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FRESH SHUCKED OYSTERS AT EMERIL'S NEW ORLEANS FISH HOUSE

# Foreword

by Emeril Lagasse

When I was first approached to open a restaurant in Las Vegas in the mid '90s, Las Vegas was a very different town, and I'll be honest, I wasn't sure if I could pull off a fish house in the middle of a desert. But from the moment Emeril's New Orleans Fish House opened, we were committed to serving the freshest seafood possible and using seasonal ingredients—no matter how challenging that was in Vegas back then.

Twenty-five years later, it's amazing to see how far the Las Vegas dining scene has come. The bar has been raised for what diners have come to expect in Las Vegas and chefs are rising to the challenge. There is such diversity in the restaurants and no shortage of visionaries who are really pushing the envelope and bringing global cuisine to the forefront here. My friends and colleagues, like Wolfgang, Mario, and José, are always on top of their game and continue to evolve, but a new group of young and talented chefs is also helping to shape this food mecca.

I have four restaurants in Vegas now, and I'm flattered that our Emeril's New Orleans Fish House and Delmonico Steakhouse are in the Essential 50, but I'm even more amazed to see how far this dining scene has come—as John Curtas, Mitchell Wilburn, and Greg Thilmont document in this fine guide to Las Vegas' finest dining.



TOSCANO

BLUE  
CHEESE

SOPPRESSATA

PRO-

# Preface

by Al Mancini

What did I do wrong? What did I do right? Why is he even asking me?

When Huntington Press publisher Anthony Curtis solicited my help for the 2016 edition of *Eating Las Vegas*, I immediately asked myself each of those questions. I admit I had to wipe a tiny tear from my eye, but then I smiled for a very long time. *ELV* is not a book I take lightly (take a look at my tattoos if you need proof!).

When I conceived of this restaurant guide in 2011 (yup, even John will admit that it was my idea), I had a particular author triumvirate in mind, and it was that specific collaboration of Max Jacobsen, John Curtas, and myself that produced the first three editions of this one-of-a-kind book. But I knew that, for me, a fourth edition wouldn't be possible, as I'm incapable of taking on this project without them *both* at my side.

Every food fan in Las Vegas took a very deep breath and prayed when Max was hit by a car in 2013 and suffered severe brain trauma. Encouraged by Max's steady recovery, I have *zero* doubt that he, John, and I will do this book once again—together and as friends. This year, however, isn't that time. Of course, my inability to contribute shouldn't mean that this superb guide to the vibrant Las Vegas dining scene should cease to continue. And, as is obvious, it hasn't.

My occasional friend, frequent nemesis, and partner in far too many dysfunctional but productive endeavors, John Curtas, has stepped up to the plate(s) for this one. To even suggest that he might catch half the lightning in a bottle that we captured in the first three editions is giving him more credit than I've ever bestowed upon him in public. But he's a talented scribe and he's assembled a talented team. My baby is in good hands, and I'm hungry.

So, John: Do my tattoos justice! And I'm confident I'm not alone in anxiously anticipating the day that Max rejoins us, so he and I can kick your ass in print once again.





BARDOT BRASSERIE STEAK FRITES



# Introduction

John Curtas

So much has happened in the three years since the last edition of this book that it's hard to know where to begin. First and foremost was the terrible accident that rendered Max Jacobson incapable of providing his gravitas and wit to this new edition. Max continues to recover from his traumatic brain injury and all of us await the day when he can lend his (contrarian, insightful, invariably correct) opinions to this endeavor. In the meantime, we're keeping his voice in the book with the inclusion of several "Max Says" citations—excerpts from the earlier editions that showcase his inimitable voice and deep wisdom relative to the Las Vegas dining scene.

For this edition, we've brought some new blood into the mix, and even Al Mancini quit preening his Mohawk long enough to approve of the insights and youthful vigor that Greg Thilmont and Mitchell Wilburn bring to the project. Thilmont is an old hand at restaurant and food reporting, having for years covered the Las Vegas dining scene for a variety of magazines, while young Wilburn is the only local foodie I know with the stamina to hit every brewery, cocktail lounge, and gastropub in town without exhausting his liver or detracting from his perceptive prose. Among us, we bring three unique perspectives to the restaurants and watering holes of Las Vegas—not as combative as the unholy Curtas-Jacobson-Mancini trinity of old, but instead offering a fresh new look at where the Las Vegas restaurant and food scene is now, and where it's likely headed.

