

Food and Entertainment

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As recently as the early 1990s, the restaurant scene in Las Vegas was governed by the notion that visitors were not prepared to pay for gourmet food. All the casinos laid on both pile-em-high buffets at knock-down prices, and 24-hour coffeeshops offering bargain steak-and-egg deals, but virtually the only quality restaurants in town were upscale Italian places well away from the Strip. The theory was that the longer tourists spent lingering over their meals, the less time they had left to play the tables.

Now, however, the situation has reversed, as the major casinos compete to attract culinary superstars from all over the country to open Vegas outlets. The first such venture was Wolfgang Puck's Spago in Caesars Palace, back in 1992; these days, as each new casino opens, it's taken for granted that it will have as many as ten world-class restaurants. Asked what had persuaded him to relocate to Las Vegas, one leading chef replied "three million dollars." Many tourists now visit the city specifically to eat at several of the best restaurants in the United States, without having to reserve a table months in advance or pay sky-high prices. Which is not to say that fine dining comes cheap in Las Vegas, just that most of the big-name restaurants are less expensive, and less snooty, than they are in their home cities.

Another break with tradition is that these days the accountants require each sector of a casino-resort to be financially solvent. Where once it was considered worth running the restaurants and showrooms at a loss because they lured in gamblers, they now have to be self-supporting. Thus prices are not what they were, with buffets more like \$8 rather than \$3, and breakfast specials at \$4.50 not \$1.99. Even so, for budget eating Las Vegas still beats anywhere else in the country.

At most times, it's generally possible to get a same-day reservation for any Las Vegas restaurant; to secure a table for Friday or Saturday night, however, call as far in advance as you can. Guests in the same hotel as a particular restaurant seldom get any special priority.

The restaurants reviewed in this section form only a tiny proportion of the total. If you're staying on the Strip in particular, the choice is overwhelming, and you'll almost certainly find a good restaurant to suit your tastes and budget in your own hotel. For that reason, the places reviewed in this section tend towards the higher end of the spectrum - it takes an exceptional restaurant to be worth making a special effort to reach.

In terms of price or quality, let alone convenience, there are few reasons to venture off into the rest of the city; good places do exist away from the Strip and downtown, but the best are right where the tourists are. The one exception to that rule is that certain cuisines have as yet been unable to get a foothold on the Strip; if you want Indian, Thai, or healthy Greek food, for example, you'll have to drive out and find it

LAS VEGAS FAVORITES

Asian	Noodles
Breakfast	Il Fornaio
Buffet	Bellagio
Burger	Fatburger
Coffee Shop	Mr Lucky's 24/7
Creole	Commander's Palace
Decor	rumjungle
Desserts	Commander's Palace
Family	Lombardi's
Fusion	8-0-8
Indian	Shalimar
Italian	Zefferino's
Mexican	Border Grill
Middle Eastern	Mediterranean Cafe & Market
Seafood	Aqua
Soul food	Simply Southern Café
Southwest	Coyote Café
Steak	Delmonico's
Sushi	Nobu
Views	Top of the World

And finally, for a perfect day on the Strip, how about:

Breakfast	Il Fornaio
Lunch	Mon Ami Gabi
Dinner	Commander's Palace

BUFFETS

Almost every casino in Las Vegas has an all-you-can-eat buffet, open to guests and non-guests alike for every meal of the week. Even at the worst you're bound to find something you can keep down, and the cost is low enough that in any case you won't feel ripped off. At its best, the traditional buffet experience is in terms of both decor and flavor like being granted unrestricted access to the food court in an upmarket mall; you'll get top-quality fast food, but not a gourmet feast.

It's no coincidence that in strictly monetary terms the better buffets tend to be in casinos that are neither on the Strip nor downtown, and depend on locals as well as tourists. At places like the Rio and casinos in the Stations chain, the buffet still serves the fundamental purpose of enticing in customers from elsewhere. Thus they've been at the forefront of innovations like having separate named areas serving different cuisines, or offering "action cooking," where your stir-fry, omelette, fajita or whatever is cooked to your specific order. By contrast, the buffets at the very largest casinos only have to be good enough to ensure that the crowds already in the building don't leave, while also coping with a daily deluge of customers. Hence the poor quality of the buffets at Excalibur and the MGM Grand, for example.

A new development, however, has been for high-end casinos to raise buffet prices to a level that makes it possible to provide true gourmet feasts. The opening of The Buffet at Bellagio in 1998 represented a quantum leap in standards, in serving food that would be considered excellent in any conventional restaurant. With dinner priced at \$25, however - and \$32 on weekends - it also dispensed with the idea that buffets are supposed to be cheap. Le Village at Paris swiftly unveiled a less varied but equally delectable and expensive spread, but the title of best buffet has to belong to Bellagio. The best old-style bargains are the Feast Around The World buffets at Sunset Station and Texas Station.

As a rule, buffet prices include unlimited refills on juices and sodas, but you have to pay extra for any alcoholic drinks. You'll also have to pay tax, plus a conventional \$1 tip per person. If possible, try to avoid eating between 6pm and 9pm, when the lines at the larger casinos can be endless. Arriving early for breakfast (before 8am) and late for lunch (around 2pm or so) can also save time otherwise spent in line.

NIGHTLIFE AND ENTERTAINMENT

As the perfect fuel to turn a dithering gawker into a diehard gambler, alcohol is very easy indeed to come by in Las Vegas. If you want a drink in a casino, there's no need to look for a bar; instead, a tray-toting waitress will come and find you. Beers and cocktails are delivered free of charge to anyone hovering near, let alone seated at, the tables and slot machines, and assuming you keep on tipping the waitress, the supply will keep on going around the clock.

