it is now home to many of the city's legal and commercial companies, numerous high roller homes, golf courses and country clubs and, naturally, a casino or two.

Our destination was Agave Comida y Tequila, the first of two restaurants established by developer Michael Corrigan, whose family were among the first to have settled here in the early 1960s, and his talented chef, Matthew Silverman. We chose here because the opportunity to eat authentic Mexican food is still sadly so rare outside Mexico and particularly within Europe. Silverman's approach, backed by a Mexican brigade only too keen to replicate their grandmothers' recipes he told me, is bold but authentic, best exemplified in his refined mushroom tamales, tuna tostadas and lobster empanadas. Table 32 at their latest restaurant, Vintner Grill, has now become the much sought after table for the local billionaires, I was reliably informed.

My last port of call was the windowless office in the basement of the MGM Grand belonging to David McIntyre. Born in a small town on the west coast of Scotland, McIntyre is now responsible for the $300 million sales of food and beverage, and on one large wall is a plan of the hotel's vast ground floor with each different café, bar and restaurant clearly delineated. A part of his role was to maximise the 'revenue per seat hour' from this entire area and while he continued to scour the world for the best chefs who would want to open in his hotel, he believes that Las Vegas may soon be entering a new and distinctive phase. "So many top chefs have come here and in setting up their own restaurants have brought on the skills and techniques of many young, local cooks. Soon they will want to go on and open their own restaurants and that will present some really exciting and new opportunities."

Bartolotta, Wynn Hotel
Joel Robuchon, MGM Grand
Lotus of Siam, www.lsaipinchutisiam.com

Agave Comida y Tequila, www.agavelasvegas.com

Vintner Grill, www.vglasvegas.com