

Dine and drink well in Las Vegas while never setting foot on The Strip

Eating well in Las Vegas – while avoiding The Strip’s celebrity-chef restaurants – is easier than losing money.

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The recommendations I received for Rosemary’s Restaurant all emphasized that it’s located in a strip mall.

Never mind that most of Las Vegas resembles a mall of some sort – from the malls of gaming and celebrity-chef dining on The Strip to mom-and-pop restaurants like Rosemary’s, which is tucked behind a Marie Calendar’s on a dusty avenue 10 miles from the Las Vegas Boulevard action that most tourists come here for.

But Rosemary’s feeds as many tourists as locals, said chef/owner Michael Jordan.

“You know foodies – they will travel a country mile on foot if that means finding a good meal,” Jordan said. “A lot of serious diners pass through this town.”

I passed through Las Vegas in mid-October, hungry to enjoy breakfast, lunch and dinner off The Strip and outside casinos. Rosemary’s Restaurant was my first and last stop. In between, I dined locally – at down-home rib restaurants, a fancy French place, a classic Vegas steakhouse and a burger joint where massive meals on buns reminded me of the Tacoma Dome.

HOME SWEET VEGAS

When Jordan arrived in Las Vegas in 1996 to open Emeril Lagasse’s Fish House at the MGM Grand, you could count the number of celebrity chefs on the tines of a fork. Wolfgang Puck had Spago at Caesars Palace. Andre Rochat had Andre’s in the Monte Carlo Resort and Casino. Now virtually every big hotel on The Strip has a celebrity-chef restaurant, from Bobby Flay’s Mesa Grill to Tom Colicchio’s Craftsteak to Thomas Keller’s Bouchon.

“It would be nice if they branched out and came off The Strip,” Jordan said. “It’s still pretty much a grass-roots thing for us here. On The Strip, they can do between \$10 million and \$20 million in revenue a year. I just don’t know if you’re going to do that kind of revenue locally. Go where the bread is buttered, you know.”

After running Emeril’s Fish House for two years, Jordan and his wife, Wendy, branched out to the suburban, strip-mall fringe of West Sahara Avenue in 1999. After opening a second restaurant, a short-lived venture in the Rio hotel that suffered when convention business nose-dived, Jordan is focused on Rosemary’s.

“Wendy and I decided it was an untapped market,” Jordan said. “Locals were just begging for some great restaurants. Since we were living here, we wanted to be a part of it and not just be a part of the tourist side but also support the local side as well.”

Jordan has a loose definition of local. He sources many of his greens from farmers in Pahump, 60 miles away and 10 degrees cooler in the mountains west of Las Vegas, and gets other vegetables from farmers in southern Utah and from distributors in Los Angeles.

“To be honest, we’re in a desert here,” Jordan said. “It’s being trucked in from L.A., one of the best food markets in the country. We’re only hours removed from what L.A. restaurants get. We’re actually pretty fortunate to be where we’re at.”

SOUTHERN COMFORTS

Jordan calls his French-influenced, American bistro menu “the story of our lives.” Jordan was born in Iowa. He and wife lived in the French Quarter in New Orleans, where they worked at Lagasse’s New Orleans Restaurant for five years. Jordan’s menu incorporates some Creole and even Midwestern touches, like hearty potato bread. The restaurant is named after Jordan’s mother, Rosemary.

Rosemary’s dining room is upscale-casual, with white linen on tables and colorful art on the walls. Service was polished and attentive, at both lunch and dinner.

Rosemary’s menu (entrees \$15-18 lunch, \$29-\$42 dinner) is remarkable in its flexibility. Diners can build their own three-course prix-fixe meals (\$28 lunch, \$50 dinner). Want two appetizers and one entree? Done. One entree and two desserts? You’ve got it. Or go for one appetizer, one entree and one dessert, although I don’t recommend Rosemary’s desserts.

I couldn’t resist buttery, intensely red carpaccio – thin slices of raw beef dressed with blue cheese and a salad of arugula and Granny Smith apples. Squash soup reflected Jordan’s Southern touch: It was as sweet as sorghum, and I could manage to eat only a few spoonfuls, although it was delicious. Twice-baked Parmesan soufflé with roasted chanterelles and garlic cream was dreamy. The grainy edge of cheese offset the souffle’s fluffiness.

Duck confit was stunning: a thick leg preserved in duck fat, served atop crisp lentils. A glimmering layer of fat peeked out beneath the leg’s crispy skin. The meat was dark brown, tender and lightly gamey.

For dinner, I was drawn to the \$105 tasting menu paired with beers at every course (\$120 with wine, \$70 without beverages). The light fruitiness of French-Canadian Blanche de Chambly eased the creaminess of salmon tartare, as well as the salty edge of the paddlefish caviar that accompanied the first course.

Saison Dupont, a French farmhouse ale, evened the sweetness of prosciutto-wrapped figs stuffed with goat cheese.

My favorite dish and pairing was the third course: crispy striped bass served with a hash of andouille sausage, rock shrimp and fingerling potatoes, and Creole brown-butter sauce. The beer was one I hadn’t experienced before: Gavruche, a spicy and malty amber-red ale from France that stood up to every flavor on the plate.

Celebrator Doppelbock’s malty horns rammed through the heaviness of roasted rack of lamb with kalamata olive mashed potatoes.

The dessert beer – Lindemans’ intensely fruity peach lambic – was better than the dessert, a boring sampler of cheesecakes and lava cake. For all that it does right, Rosemary’s fails on desserts. Lemon ice-box pie and coconut bread pudding had the same gummy texture and consistency. Only the creme brulee was good.

Rosemary’s Restaurant

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