

EATING LAS VEGAS

2020



JOHN CURTAS

THE 52 ESSENTIAL RESTAURANTS

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SALMON SALAD AT SPAGO

Introduction

"In the lexicon of lip-smacking, an 'epicure' is fastidious in his choice and enjoyment of food, just a soupçon more expert than a 'gastronome'; a 'gourmet' is a connoisseur of the exotic, taste buds attuned to the calibrations of deliciousness, who savors the masterly techniques of great chefs; a 'gourmand' is a hearty bon vivant who enjoys food without truffles and flourishes; a 'glutton' overindulges greedily, the word rooted in the Latin for 'one who devours.'

"After eating, an epicure gives a thin smile of satisfaction; a gastronome, burping into his napkin, praises the food in a magazine; a gourmet, repressing his burp, criticizes the food in the same magazine; a gourmand belches happily and tells everybody where he ate."

—William Safire

In the beginning, you're an omnivore—a gourmand, if you will—eating everything in sight, building up a culinary catalogue in your head (and palate) of every taste, every flavor, every texture you encounter with every bite. At first, you don't even know you're doing it; you just want to devour everything and learn as much about it as you can. But after you've eaten everything from fish tacos in Cancun to bouillabaisse in Marseille, the quest for quintessence is all you seek, be it in a burrito, a burger, or a Béchamel.

Becoming an epicure is no easy task. It takes years—decades, really—of eating, reading, cooking, traveling, and tasting. Anyone who thinks you can become a gourmet simply by eating in restaurants is a fool. You can no more learn about food by eating in a lot

of restaurants than you can learn about music by attending a lot of concerts. Great restaurant meals are the payoff for all your hard work, and the older you get, the more you want to maximize your enjoyment of them.

This 8th edition of *Eating Las Vegas* is the result of my 29 years of searching for excellence in the Las Vegas food scene. It's the culmination of more meals than I can count (consider 10 restaurant meals a week times 50 weeks a year times 25 years and you'll get the idea), more calories than I need, and more tiramisu than any man should eat in a lifetime. But I've loved every minute of it. Even the bad meals have taught me something, and the ethereal life-changing epiphanies I've had in Las Vegas restaurants—Paul Bartolotta's roasted wild turbot, green-sauce chicken at Chengdu Taste, every bite I've ever had at Restaurant Guy Savoy—I wouldn't trade for the world.

To be sure, much is lacking in our food scene—agriculture being first and foremost. Ours is a top-down industry, enabled solely by the marketing muscle of the casino industry. Make no mistake, there's nothing "organic" about our restaurants. If not for the revolution wrought 25 years ago by Wolfgang Puck, Steve Wynn, Sheldon Adelson, and others, Las Vegas would still be the home of cheap prime rib and mountains of (frozen) shrimp cocktails. This is one of the reasons we get routinely ignored by the James Beard Foundation, which reveres the suffering-for-their-art chefs and looks upon our eateries as bloated, overstuffed, food factories for the Branson, Missouri, crowd.

But this book isn't interested in the mouths of the bargain-hunter fanny-packers. It's interested in *you*, reading these words. Because if you care enough to get this far in this introduction, you clearly have a certain dedication to eating well. And eating the best food in Las Vegas is what this book is all about.

Yes, it's a guidebook, but of more limited scope than many. If you expect a comprehensive tour of Las Vegas restaurants, look elsewhere. If you want to know whether some obscure (usually terrible) Italian place in some third-rate hotel is worth your dining-out dollar, consult Yelp, Thrillist, TripAdvisor, or any number of websites devoted to crowd-sourced opinion.

