

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT...

# Los Angeles

## THE L.A. WOMAN

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- > She's Smart.
- > She's Iconic.
- > She'll Surprise You.

LET'S HEAR IT  
FOR THE  
5 MILLION OF  
THEM WHO MAKE  
THE CITY GREAT

FEATURING

← **MARIA  
SHRIVER**

interviewing  
L.A.'s most  
powerful  
woman

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# Playing The Tables

Knife and fork in hand, our restaurant critic eats his way through the most talked-about outposts in L.A.'s favorite desert suburb (aka **Las Vegas**)

**Twenty years ago** a nice meal in Las Vegas meant gnawing some surf and turf as you listened to a guy in Dacron sing about love, the casino jingling in the background. You were better off with the dollar kielbasa at Slots-A-Fun; at least it made you want to drink for the right reasons. Then in 1992, Wolfgang Puck opened Spago at Caesars Palace and everything changed. Soon every other high-profile chef would have a satellite in Vegas. So what if few of them are actually at those outposts for more than a weekend flyby? Though the town loosened the ties between cook and stove, its flair for spectacle also helped loosen up the cooks themselves, presenting each with a core question: Are you able to bring a moment of euphoria to those who pass through your doors?

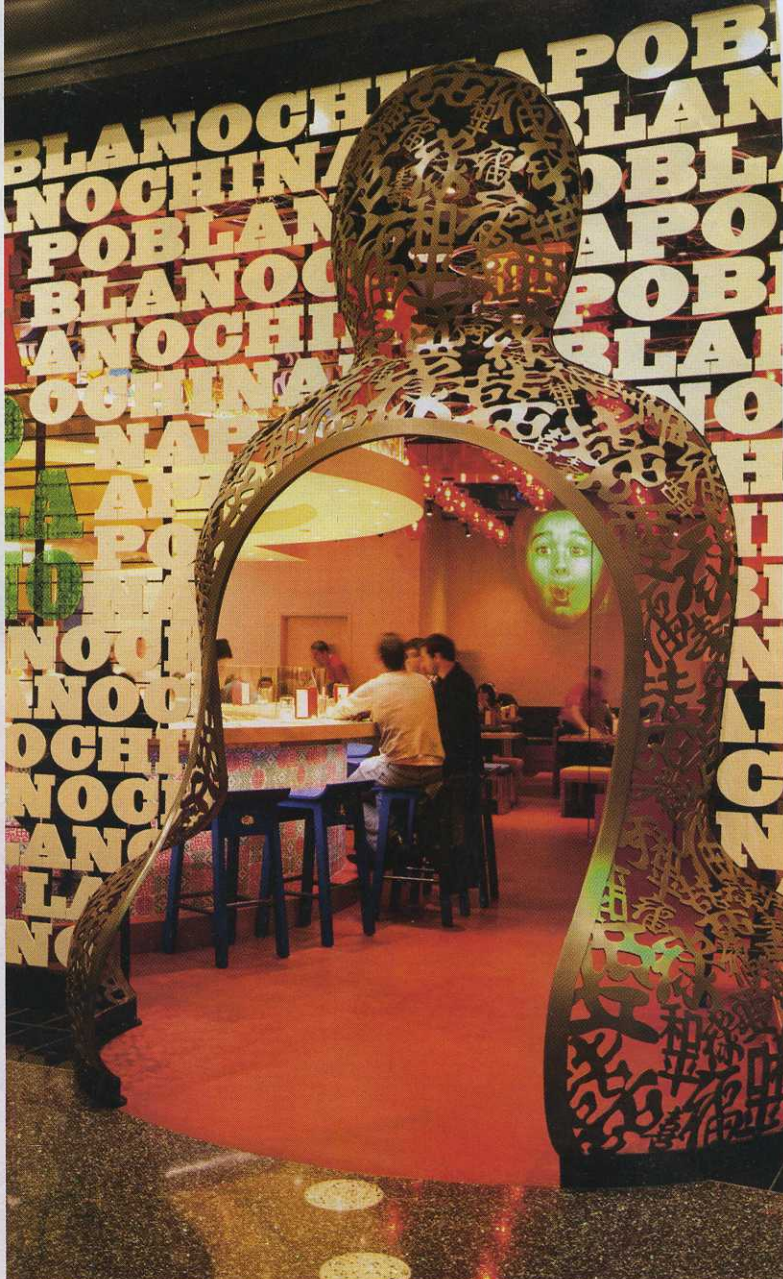
Vegas isn't a place for subtlety. Even the restaurants that aim for decorum have to do so in a big way here. That's one reason why to purists the town will always stand for what's bogus. But the dining scene is showing signs of maturity. Vegas is no longer trying to muscle its way onto the culinary map; it's there. Chefs are ceding the diva roles to Cher and Celine, relying more on craft than splashy showmanship. Today the Strip, a four-mile stretch between Mandalay Bay and the recently shuttered Sahara, is like a microcosm of the national dining scene. At some spots tasting menu extravaganzas

