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CARNE CRUDA AT CARNEVINO

## Foreword

by Barbara Fairchild

The first time I ever saw my dad tip a maitre d' for a better table was in Las Vegas. It was in a post-Rat Pack, pre-Steve Wynn time frame, and this little gesture was a revelation: Yes, my dad was a recognizable character actor with a successful career, but still, money was tight, so *tipping* someone to get a better seat? Wow. That's when I knew that this was no ordinary town.

Flash forward to the 1990s. As executive editor of *Bon Appetit* magazine, I was helping to put the finishing touches on "Desert Storm," the first of what would be many stories we would do on the dining scene in Las Vegas. Yes, the nineties: I knew once Wolfgang Puck and Jean-Louis Palladin came to town, there would be no looking back.

It seems that I was right. And so here we are: Or rather, here you are, with this excellent book in your hands, one that is far more than just a mere "guide to local restaurants" or whatever the standard jargon would be. The intrepid trio that put this together—the inimitable John Curtas, and the equally discerning Greg Thilmont and Mitchell Wilburn—have decades of dining-out war stories in Vegas. So they have made sure that *Eating Las Vegas* is the *definitive* book of its kind.

I heartily agree: It's exhaustively researched, excellently written with great wit and style, and includes beautiful photographs to help set the mood, or in today's vernacular: There's a lot of good food porn in here. Add the easy-to-use format and you have a book that is a real keeper. The "Top 10" alone is worth the price of admission, and helps make the point that this is no "hotel only" book. These guys know the territory and go all over town to bring you the best—from the Strip to the strip mall. Plus, I don't know any other trio of writers that would include a chapter on chain restaurants, but these

three are up to the challenge. For that I have only one word: *courage*.

If I sound enthusiastic, it's because I am. Statistics time and again show that these days, the main reasons people come to Vegas are for dining and shopping. "Gaming" is still a part of it, of course. But where else can you find the concentration of quality and selection like the restaurants featured in these pages? I've often said that in a week's worth of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners here, you could hit just about every major chef in the U.S. and France, with Asia, Italy, and Spain thrown in for the delicious ride. Let this trio of experts help lead the way.

Just last spring, a speaking engagement brought me to Alizé, the Michelin-starred restaurant at the top of the Palms hotel. I was early and the restaurant was fairly empty. The view is spectacular from Alizé—a unique "set-back" perspective of the city—and it gave me pause: Caught between a vivid sunset and the advent of night, the lights below were just coming on. There were the sparkling hotels of the Strip at one end of Las Vegas Boulevard, the Stratosphere and the almost honky-tonk vibe of Fremont Street at the other; planes were coming and going from McCarran International, rush-hour traffic and the low-slung spread of suburbia ran in almost every direction. But where I was standing—silence. No ordinary town. No ordinary book. Extraordinary, indeed.

# Introduction

by John Curtas

If you're reading these words, you can congratulate yourself on having the good taste and common sense to buy this book. It means you're passionate about food and restaurants and that you have (or will have) a connection to one of the greatest restaurant cities in the world. It also means you want to dive deeper into food, tasting it more intensely and thinking more thoughtfully about where and what you eat.

Buying this book also means you're a bit old-fashioned. Guidebooks are so 1997, aren't they? In this age of social media and Yelp and Trip Advisor, who needs an actual curated, thoroughly researched, printed, and bound dining guide, in hand, to decide where to go out to eat? Well, avid eaters like myself, for one, and I'm guessing that by buying this book, you and I are on the same page.

The need for restaurant guidebooks occurred to me many times over the past year, as I traveled around the U.S., Europe, and Asia, looking for the best places to eat. Like many a wayfaring gourmand, I enjoy planning a trip almost as much as going on one. Back in the day, guidebooks aplenty could tell you where to eat in New York or Paris or Rome. These days, you can't find a pure restaurant guide to any of them. You're left with the blizzard of information on the Internet, a double-edged sword if ever there was one. Sure, Top 10 lists and crowd-sourced opinions are everywhere, but lacking is the voice of food writers who know what they're talking about and want to share their knowledge with you—the better to help you make informed decisions on where to spend your precious dining-out dollars.

And let's face it, as much as the Millennial generation might not agree, thumbing through a ready reference guide is a lot more fun and convenient than staring at your smartphone.