This book is as far from crowd-sourced opinion as you can get. I've seen the crowd; I've listened to the crowd; I've even been (on occasion) friends with the crowd; and you, my friend, should know that the crowd is generally full of beans when it comes to judging the best of the best. The crowd hasn't eaten in a restaurant every year

for a decade to see how it evolves; the crowd hasn't observed subtle changes from chef to chef; the crowd can't tell when that baguette is 30 minutes past its peak condition or that gelato has been kept at a few degrees south of perfect refrigeration. The public, God bless them, is concerned about bang for the buck. Yours truly, you need to know, doesn't give a fuck about bang for the buck.

No, all I care about is quality, quintessence, perfection—be it in a haunch of beef or a bunch of broccoli. Price isn't disregarded altogether, but comparing buffets isn't my interest or mission statement. (I leave that to the *Las Vegas Advisor* in the back of the book.) Telling you whether to drop a house payment at Joël Robuchon or a car payment at Bazaar Meat is what this tome is all about. If you're looking for the best Szechuan food in Chinatown, you've come to the right place. Best burgers in town? Step right in. If quintessential (expensive) Japanese floats your boat, we're here to help. On the other hand, if AYCE sushi is what you're after, you have my sympathies.

First and foremost, this book is a distillation of my never-ending quest for the best of Las Vegas. These are the best restaurants I've visited over the past year—the ones doing the most finely tuned cooking with the most unimpeachable ingredients. We've kept the "52 Essential" number in order to give you a workable framework to operate within. We've added a "Close, but No Cigar" section to recognize the many noteworthy places that may no longer merit an urgent visit, but are still worth a trip. And of course, the back of the book lists several hundred places, ranging from notable noodle parlors to terrific tacos—every one of them visited by me.

I'm proud to share my gustatory research with you, just as I'm proud to have covered this town so thoroughly and obsessively over the past three decades. Las Vegas is now one of the world's greatest restaurant cities—both on and off the Strip—and this book will guide you to the places that make it so. So grab a fork (or a pair of chopsticks) and dive in!

The Pros and Cons of Las Vegas Restaurants

Let's review the pros and cons of eating Las Vegas, to both inspire and warn you about what's really going on around here.

Pros

Fabulous French—As mentioned above, most American cities, outside of New York, are lucky to have one or two good French restaurants. We have 10.

Great steaks—Boffo beef abounds in our burg.

Incredible Italian—There are very good Italian restaurants in Vegas (Rao's, Carbone, Allegro, La Strega, and Locale) that didn't make the cut in this book.

Terrific Thai—Even our mediocre Thai restaurants, dozens of them, are pretty good. The top in town—Lotus of Siam—sports world-class wine program on par with its incendiary cooking.

Amazing Chinatown—Cheap and tasty eats abound only a mile west of the Strip. Leave your timidity behind and you'll have a feast for four for the price of a couple of cocktails at the Wynn/Encore.

Everyone's turning Japanese—In the past decade, righteous ramen, pullulating udon, exciting Edomae sushi, and great gyoza have invaded Chinatown. Be advised: The best stuff is in the 'burbs. Big-box Japanese, such as Nobu, Hakkasan, and Morimoto, are soooo 2010. The only people eating in them these days are vinyl-siding salesmen from Kansas.

Broad and deep wine lists—But at a price. See below.

Something for everyone—There are more good eats at the Aria Hotel than there are in any mid-sized city in America. And it's not the only hotel in Vegas that can make this claim.

Great service—Bad service on the Strip is almost non-existent.

Easy access—Make a reservation or just show up; someone will bust his or her ass to find you a seat.

No attitude—You won't find "mission statements" or "bad-boy-doing-it-his-way" chefs in Las Vegas.

Understandable food—See above.

Comfort—Strip restaurants never contracted the tiny-tables shitty-chairs virus that infects most hipster haunts in say, Seattle, D.C., or Brooklyn. The chairs are padded and the air conditioning always works.

Adult noise levels—A few joints around town are ear-splitting at prime times, but for the most part, you can hear yourself think while you're eating.

Great cocktails—Ever since the cocktail revolution took hold about a decade ago, it's been hard to get a bad drink in a Vegas hotel. Or even off the Strip, for that matter.