can be enjoyed in cosseted chambers; at others, tables bearing mounds of hand-sliced *jamón ibérico* spill onto walkways. Perhaps in Brooklyn gastropubs serving parsley-flecked bone marrow makes a proletarian, gastronomy-for-the-people statement; here they put the matter to the people by serving hefty crosscut bones beside the beef haunches at the Wicked Spoon buffet in the Cosmopolitan. If it sells, keep it. Reality rules in Vegas, and that's refreshing.

American Fish is an ideal example of the hybrid restaurant the city has perfected. A venture from ubiquitous San Francisco chef Michael Mina, it shifts attention away from the personality and places it on the main ingredient. Located deep in the hold of the new Aria Resort & Casino, the room is modeled on a fishing lodge in which the design elements have been reduced to wood and fire. Behind a glass wall the kitchen seems to be in a constant conflagration. Grills that can be raised or lowered by massive wheels are suspended over flames

#### PEPPER POD:

At China Poblano in the Cosmopolitan, chef José Andrés links travels to Mexico by way of Asia





1

**WINNING:** (1) The wine cellar at Twist in the Mandarin Oriental; (2) paella at Jaleo in the Cosmopolitan; (3) L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon's foie gras-stuffed quail; (4) Michael Mina of American Fish



2



4



3

that could cook an ox. Curious what fish could withstand the onslaught of fire, I go up for a closer look and discover they're grilling nothing more than bread. Such pyrotechnics would bother me in some other place. But by Vegas standards, they're effective. You can almost imagine Hemingway's Nick Adams,

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back from a weeklong trout-fishing trip in the Michigan backwoods, downing a Schlitz at the long bar. The menu presents four ways to cook your fish: It can be poached in ocean water that's flown in from Hawaii, seared in cast iron, baked in sea salt, or grilled over wood. Those would seem to be constraints, but they liberate Mina, taking him away from warhorses like lobster

potpie that he usually trots out. A mackerel appetizer is masterfully put together, the skin crisped in a skillet, the smoked trout roe adding pop to the brothy vinaigrette. Cubes of serrano ham might sound incongruous in shrimp and grits, but their farmhouse note brings the flavors into sharp focus. Scored with bands of char and served with corn

bread to soak up the juices, the mixed grill of scallops, salmon, and jumbo prawns has a pitch-perfect simplicity. The best dish is the poached halibut, which separates into thick, moist flakes. The ribbon of cucumber beurre blanc adds richness, but what lingers is the taste of the sea.

Commanding its own lake, Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare at the Wynn takes a different, which is to say more traditional "New Vegas," approach to dining. Soon after I'm seated, a waiter pushes a cart full of Mediterranean fish toward me. (Anyone wheeling anything toward you in Vegas means you're in a place with stratospheric prices.) Tucked amid the San Piertos and the gilthead sea bream are langoustines that cost \$30 apiece. I order one. Sensational. After I suck up the flesh and the last drop of roe-flavored juice in the shell, I move on to a little salad of mullet with crushed olives, and then I wait for the main course of whole roasted pink sea bass. Fifteen minutes become 30. The waiter has spent so much time describing the fish to a table of eight, he's ignored everyone else. One group wants wine, another the check. My wife and I would like cutlery. Just when we contemplate abandoning ship, the waiter appears and fillets the fish, its inner cavity stuffed with roasted thyme. Served with oven-browned fingerlings, it is peasant and elegant, like it's just been made for us by a fisherman wearing rope-soled shoes. This might be as close to the