All the casinos have at least one actual bar as well, located in the heart of the gaming area and invariably packed with cacophonous slot machines; even the ones at Bellagio have video poker screens inlaid into their solid marble counters. Customers who are actively gambling can usually get their drinks free. If you're staying at a major casino on the Strip or downtown, you'll have no difficulty finding a place to drink in your hotel. Neither area, however, holds any significant bars other than those attached to casinos. Elsewhere, neighborhood bars do exist where you can drink and eat away from the frenzy of the casinos - the most popular local pub chain, PT's, has around twenty locations - but very few tourists bother to seek them out. Brewpubs too have appeared both in, and away from, the casinos; if you're a beer drinker, you might prefer to seek them out, but don't expect anything special in terms of food, let alone that you're going to get away from blaring slot machines.

To buy or consume alcohol in Nevada, you must be aged 21 or over, and have photo ID to prove it.

In terms of enjoying a proper night out, however, ordinary run-of-the-mill bars are just a small part of the picture. In the last few years, Las Vegas has witnessed an explosion of nightlife opportunities. The old-fashioned Las Vegas lounge has returned in force, both knowingly retro-styled for twenty-something rockers and lovingly re-created for older visitors looking to recapture the quieter but still somehow deliciously decadent flavour of the Rat Pack era. The casinos are once more competing to hold exotic and characterful lounges; the Venetian, for example, currently holds three highly individual alternatives.

What's even more striking is that Las Vegas has finally come of age as an international clubbing capital. The opening of the stand-alone Club Utopia on the Strip in 1994 paved the way for a steady trickle of copycat ventures, but only since the start of the millennium has the scene really taken off. No longer are clubbers considered a breed apart from tourists; instead, the success of nightclubs at hipper casinos like the Hard Rock and Mandalay Bay has prompted all their major rivals to follow suit, often with spectacular results. As the word gets about, Las Vegas is becoming known as a specific clubbing destination, although it's still somewhat skewed towards older punters - Hugh Hefner is even said to be talking about bringing in the first new Playboy club for twenty years.

So many entrepreneurs have so much money to throw around in Las Vegas, aiming to please all of the people all of the time, that it's getting all but impossible to pinpoint the differences between bars, lounges, restaurants, and nightclubs. Our listings are divided on the basis that you go to a bar to drink, whereas you go to a club to dance. And a lounge & well, you go to a lounge because you're in Las Vegas.

There was a time when performing in Las Vegas represented the absolute pinnacle of any show-business career. In the early 1960s, when Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack were shooting the original *Ocean's 11* during the day then singing the night away at the Sands , the city could claim to be the capital of the international entertainment industry. It was even hip.

The money is still there in Las Vegas, as was shown by the MGM Grand paying Barbra Streisand a reported \$20 million to perform on Millennium Eve, but the world has moved on. As the great names of the past fade from view, few of the individual performers popular with traditional Vegas visitors are now considered capable of carrying an extended-run show. Today's stars, on the other hand - Celine Dion excepted - don't want to spend their lives playing Vegas. Top-selling musicians make quite enough money from recordings and occasional tours not to need to spend months at a time in the desert.

Nonetheless, live entertainment remains a crucial component of the Las Vegas package, and the days of the big-budget "spectacular" are far from over. The tendency nowadays is to rely on lavish stunts and special effects rather than global megastars, with the illusionist-magicians Siegfried and Roy now into their second decade at the Mirage . A fair number of old-style Vegas revues are still soldiering on, but there are more stimulating contemporary productions than you might imagine. In particular, the arty Canadian-based circus/theater troupe, Cirque du Soleil , has revolutionized attitudes toward what Las Vegas audiences might be able to handle. Its two stunning shows, *Mystère* at Treasure Island and the magnificent *O* at Bellagio , remain the biggest tickets of all, though the Luxor 's Blue Man Group has stolen a little of their avante-garde thunder. To make sure of seeing one of these big-name shows, especially on a weekend, it's essential to make reservations as far in advance as possible; if you're happy just to see whatever's available, however, most of the lesser shows are still selling tickets right up until showtime.

It also looks as though Las Vegas might finally be getting more into tune with the musical tastes of the baby-boom generation. You can still see Tom Jones, Eglebert Humperdinck, and Wayne Newton if you're in town at the right time, and lots of unfashionable names from the Seventies and Eighties linger on, but the Hard Rock, Mandalay Bay , and Aladdin are all now showcasing the biggest names in contemporary rock, reggae, blues, and soul.

We've reviewed a representative cross-section of Las Vegas shows. All take place on the Strip ; several of the downtown and off-Strip casinos have showrooms, but with the Rio repeatedly misfiring, none currently features anything of interest. Note that the entertainment scene was especially hard hit by the post-September 11 economic downturn. Several shows closed, while others reduced their frequency and/or ticket prices. All the listings here are therefore even more subject to change than usual.

As for what the future may hold, the Cirque du Soleil will certainly remain at the forefront. They're said to be developing a show for Steve Wynn's *Le Reve* , set in a Himalayan village where all the children aged under eleven can fly, and another for New York-New York , with a fire theme to match *O*'s water motif. The biggest single project of all, however, is the Colosseum at Caesars Palace , intended to draw four thousand people per night to watch Celine Dion.