Top-shelf ingredients—Our best restaurants get meat, fish, and veggies on par with anyone's. True, 99% of it flies or drives to get here, but Chicago chefs don't exactly have fish jumping out of the ocean and onto their stoves either. Those vaunted New York sushi bars charging an arm and a leg for their omakase are getting the same fish, from the same Tokyo purveyors, as Yui and Kabuto are. And the bounty of California is a lot closer to us than it is to Atlanta.

People-watching—If you don't love people-watching in Vegas, you're either vision-impaired or not paying attention.

Sweet release—The pastry talent in Vegas is legendary. I'll stack the desserts coming out of our finest restaurants up against any, anywhere, anytime.

Cons

No imagination—If you're looking for highly personalized chef-driven food, look elsewhere, or off the Strip. With a few notable exceptions (our fabulous frog ponds being first and foremost), Vegas restaurants are food factories pure and simple. More than one chef has had his ambitions and enthusiasm crushed under the weight of feeding 500 picky eaters a day.

Overpriced wine—Las Vegas wine lists are best approached with a soothsayer, accountant, mortgage banker, and defibrillator on hand. A jar of K-Y jelly helps too. You'll also pay extra for that reach-around.

Overpriced drinks—The Strip is home to the \$15 cocktail ... which is fast becoming the \$20 cocktail.

Incredibly bad Italian—Las Vegas is home to more terrible Italian restaurants than any city in the country. Amerigo Vespucci must roll over in his grave every night thinking of the slop being served in the name of his homeland in the land that he named.

Corporate soul-crushing sameness—Every goddamn restaurant in every goddamn hotel serves a pizza, and a pasta, and a salmon, and a chicken, and a steak, and a (bad) Caesar salad. Throw in a couple of trendy items like sliders, kale, bone marrow, and pork belly and

you have your instant, interchangeable, eating experience! Reading Las Vegas menus is like living in an endless loop of a Guy Fieri fever dream.

Hoi polloi—Cargo shorts (men) and yoga pants (women) are everywhere. Usually on people with asses too big to be wearing them. Speaking of asses ...

Dullards with money—Las Vegas is not, I repeat, not a gambling town; it's a convention town. Real gamblers throw money around like it's confetti; asshole conventioners are livin' large for 3.5 days on the corporate credit card. Gamblers know how to behave in public; Middle Manager Mike from Milwaukee acts like he's never seen cleavage or a cote de boeuf before. Which he probably hasn't.

Celebrity chefs—I'm of two minds about celebrity chefs. On the one hand, our amazing restaurant scene wouldn't exist without them. If not for the corporate-branding ambitions of José Andrés, Wolfgang Puck, Michael Mina, et al., we'd still be living in prime rib purgatory. Twenty-five years ago, they saw gold in them thar hills and saved me from a life of "gourmet rooms," Continental cuisine, and coffee shops. On the other hand, many of them (not the four mentioned above) use Vegas like a late-night booty call for cash. Don't fool yourself: The only reason Giada, Morimoto, Gordon Ramsay, Bobby Flay, or Alain Ducasse show up twice a year is because they're contractually obligated to. The restaurants themselves are owned and run by the hotels.

Comps—Here's how comps work. You blow a lot of money gambling. The casino then gives you a voucher for something "free," usually a meal. You go to the restaurant to eat for "free." No money changes hands at the restaurant, but to ensure that you use up that comp as fast as possible, the restaurant (owned by or in cahoots with the hotel) charges insane markups. Everybody wins! Except those who pay with their own money and expect a fair exchange. I once saw a quartet of young Asian men stroll into a joint and sit down at a table with four bottles of Cristal champagne on each corner and a bowl of caviar the size of a basketball in the middle. They spent exactly ten minutes at the table, talked on their cell phones the whole time, and left without eating a thing. I paid \$343 for my meal.

