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On the plate, off the Strip

The Vegas Apprentices: Proteges of famed chefs strike out on their own

Eric Noland, Travel Editor

LAS VEGAS - The roster of celebrity chefs in Las Vegas is as glittery as the Strip itself: Joel Robuchon, Alain Ducasse, Thomas Keller, Wolfgang Puck, Daniel Boulud, Charlie Palmer. These high-voltage chefs have lent their names to and inspired the dishes for some exceptional restaurants in the resort-casinos of Las Vegas Boulevard.

That said, it's a good bet that you'll rarely find any of them actually in the kitchen - unless, perhaps, Wine Spectator magazine is in town for a cover shoot. And the menus and wine lists, while unimaginably tantalizing, will give most visitors an acute case of sticker shock.

The city has some fine-dining alternatives, though - for an intrepid soul willing to leave the Strip for a couple of hours. In recent years, the celebrity-chef movement in Las Vegas has generated a spinoff effect, in which chefs and restaurant-management folk who worked for some of the big names have strayed to the outskirts to open their own places.

The restaurant facades are uniformly nondescript - suburban shopping center frontage that could easily pass for an escrow office (and, more often than not, there is one right next door). But within, superb cuisine is combined with earnest service, yet at prices closer to those of your favorite neighborhood bistro.

Three such establishments were sampled on a recent visit: Rosemary's, Table 34 and Todd's Unique Dining. While the main-course offerings were fairly predictable, leaning toward comfort foods here in the dead of winter, the appetizer menu at each was wonderfully inventive - clearly a creative vent for some of these guys. It goes without saying that while working at marquee operations on the Strip, each chef yearned to someday have his own place.

"For me, the corporate environment didn't work," said Todd Clore, formerly chef de cuisine for Bally's acclaimed Sterling Brunch - and a one-time understudy of Philippe Jeanty in the Napa Valley and Roy Yamaguchi in Los Angeles. "I tell the story that to change the menu when strawberries go out of season, by the time you get all the vice presidents to sign off on it, strawberries are back in season."

Clore opened Todd's Unique Dining in Henderson two years ago. In the same general neighborhood, due south of McCarran International Airport, is Table 34, commanded by Laurie Kendrick, who formerly managed Chinois and Spago for Puck at Caesars Palace (brother Wes is in the kitchen). And many blocks west of the Strip is Rosemary's, operated by chefs Mike and Wendy Jordan; Mike was a seven-year disciple of Emeril Lagasse, and opened Emeril's New Orleans Fish House at the MGM Grand.

A look at each of the restaurants:

ROSEMARY'S

While Table 34 and Todd's Unique are simple, unassuming neighborhood establishments,



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this restaurant offers a distinct air of sophistication - in decor, service and ambience. We felt like the only Strip refugees in the other two restaurants, but it was evident here (certainly by the luxury vehicles in the parking lot) that high-rolling foodies have discovered this 7-year-old restaurant.

Some of the entree prices stray into the high \$30s and the wine markups are a bit more conventional, but the payoff here is considerable.

Jordan and wife Wendy have spent much of their careers cooking in the Deep South, and the preparation styles reflect that. My wife is still raving about the perfectly cooked striped bass she had here, with a deliciously crispy skin, served over a little heap of rock shrimp, andouille sausage and fingerling potatoes, with hush puppies nestled in a Creole meuniere sauce (\$28).

The highlight on my side of the table was Mike Jordan's signature appetizer, shrimp laced with Texas barbecue sauce and served over a slaw made with bleu cheese from Maytag Farms in Iowa (\$11). What an imaginative marriage of flavors and textures.

The roasted rack of lamb (\$38) I chose for an entree - essentially three rib chops - was serviceable, although the accompanying kalamata olive mashed potatoes that had looked so intriguing on the menu left me with the conclusion that the kitchen must have run really low on kalamata olives that night. The fried arugula sprinkled on top of the chops was delicate and salty, and literally melted in the mouth.

A high premium is clearly placed on service at Rosemary's. Dishes are served from the left and removed from the right, without exception. And they all arrive at once. Kitchen runners and waiters collaborate so that even at a large table, no one is left waiting over a course while another diner's plate is fetched. For a table of six next to us, three servers arrived bearing two plates apiece, all of which were placed on the table in one grand flourish.

Because of the liberal use of Southern spices here, we decided to defer to our waiter for wine selections. Good thing. Who'd have guessed that a Spanish grenache (Bodegas San Alejandro "Las Rocas," \$8 a glass) would work with the striped bass? But our waiter said it would stand up well to the andouille and Creole spices, and he was right. (The dinner menu lists a wine suggestion for every dish, but not all of those are available by the glass.)

Despite its unassuming exterior, Rosemary's presents smart decor, with oil paintings gracing the walls, an inviting bar beneath a row of stylish hanging lamps, and an open kitchen that emits the unmistakable sense of bustle (dining positions along a counter look into the kitchen).

That appetizer menu is the star of the show here, though. Among its nine selections, we were also sorely tempted by the pan-fried veal sweetbreads with grits, onions and bacon mustard demi glace (\$9.50), and the crab cakes with grilled asparagus and various shitake accents (\$15).

Those dishes and Rosemary's in general left us with an inevitable conclusion: We'll just have to come back.

