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Dining in Las Vegas

LAS VEGAS — My friend Bud Holmes used to own a casino in this town. He told me that in the 1970s he and his partners came up with a novel idea: A 99-cent breakfast buffet.

Some might wonder how any establishment could survive, much less thrive, serving a 99-cent breakfast. According to my friend, people would line up waiting to be seated in the dining room, meanwhile every available square inch in the waiting area was lined with slot machines.

It didn't take long to turn a meal served for less than one dollar into a profitable offering. It revolutionized how foodservice was done in Las Vegas.

Before long ultra cheap prime rib specials and inexpensive steak promotions popped up everywhere. Food was an afterthought,

something to fill the bellies of the masses so they could keep gambling. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the town was focused on one thing and one thing only: Money.

Nothing has changed. Everything in today's Vegas centers around money, but they have found even more clever ways to disguise the mission. First they tried to promote Las Vegas as a family destination. I don't care how many roller coasters are erected, this town is as far away from a healthy family destination as any place can get. Next they brought in Broadway shows to add to the Wayne Newton-type offerings. Finally, celebrity chef, Wolfgang Puck, opened a restaurant here.

On my last visit to this town, 1993, I ate at the Las Vegas version of Puck's legendary Los Angeles eatery Spago.

Spago was a huge success, and success never goes unnoticed in Las Vegas. Over the next 10 years the hotel properties got bigger, the décor grew more elaborate and the carrot was dangled in front of some of the nation's top chefs.

Many high profile chefs have built satellite restaurants in the hotels here. Puck opened the floodgates for chefs such as Emeril Lagasse who has three properties in town. New York's brilliant sushi chef Nobu Matsuhisa is in the Hard Rock Hotel, Todd English opened an Olives in the Mirage, Bobby Flay, Stephan Pyles, Julian Serrano, and a long laundry list of others have joined the fray.

Common wisdom would leave one to believe that there is no way

that the satellite restaurant in Vegas is anywhere as good as the mothership in New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. The counter argument would be that those restaurants operate on such a high level in the first place, a slight drop in food quality or service still puts the property miles ahead of most restaurants.

The truth is the celebrity chef is as good as his staff, and his staff needs to move up the restaurant ladder or they will jump ship. Having satellite restaurants gives the high profile restaurateurs a growth vehicle for their staff. Odds are, in the original restaurant, the celebrity chef is developing the food and the legions of sous chefs and line cooks are doing the production. In Vegas nothing changes in that paradigm. The chef moves his top talent to Las Vegas giving them an opportunity to run their own property, while others move up into the vacated positions back home. Everyone is happy, especially the Vegas dining public.

Michael Jordan worked for years as a sous chef in Lagasse's New Orleans restaurants Emeril's and NOLA. When Emeril moved west to Vegas, Jordan was the perfect choice to make the trek. Today, the top rated Zagat restaurant in Las Vegas is Rosemary's which is owned by the former NOLA sous chef, Jordan, and his wife.

In conclusion, if you are a non-gambler, non-drinker, family man who loves fine dining, Las Vegas might just be the place for you.



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