No one gives a shit about you; you're just a number—And when you leave, 10 more just like you are waiting for that seat. When you consider the numbers they do—a million a month in gross receipts is average—it's amazing how cordial Strip restaurants are. Most could act like carnival barkers when dealing with their ever-clamoring customers and still get away with it.

Food-and-beverage executives—There are exceptions but the “company-man” mentality that runs the F&B programs at most hotels is always threatening to turn Vegas into an armada of predictable franchised grub. Which works fine if you’re a glorified accountant. Which most of them are.

Size matters—Most Vegas restaurants are behemoths. A 175-seat joint is average; places like Bazaar Meat seat more than 300. Intimate they’re not. If you want intimacy, go to Le Cirque ... or San Francisco.

Expense—Make no mistake: Vegas is the most expensive restaurant town in America. The mantra of the big hotels is “hit ‘em hard, hit ‘em fast, and wait for the next sucker to show up.” The down-pricing and bargains instituted during the Great Recession are but a dim memory now. Sticker shock is everywhere; even the buffets will set you back a Benjamin (for two) these days. Big-city gourmands gasp when they see the cost of a prime steak or bottle of Cabernet out here. Personally, I go to other big cities (New York, L.A., Paris, Rome) when I want to dine well for less money. There’s a lot of fantastic food in Las Vegas, but you’ll pay through the nose for it.

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

Here’s a quick list of the changes in the Essential 52 since the last edition of this book.

New in 2020

b.B.d.’s, China Mama, Cipriani, Hatsumi, Lamaii, Mabel’s BBQ, Matteo’s Ristorante Italiano, Mott 32, Oh La La French Bistro, Old Soul, Rooster Boy Café, Spago, Tatsujin X, The Black Sheep, The Kitchen at Atomic, Vetri Cucina, Weera Thai Kitchen

Gone from the Essential 52

Allegro, Andre’s, Blue Ribbon, Boteco, Carbone, Chengdu Taste, Hiroyoshi, Japaneiro, Jean Georges Steakhouse, Julian Serrano, La Cave, Libertine Social, Morel’s, Mr. Chow, Picasso, Prime, Trattoria Nakamura-Ya



DEVIL'S EGGS AT CARSON KITCHEN

Section I

The 52 Essential

Aria at CityCenter

1-877-230-2742

aria.com

Mon.-Fri., 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Sat. & Sun., 9:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m.

\$25-\$75



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 Ameri-

can 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, 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 me realize what I was missing all along.

GET THIS

Lobster Thermidor; skate wing; Croque Madame; onion soup *grantinée*; foie gras parfait; steak tartare; duck wings à l'Orange; king crab *crêpe*; seared foie gras Lyonnaise; *frisée aux lardons*; sole meunière; chicken roti; oak-smoked Duroc pork chop; brunch.

BAZAAR MEAT BY JOSE ANDRES (STRIP)

Steakhouse

Sahara Las Vegas

(702) 761-7610

saharalasvegas.com

Sun.-Thurs., 5:30-10 p.m.; Fri. & Sat., 5:30-11 p.m.

\$75-\$125



José Andrés is a high priest of meat and this is his temple. Calling it a steakhouse, however, is a bit unfair, since the seafood and wacky Spanish creations (molecular olives, cotton-candy foie-gras foam, etc.) are every bit as good as the steaks. For pure carnivorous joy, I'll put Bazaar up against any porterhouse pit in the country, any day, but I'll also stake its tapas and sausage and gutsy Spanish comfort food against any this side of the Iberian Peninsula.

There's a raw bar, a ham bar, a real bar, and a bar-none selection of steaks. With all of this in mind, you will, of course, not want to miss the roasted suckling pig or the whole roasted wild turbot. That little piggy can be ordered whole in advance for a crowd of 8-10; quarter portions are available on short notice (although not usually on the menu) for smaller tables.

And if all that's not enough to distract you, the wine list may be the best Spanish card in the country.