TABLE 34

One of the benefits of owning your own place is free rein for indulgence.

The Kendricks liked the idea of having smoked salmon on the appetizer menu, and they surely could have gotten their hands on some first-rate commercial product. But where's the challenge in that?

Instead, they make their own. "We start with the fish whole," said Laurie Kendrick, "then it's brined for 2 1/2 days and cold-smoked" (a process in which a smaller fire is maintained in the smoker to keep the fish at a lower temperature).

The result is fabulous flavor and texture - with none of the fishy taste common to the commercial stuff. As an appetizer here, the salmon is rolled into a cone and positioned atop a crispy potato basket, which itself sits in a little puddle of parsley-shallot cream. Atop the tower are thin slices of mild onion and a sprinkling of alfalfa sprouts. And alongside is a generous green salad (though they shouldn't have bothered to include those halved cherry tomatoes, which were dreadfully out of season). It was an impressive creation, and a bargain for \$10.75.

Another success was an entree of Maine scallops (\$26.50), seared so that they were browned to crusty on the top and bottom yet still medium rare at the center. They were presented with an assortment of perfectly prepared vegetables: sauteed spinach, tender

brussels sprouts, haricots verts, carrots, broccolini.

The scallops sat in a citrus sauce with Mandarin orange wedges, which hinted that someone in the kitchen has a sweet tooth. One of the salads on the menu confirmed it - arugula with goat cheese (it would have been better roasted rather than cold), sliced apples, candied walnuts, grapes and a sweet citrus dressing (\$10.50).

In the face of this evidence, we knew dessert would be a highlight of the night, and it didn't disappoint: a flavorful vanilla-bean creme brulee with decadently creamy custard and plump, thumb-sized berries on top, and a tangy lime tart with pecan crust (all desserts here are \$6.50).

Unfortunately, our waitress was no help whatsoever when we asked for wine suggestions on our starter courses ("Any of the sauvignon blancs or chardonnays would work" - gee, thanks.) But we witnessed an impressive bit of teamwork when I flagged a passing bus boy and specified a glass of red to accompany the grilled rack of pork and spicy chipotle mashed potatoes (\$24.75). Rather than track down the waitress, he personally carried the order to the bar, and soon the hostess whisked it to the table.

Table 34, which has been here a little over a year, is obviously working hard to please. With its generous portions, extensive by-the-glass wine list and starter menu built around all manner of seafood,

it is succeeding.

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TODD'S UNIQUE DINING

What an odd name for a restaurant. Clore explains that he didn't want his cuisine to be labeled. "Because I'm so spontaneous," he said, "I want to eat Mexican food one night, then Thai the next, then Americana, then I want spicy again."

As a result, his menu is printed daily, according to his whim. On the night we visited, Clore was clearly on a foray to the Far East.

Drawing raves at our table was one of his signature items, an appetizer of goat cheese wontons (\$7). The shells were impossibly thin and lightly fried, with a soft, warm cheese filling

and the tangy-sweet contrast of a raspberry-basil sauce.

Another starter, Malaysian barbecued shrimp (\$9), was served with a spicy glaze, but not to the point of overpowering the delicate shellfish. It was served with tiny blinis and thin slices of pickled cucumber. Also impressive was a five-ounce Dungeness crab cake with roasted-pepper butter (\$9).

A friend from Hawaii joined us at dinner, and the seared rare ahi (\$24) had her thinking of home: It possessed the pleasing contrast of grill char on the outside and sashimi succulence at the center. Mashed potatoes infused with wasabi were a fitting accompaniment.

Kobe short ribs (\$24) - boned, rolled, tied and cooked all day - were falling-apart tender and savory, served with jalapeno mashed potatoes. That helped keep the chill of a winter night at bay, as did oven-roasted monkfish in a garlic cream sauce (\$24).

Our enthusiastic waiter was helpful in suggesting both items on the menu and wines that went with them - a glass of Twenty Rows Cabernet Sauvignon (\$10) from the Napa Valley, for example, which wasn't daunted by the ribs.

We concluded afterward that next time, we'll start with salads and then build a dinner entirely from that impressive appetizer menu. In fact, that might be a fun strategy at any of these three restaurants.

Try that on the Strip and you might get a sniff of disapproval.

Not out here.

IF YOU GO

ROSEMARY'S RESTAURANT: 8125 W. Sahara Ave., Las Vegas. Open daily for dinner from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Open for lunch Monday through Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Noteworthy: Three-course prix fixe menu for \$45 (surcharges assessed for higher-ticket items). ... Five-course chef's tasting menu for \$60 _ \$105 with wine pairings, \$90 with beer pairings. ... On Sunday nights, bottles on the wine list are half price. (702) 869-2251

TABLE 34: 600 E. Warm Springs Road, Las Vegas. Open for dinner Tuesday through Saturday from 5 p.m. to close. Open for lunch Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Noteworthy: Happy hour specials Tuesday through Friday from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. - including \$2 off all wines by the glass on Wednesdays. (702) 263-0034

TODD'S UNIQUE DINING: 4350 E. Sunset Road, Henderson, Nev. Open for dinner Monday through Saturday from 4:30 p.m. to close. Noteworthy: Menu changes nightly. ... On Wednesday nights, no corkage charge on wines brought in by guests. (702) 364-8633;

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