The landscape has changed as much as the authors. In three short years, Las Vegas has seen the revival (with a vengeance) of big-deal dining (Carbone, Mr. Chow), another French Revolution (hello, Bardot Brasserie!, or should we say, *bonjour?*), better and better sushi (Yui, Hiroyoshi), an explosion of quality in the burbs (Other Mama, Japaneiro, Fish N Bowl, Lulu's), and a downtown scene that's blown



RAKU SWEETS "MT. FUJI"

up since 2014, with Carson Kitchen, Glutton, Therapy, Smashed Pig, and others blazing the trail. Put it all together and you have a city that's truly maturing, restaurant-wise. The hegemony of the Strip being challenged every night by passionate chefs attracting customers to their far-flung restaurants by serving cuisine which, at long last, goes beyond some casino executive's concept of "what the tourists want."

But let's face it: Tourism drives our economy and there's no getting around the fact that 42 million mouths are a lot to feed. So it's no surprise that the Strip is where the majority of our "Essential 50" restaurants reside, although Chinatown and the suburbs collectively account for 20 of those top spots. Once done with the best of the best, intrepid gastronomists should scour the second half of the book, where they'll find our recommendations for off-the-beaten-path gems and only-in-Vegas experiences.

The second half of the book is also where you'll find a dedicated section on Chinatown (which deserves a separate book in its own right), my list of our greatest steakhouses (that compete with any in America), and all three authors' ruminations on everything from brewpubs to brunch spots.

All of which adds up to the real reason for this book: to help you spend your dining-out dollars wisely. More than anything else, we want *Eating Las Vegas* to act as an authoritative source that's beyond anything you'll find on the Internet for deciding where to eat out in Las Vegas. This city is one of the most dynamic dining destinations in the world and as useful as some websites can be, in the end, all they can provide is crowdsourced opinion. Within the pages of this guide, you'll find discerning advice from those of us who are in these restaurants every day and night, critically evaluating the best Las Vegas has to offer and providing our informed opinions to rely on whenever you're questioned (or ask yourself), where should we eat tonight?

### Price Designations

At the top of each review is one of four price designations: \$25 or less, \$25-\$75, \$75-\$125, or \$125 and up. They provide a general guide to what it will cost you to dine there, based on the per-person price of an appetizer, an entrée, a side or dessert, and one or two lower-priced cocktails.





TASTING MENU AT TWIST BY PIERRE GAGNAIRE

# Section I

## The Top Ten

Aria at CityCenter

(702) 590-7757

arialasvegas.com

Mon.-Fri., 5-10:30 p.m.; Sat. & Sun., 10 a.m.-10:30 p.m.

\$25-\$75



## CURTAS

When Michael Mina announced he was closing American Fish at Aria and replacing it with a classic French brasserie, more than a few foodies scoffed. Didn't he know that this was the age of tiny tables, minuscule plates, insulting noise levels, and uncomfortable everything? Hadn't someone told him that traditional French style was about as hip as a dickey? And that Croque Madame and salad Niçoise were old hat by the Clinton era?

They might have told him, but we're happy he didn't listen. Instead, what he did was bring forth a drop-dead-delicious ode to the golden era of brass, glass, and béchamel-drenched sandwiches—hearty platters of wine-friendly food that many think went out of style with tasseled menus, but didn't. It just took a break for a decade.

With BB, the reasons all of these recipes became famous to begin with has come roaring back, to the delight of diners who want to be coddled and cosseted with cuisine, not challenged and annoyed.



Mina had the prescience to know this, and the good sense to hire Executive Chef Josh Smith to execute his vision. Smith is an American through and through, but obviously has a deep feeling for this food, and every night (and via the best weekend brunch in town), he proves why classics never go out style and overwrought, overthought, multi-course tasting menus may soon go the way of the supercilious sommelier.

Make no mistake, Bardot Brasserie is a throwback restaurant, but a throwback that captures the heart and soul of real French food like none of its competition. It harkens to an age of comfort food from a country that pretty much invented the term. What sets it apart is the attention to detail. Classics like steak frites and quiche are clichés to be sure, but here they're done with such aplomb, you'll feel like you're on the Left Bank of Paris, only with better beef. The *pâté de campagne* (country house-made *pâté*) is a wondrous evocation of pressed pork of the richest kind, and the *escargots* in puff pastry show how a modern chef can update a classic without sacrificing the soul of the original recipe. The skate wing suffers not at all from being 6,000 miles from the Champs Elysée, and the lobster Thermidor—bathed in Béarnaise and brandy cream—is a glorious testament to the cuisine of Escoffier.

Most of all, though, Bardot Brasserie is an homage to the great homey restaurants of France. By going old school, Michael Mina has set a new standard in Franco-American style and made us realize what we were missing all along.

**GET THIS:** Lobster Thermidor; skate wing; French toast; Croque Madame; brunch.

## WILBURN

Where so many have failed to “bring back the classics” in a half-hearted culinary dry-hump, Bardot Basserie is literally a time portal into the days of Escoffier. It's meticulous, obsessive, perfectionist French cuisine in just about the most beautiful room on the Strip.