Before you get to the big proteins, though, you'll have to navigate side one of the blackboard-sized menu. There, you'll find all sorts of temptations that will fill you up long before Porky's left leg

appears. Lighter appetites should stick with fresh raw scallops, gazpacho shots, and José's Asian taco (ham, nori, topped with flying fish roe), while heartier souls will want to dive into the croquetas (stuffed with creamy ham or chicken) or the Reuben, a hollowed-out crispy mini-football of air bread upon which pastrami is draped. The super-giant light-as-a-saltine chicharron takes up half the table, but disappears quickly as it's dipped in Greek yogurt with za'tar spices, and everyone will be fighting over the last bite of patatas bravas.

One of the signs of a great steakhouse is how they treat their veggies and here, if you don't want to think about meat (difficult under the circumstances, but doable), you can splurge on stuffed piquillo peppers, Catalan spinach with raisins and pine nuts, Brussels sprouts petals with lemon purée, or a whole cauliflower steak with preserved lemon. The beefsteak tomato tartare gets the most oohs and aahs (looking like the brightest red small pizza you've ever seen), but the simple tomato salad and the endive Caesar are show-stoppers as well.

If you haven't gotten the idea by now, this is a huge menu, both sides of that big plastic board, in fact, and deciding what to eat can be somewhat daunting. The good news is they pull everything off, nightly, with the precision of a Marine Corps drill team.

When you finally get to the steaks, you'll find all the usual suspects: grain-fed, grass-fed, sirloined, flat-ironed, and skirted, but the thing to get is the "vaca vieja" eight- to ten-year-old rib steak—beef from old cows being the current fad among serious meat mavens. Aged on the hoof rather than in a locker, it competes with the best of dry-aged steaks for pure beefy minerality.

Like I said, calling this place a steakhouse is a bit of a misnomer. It's a palace of protein that even a pescatarian or a vegetarian can love. It's also one of the greatest restaurants in the world.

GET THIS

Cotton-candy foie gras; pork-skin chicharron; José's Asian taco; croquetas; Ferran Adria olives; patatas bravas; Reuben sandwich; tomato tartare; beef tartare; oysters; clams; live scallops; chef's selection of cured meats; piquillo peppers; Brussels sprouts petals; cauliflower steak; endive Caesar salad; tortilla sacromonte egg omelet with sweetbreads; grilled Galician-style octopus; roast suckling pig; whole roasted turbot; Wagyu beef cheeks; flat-iron steak; "vaca vieja" rib steak.

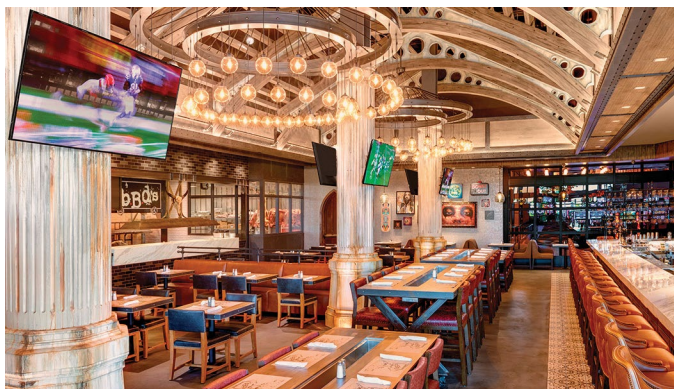
Palace Station

(702) 221-6513

palacestation.sclv.com

Mon.-Fri., 4:30-10 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

\$25 or less



In late 2018, this 300-seat meat emporium quietly opened in the refurbished Palace Station, bringing forth a gargantuan menu of everything from burgers and dry-aged steaks to bowls of duck ramen and hot chicken to never-seen-before dishes like Buffalo burnt chicken wings, Japanese duck drumsticks, and kimchi fries. It also poured the best (not the biggest) beer selection in town. So much was so good so fast about b.B.d.'s, it was a shock to the Vegas culinary ecosystem—and in the original locals casino to boot.

b.B.d.'s stands for burgers, Beers, and desserts, but that's only half the story. It's also a sports bar, a casual steakhouse, and a vegan restaurant. You'll find enhanced versions of Philadelphia's best sandwiches, along with Bavarian pretzels, lamb gyros, house-cured pastrami, housemade hot dogs, and house-aged beef, making this the all-star utility infielder of Vegas meateries.

