

Dinner without chips

Leave the Strip's casinos to find Vegas' memorable restaurants

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By MANUEL MENDOZA / The Dallas Morning News

From chef-driven dining on an epic scale to 99-cent shrimp cocktail – not to mention buffets, buffets, buffets – Las Vegas visitors tend to take their meals in casinos, especially if they're staying on the Strip.

For those willing to venture a bit out of the way, inspired off-Strip choices await, including what many think is the best restaurant in town, Rosemary's.

Away from the high-overhead gambling halls, lower-key joints also stand out. Two of the best are Lotus of Siam and Chicago Joe's, both offering delicious ethnic cuisine at reasonable prices.

Here are minireviews of these finds:

- A 20-minute drive west of the Strip, **Rosemary's** is foodie heaven. Emeril-trained couple Michael and Wendy Jordan do wonders with Southern-slanted nouvelle Americana: bleu cheese, coleslaw, barbecue – all on the same plate. Their barbecued shrimp on Maytag slaw is a signature dish.

French cuisine also is an influence, so foie gras and sweetbreads are available alongside pork chops, hush puppies and cheddar grits. The best bet is whatever the Jordans have whipped up for the evening. The specials, often fish dishes, are even more creative than the regular menu.

Whatever you decide to order, go on Sunday night if you can. Bottles of fine wine are half price (excepting the scarce Burgundy from Domaine de la Romanee-Contí), and Rosemary's has a world-class list. The service is as seamless as at any of the upscale dining palaces on the Strip.

8125 W. Sahara Ave., 702-869-2251; www.rosemarysrestaurant.com. Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday. Dinner, 5:30-10:30 p.m. daily. Reservations recommended but not required.

- Some say **Lotus of Siam** serves the best Thai food in the country. You couldn't tell from the trappings, a dive strip mall just east of Las Vegas Boulevard. The menu contains curries and other standard favorites. But Lotus of Siam specializes in harder-to-find Northern Thai, which emphasizes exotic flavors over pure heat.

The bargain lunch buffet (\$5.99) is a great way to sample, even as it leans toward more familiar dishes. One of the best is spicy minced chicken, stimulating all the sensors on your taste buds.

If you're not on a budget, put out the fire with one of dozens of German Rieslings on the wine list, some of them quite pricey.

953 E. Sahara Ave., 702-735-3033; www.saipinchutima.com. Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday. Dinner, 5:30-9:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5:30-10 p.m. Friday-Sunday. Reservations for dinner; walk-in at lunch.

- With just a handful of tables, **Chicago Joe's** resides in a cute little house on the way from the Strip to downtown. Checkered tablecloths and urban signage make for a quaint setting in this traditional family-style Italian restaurant.

Service is attentive but not fussy, and the lunch special is a steal: \$7.95 for the signature spaghetti with your choice of marinara or mushroom sauce, and meatballs or sausage. Wash it down with a glass of Chianti.

For champagne tastes, lobster also is available along with all the Italian favorites: antipasto, garlic bread, lasagna, eggplant parmigiana, mussels marinara.

820 S. 4th St., 702-382-5637; www.chicagojoesrestaurant.com. 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Friday; 5-10 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday.

Online at: http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/fea/travel/dmnstories/stories/DN-vegasfood_0917tra.ART.State.Edition1.3f351c9.html