Informed opinion is what this book is all about. It's 200-plus pages of restaurants—both large and small, of great reputation or none at all—that have been visited time and again by the authors. I not-so-humbly claim that no one in the history of Las Vegas has ever, or will ever, eat in more of its restaurants than I have. Since 1981, I've scoured this city in search of the best meal I could find. Greg Thilmont and Mitchell Wilburn have a lot of catching up to do, but in them I've found two able lieutenants who are as hungry for the good stuff as I am.

This is my second edition with these co-authors and the fifth overall. Las Vegas is too important a restaurant city, and too huge a tourist destination, *not to* have its own guidebook. Forty-three million annual visitors have to eat. The population of greater Las Vegas is well over two million hungry souls and rising. We have some of the greatest restaurants in the world, more accomplished chefs than I can count, and an ability to feed every local and tourist the most wonderful food on the planet. From our burgeoning Japanese scene (Yui, Hiroyoshi, Japaneiro, Yuzu, Fish N Bowl, Yonaka, et al.) and new infusions of L.A. Chinese cool (Chengdu Taste) to a resuscitation of some old friends (hello Bouchon, Andiron and Charlie Palmer Steak!), things have gotten even tastier in the past year. Throw in some downtown Vietnam (Le Pho) here and a Mediterranean marvel (Khoury's) there, and you have a town that is as much about its food as it is about gambling, nightclubs, shopping, and conventions. The party-as-a-verb crowd has nothing on intrepid gastronauts and destination-dining denizens when it comes to keeping this city humming.

As with the last edition, we break this book down into the Top 10 (listed alphabetically), and then the Rest of the Best, 40 more stellar restaurants also listed alphabetically. In the second half of the book, you'll find scores of hidden gems and worthy contenders. Chinatown gets its own section, as do steakhouses, because our town excels in these two areas of eating like almost none other in America (plus, in this edition we've added a mini-stand-alone section featuring Las Vegas' outstanding French cuisine).

The 50 Essential Restaurants define our dining culture right now, the places that are putting out the best food Las Vegas has to offer, where I'd take a visiting food writer, critic, or imperious gastronome if they asked me to personally guide them on a month-long tour of "eating Las Vegas." I've guided people, literally and figuratively, through the restaurants of Las Vegas for 21 years now. Because eat-

ing Las Vegas is what I do, and what Greg Thilmont and Mitchell Wilburn do, better than anyone. It's also, dear reader, what you're soon to be doing, more knowledgeably and enjoyably than ever.

## 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.

## Who's In / Who's Out

After the publication of last-year's edition, we were asked many times what changes had been made in the lists. So we don't have to answer that question a couple of hundred times again this year, here's a quick-and-dirty culinary box score.

### In

**Top Ten**—Carbone, Sage, Yui Edomae Sushi

**Essential 50**—Andiron, B&B Ristorante, Bouchon, Chengdu Taste, Due Forni Pizza & Wine, Harvest by Roy Ellamar, Hiroyoshi, Khoury's, MR CHOW, rm Seafood, Stripsteak

### Out

**Top Ten** (but still in the 50)—Guy Savoy, Joël Robuchon, Twist by Pierre Gagnaire

**Essential 50**—Andre's (closed), Artisanal (closed), El Dorado Cantina, Inyo Asian Restaurant (closed), Japanese Cuisine by Omae (closed), Lulu's Bread & Breakfast, Mizumi, Monta Ramen, Rose. Rabbit. Lie., Yardbird, Yusho



FROM TWIST AT MANDARIN ORIENTAL

# Section I

## The Top Ten

Aria at CityCenter

(877) 230-2742

aria.com

Mon.-Fri., 5:30-11 p.m.; Sat. & Sun., 9:30 a.m.-11 p.m.

\$75-\$125



## 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 is the age of tiny tables, minuscule plates, insulting noise levels, and uncomfortable everything? Hadn't someone told him that traditional French style is 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 of style and overwrought, over-thought, 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; Croque Madame; onion soup grantinee; foie gras parfait; steak tartare; duck wings à l'Orange; king crab crêpe; seared foie gras Lyonnaise; frisée aux lardons; sole meuniere; chicken roti; oak-smoked Duroc pork chop; brunch.

## WILBURN

Where so many have failed to “bring back the classics” in a half-hearted culinary dry-hump, Bardot Brasserie 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.