They offer 20 (!) different sauces (all made in-house), potatoes a number of ways (the classic French fries are potato perfection), three salads (if you insist), and the usual frivolous fat-filled fried stuff (onion rings, poppers, cheese sticks, and such). But your attention is drawn to the meat from the moment you walk past the butcher

shop at the entrance and the real stars of the show are the burgers made with in-house-ground beef; they're juicy and packed with the kind of dense mineral-rich beefiness that's but a wisp of memory in the hamburgers most people consume. The beef here tastes like it could've come straight from Delmonico or CUT. The grind is coarse and the packing is just firm enough to hold together and sear properly, the better to retain the juiciness essential for burger apotheosis.

Three are offered. The 12-ounce dry-aged prime steakhouse burger is aged for 40-50 days and achieves that tinge of gaminess true beef aficionados look for.

The griddle burger elevates the In-N-Out template; one bite and you might forswear In-N-Out forever. And the steamed burger mimics the chopped-onion gray-meat magnificence of a White Castle slider. It tastes like White Castles that are three times thicker, sandwiched in a superior bun, and doesn't lie in your gut like a greasy brick. (Not that there's anything wrong with that, especially if you've been parkin g booze there all night.) Put them all together and you have a hamburger hamlet of unbridled greatness, the likes of which Vegas has never seen under one roof.

I'd be remiss if I didn't tout the steaks here too. They do a complete lineup from miso skirt to Flintstonian tomahawk, each the equal of beef a mile to the east at slightly softer prices.

If you have room and even if you don't, don't miss dessert: Gooney Warm Cinnabomb, wood-fired s'mores, waffle bread pudding, and liquid chocolate cake. Each is over the top and feeds at least two.

All of this is the handiwork of one Ralph Perrazzo, a Long Island chef (and Bradley Ogden alum) who won some TV burger battle, paving the way for his expansion to Vegas. I don't take those contrived competitions seriously anymore, but Perrazzo's meat mastery cannot be denied. His burgers are the best in Las Vegas.

GET THIS

Bavarian pretzel; mac & cheese; pickle fries; Korean BBQ fries; lamb gyro; duck/vegetable ramen; hot chicken sandwich; My Cousin Philly cheesesteak; Philadelphia's Other Brother roast pork sandwich; spicy Buffalo burnt wings; Japanese duck drumsticks; hot pas-trami sandwich; house-made hot dogs; prime steakhouse burger; griddle burger; steamed mini-burgers; tomahawk steak; miso skirt steak; porterhouse; s'mores; Cinnabomb; liquid chocolate cake; and beer. Don't forget the beer.



CHICKEN SKEWER AT HATSUMI

Section II

Additional Recommendations

Additional Recommendations

Introduction

The second half of the book provides plentiful additional suggestions for Las Vegas' top restaurants in the many categories that readers, neighbors, colleagues, family, friends, and total strangers frequently ask us to recommend. Additionally, you'll find expanded sections on Chinatown, steakhouses, French restaurants, buffets, and burgers. Maps and a detailed index eliminate any challenge you might have for locating every eatery referenced in the book.

Note that Huntington Press (the publisher of the *Eating Las Vegas* series) also maintains LasVegasAdvisor.com, which covers the Las Vegas dining scene extensively. There you can find lengthy and constantly updated listings of cheap eats, local favorites, late-night dining spots, and additional meal options in more categories than appear here. And although I don't frequent the buffets, I have a huge amount of respect for the chefs who work in them and the customers who enjoy the ability to sample a lot of different food for one set price, and there had to be a buffet listing in this volume. Here again, input from the *Las Vegas Advisor* was paramount in identifying the city's best.