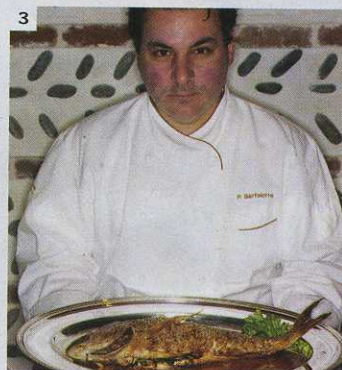
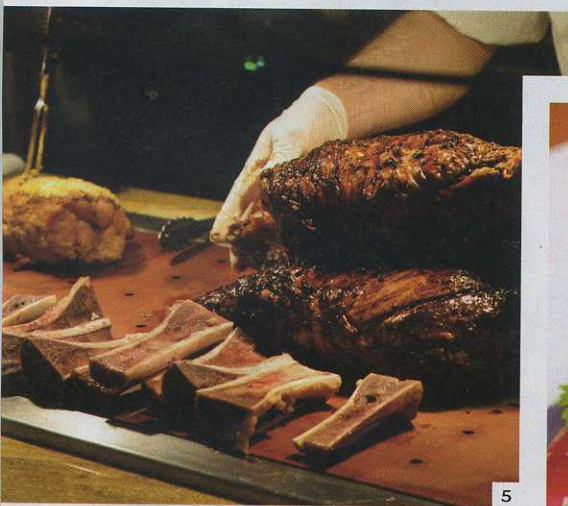
Amalfi Coast as my wife and I ever get.

For the next big meal we walk up the sweeping staircase from the gaming floor of Caesars and into Guy Savoy, the offshoot of the Michelin-three-star palace in Paris. The towering ceiling and bare walls lend the dining room a bleak feel. As if on cue a waiter trundles a boulangerie on wheels in my direction (too bad the tomato *fougasse* is stale); he's followed by the sommelier hauling a side table to rest the wine list on. Without even seeing the menu and its \$70 appetizers, I already know the Vegas math: Furniture displacement x 2 = *beaucoup d'argent*. I glance around. A bunch of wealthy-looking Spanish speakers occupies one side of the room; across from them four fast-talking young guys who remind me of the card-counting MIT students in Ben Mezrich's *Bringing Down the House* order high on the wine list.

Savoy is known for adhering to the tenets of classic French cooking without displaying a trace of chauvinism. In the early '80s, when everybody was embracing exotic spices and fussily dotted plates, Savoy made a *civet de lièvre*, a gamy hare stew, that was like a thunderclap from an angry god. He is a grounded chef. There are tasting menus of different prices (the cheapest is "The 90 Minute Experience" for \$140), but I decide to eat à la carte. The \$68 foie gras—a slab that's seared and then poached in a plastic bag—is presented on a platter. The waiter

**FULL COURSE:**

(1) Chef de cuisine Pascal Sanchez at Twist; (2) China Poblano's dining room; (3) Paul Bartolotta at Bartolotta Ristorante di Mare; (4) poached sockeye salmon with caviar and purple potatoes at American Fish; (5) the Wicked Spoon carving station



pierces the bag, releasing a plume of heady steam, before returning to the kitchen and transferring the foie gras into an oversize soup bowl. In a touch that is pure Savoy, finely chopped beet ribs temper the meat's opulence while taking on a robust grandeur in the golden fat. The veal chop for two (a staggering \$175) is substantial enough that the exterior can be well charred while the interior remains gorgeously pink. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt about the excess as I slip the \$622 credit card receipt into my wallet.

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**A chef coming** to Vegas has to carefully consider what level of dining he's going for; it's a crowded scene. Savoy went large, duplicating his highest-end restaurant

instead of one of the many bistros he runs in Paris; Thomas Keller imported the bistro Bouchon rather than the higher-end French Laundry. Joël Robuchon has been having this high-low conversation for several decades, shuttering his ultraluxe Paris flagship to concentrate on L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, an international concept where most customers sit along a counter that wraps around the kitchen. At my appointed time I slide onto a stool in a corner pocket of the MGM Grand. The pointy ends of the neatly formed mini baguettes indicate skilled hand rolling and an artisanal approach. The dish I really want, beef stew gelée with parsley, isn't available, so I substitute *kusshi* oysters and feel I've won out when they come to the table looking like sparkling jewels, lightly poached and bathed in melted Échiré butter. Though sweetbreads carry a bitter tang

from being skewered on a laurel twig, the meal is a declaration of craft and integrity that culminates in a chartreuse soufflé with pistachio ice cream. Unlike many soufflés out there, this is the real thing, rising out of its ramekin, the sides straight and high.

Such is the crowd-pleasing certainty of offering charred meat and hearty red wines that you can't enter a casino without being beckoned by an interpretation of the steak house. It's a malleable form that can be infused with ceremony by a staff in white jackets at the Palm or invested with a nightclub's veneer, as at STK, where a DJ spins tracks as you eat. I go for neither. For a contemporary rendering, one that fuses the genre's storied comforts with the modern fixation on sourcing, I head to Mario Batali's Carnevino. The dining room occupies a curious wedge on the Palazzo's main floor.