One quick word about locations. Each of the entries in this section includes an address and phone number. When a recommendation has two or three locations, it's noted, and when it has more than three, it's listed as "multiple locations." The address and phone for each are presented according to the following protocol. If there's an original or clearly dominant location, that's the one that's listed. And if not, the location that's geographically closest to the Strip is used. When a restaurant appears in more than one section, the location and phone are provided in the first listing only and subsequent listings refer back to the original.



BEEF TEPPAN YAKI AT TATSUJIN X

FOOD

CHINATOWN

When Chinatown Plaza opened in 1995—housing five restaurants and a smattering of shops—Spring Mountain Road was known mainly for its potholes. No one thought of this area as Chinatown and it was audacious of the developers to call it such. Twenty-five years later, I estimate I've eaten in more than 125 restaurants along Spring Mountain Road. All you can do is applaud their prescience and marvel at what this three-mile stretch of road has become.

At last count, more than 150 Asian restaurants line this avenue (and, it seems, triple that number of massage parlors and nail salons). These days, the whole stretch of street from Valley View to Jones is a veritable buffet of Asian eats and it's a must-stop on any foodie tour of Las Vegas. Intrepid gastronomers know this is where you come to get the real deal in Chinese barbecue, Japanese noodles, and giant bowls of whatever soup suits your fancy—all at astoundingly cheap prices.

Some notes on the following lists. For the most part, these are places I highly recommend and have visited multiple times, but remember that it's Chinatown, Jake, meaning: Owners change, chefs come and go, and you never really know what's going on. Also, Homie don't do no all-you-can-eat-anything, so those low-rent sushi joints are nowhere to be found in this book. I'm not big on conveyor-belt service either, preferring my food to be cooked to order, not spewed out wholesale from a kitchen in hopes someone will grab it. And while I'm at it, don't ask me for hot-pot recommendations. I'm more interested in minor-league Lithuanian soccer than I am in bubbling bowls of broth where everything tastes the same.

Finally, none of these joints are for picky eaters. The whole point of eating along Spring Mountain Road is that it's the closest you'll ever get to the real thing without a 14-hour flight across the Pacific. In some of these places, English is definitely a second language. In others, service is often perfunctory and not of the most professional quality. But arrive with an open mind and an adventuresome palate and you'll be an Asian maven in no time. But arrive with an open mind and adventuresome palate and you'll be an Asian maven in no time.

Chinese

88 Noodle Papa

4276 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 550-0717; (725) 251-2078

In the spanking new Shanghai Plaza, another authentic Chinese noodle parlor with a very pleasant staff and easy-to-navigate menu. The Food Gal loves their Hainan chicken, I come for the beef chow mein and won ton soups.



BEEF CHOW MEIN AT 88 NOODLE PAPA

Asian BBQ & Noodle

3400 S. Jones Boulevard, #5C
(702) 202-3636

Go well before noon or mid-afternoon if you want to get a seat. Max Jacobson, one of the original authors of this book, endorsed this as the best Chinese barbecue in Vegas and I have no reason to argue with him. Closed Fridays. (Yes, Fridays. Oh, those crazy Asians.)

BBQ King

5650 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 364-8688

Cash only. Cantonese only.

Big Wong

5040 Spring Mountain Road, #6
(702) 368-6808

Beef noodle soups to beat the band.

Capital Seafood Restaurant

4215 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 227-3588

In the original Chinatown Plaza, going strong for 20 years. Superb Cantonese lobster stir-fries at half the cost you'd pay a mile to the east.

Chengdu Taste (see "Close, But No Cigar" review)

China Mama (Essential 52: see review)

Chubby Cattle

3400 S. Jones Boulevard
(702) 868-8808

Conveyor-belt hot pot is the mode at this new Mongolian eatery. Some of it is hokey, but the extensive menu has legitimate—and sometimes esoteric—Asian surprises in store.



WAGYU YUKKE AT CHUBBY CATTLE

J&J Szechuan Cuisine

5700 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 876-5983

My favorite, old-school, go-to Szechuan now has serious competition, but still shines.

Joyful House

4601 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 889-8881

One of those truly terrible places that's been around forever. Strictly for the sweet-and-sour-pork crowd.

Mian Sichuan Noodle

4355 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 483-6531

Straight from the San Gabriel Valley comes this offshoot featuring the fiery mouth-numbing noodle soup/stews of Sichuan. Guaranteed you'll be the only *gwailo* in the joint.

New Asian BBQ Tan Tung Ky

5150 Spring Mountain Road
(702) 202-2262

Opened in 2019, this place immediately announced itself as the best Chinese barbecue on Spring Mountain Road, along with very good, if somewhat standard, dim sum. You'll be the only round-eye in the joint, but don't let that deter you. Service is friendly and super-fast.

NURO Bistro

4255 S. Durango Drive, #110
(702) 901-4609

You have to travel all the way out to Durango Drive to get it, but this is the best Hainanese chicken in town.

Orchids Garden

5845 W. Sahara Avenue
(702) 631-3839

For years the sign out front read, "Chinese food to go in rear." For

a decade, the dim sum was lame and the place was on life support. Now it's one of our best and crowded all the time. Go figure.

Ping Pang Pong (Gold Coast)

(702) 247-8136

It's not really in Chinatown. But it's nearby and serves some of the best dim sum in town. Unfortunately, you have to brave the environs of the Gold Coast to get to it, and go early: By noon every day, the place is full of Asians and Caucasians fighting for a table.

Shang Artisan Noodle

4983 W. Flamingo Road

(702) 888-3292

Dinner and a show! Or lunch and a cooking lesson. No matter when you arrive, they'll be hand-pulling noodles in that wonderful piece of sleight-of-hand that makes for delicious Chinese lamian. Don't miss the spicy wontons or the beef pancake.

The Noodle Man

6870 S. Rainbow Boulevard, #101

(702) 823-3333

Not strictly in Chinatown, but wonderful hand-pulled ribbons are thrown and cut out in the open (they make a show out of it). Noodle Man is a southwest Vegas favorite for its delicious soups and other noodle-based dishes.

Veggie House

5115 Spring Mountain Road, #203

(702) 431-5802

A full menu of classic Chinese dishes and some not-so-classic house specials (try the crispy spicy eggplant), all using vegetarian ingredients only. Open for lunch and dinner, dine in or take out.

Yummy Rice

4266 Spring Mountain Road

(702) 331-3789

The conceit here is bowls of rice in a hot clay pot topped with eel, egg, pork, or a combo of ingredients. The vibe is very "Hong Kong

café" and the bill so small, you won't believe it.

Yun Nan Garden

3934 Schiff Drive

(702) 869-8885

Hidden on Schiff Dr. behind a Chinatown strip mall, Yun Nan holds its own with neighbor Chengdu Taste. Get the good noodle soups or take out from a unique fast-serve counter offering seaweed, neck bones, pigs ears, and a dozen more exotic selections.

Japanese

Hachi Japanese Yakitori Izakaya

3410 S. Jones Boulevard

(702) 227-9300

Another newcomer to our izakaya revolution, Hachi is well-run and more inventive than most.

Hiroyoshi Japanese Cuisine (see "Close, But No Cigar" review)

Our favorite neighborhood sushi. Small, creative, pristine, and personal: very much like you find in Japan.

Ichiza

4355 Spring Mountain Road, #205

(702) 367-3151

A grimy second-floor joint that's seen better days, but the food is pretty nifty.