

## On High-Stakes Tables in Las Vegas: Fish, Not Chips

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

### LAS VEGAS

#### JOËL ROBUCHON and his creations travel very nicely, thank you.

His newest venture, Joël Robuchon at the Mansion, which opened on Monday in the MGM Grand hotel here, represents a leap back into the rarefied realm of haute cuisine, from which he "retired" in 1996. During the tryouts preceding its official debut, the restaurant served the best food in Las Vegas, by a decisive margin, and some of the very best French food I have ever eaten on this continent.

This is no revolutionary Robuchon, like his Ateliers (including one here and, soon, in New York), where one eats at a counter and talks to the chefs. It is no casual, scaled-down, moderately priced Robuchon, like La Table de Joël Robuchon in the chic 16th Arrondissement, and its counterparts in Monte Carlo and Asia. This is full-scale, damn-the-torpedoes, three-stars-or-bust Robuchon, worldly, luxurious, costly.

Getting there is none of the fun. You walk through the crass clamor of hundreds of slot machines, past a Starbucks and other lesser diversions and into a bombastic stone doorway more suited to a central bank than a casino. But inside you are in Paris, in a subdued neo-Deco room lighted by a glamorous Swarovski crystal chandelier, furnished with handsome chairs in the fashion of Ruhlmann and graced by Lalique vases.

A small glass of lemon gelée flavored with vanilla and topped with an anisette-infused cream sets the tone straight away - a complex, entirely original and appetite-rousing prelude to the many delights that lie ahead, and a vivid demonstration of the French master's familiar maxim that three tastes in any one dish are quite enough.

Mr. Robuchon's arrival signals another step in the evolution of Las Vegas as a culinary capital, and the onset of a struggle between two visions of its future. Will it specialize in a kind of ghost cuisine, conceived but seldom cooked by absentee chefs who made their names elsewhere, or will it nurture its own kitchen superstars?

Steve Wynn, whose gigantic new \$2.7 billion casino opened in the summer of 2005, helped put Las Vegas on the world's gastronomic map in 1998 when he lured luminaries like Julian Serrano, Alessandro Strata and Sirio Maccioni to the Mirage and Bellagio, the Las Vegas resorts he then owned. Mr. Serrano and Mr. Strata moved here, and their food profited from their daily attention. But many of the chefs and restaurateurs who followed in their profitable wake did little more than phone in menus.

Mr. Wynn said that one evening in 2000 he ran into Jean-Georges Vongerichten at Prime, the Bellagio steakhouse that bears Mr. Vongerichten's imprimatur. Mr. Vongerichten, who is involved in restaurants in New York and around the world, told the casino boss that it was the first time he had cooked at Prime since it opened two years earlier.

That set Mr. Wynn to thinking, he told me, and he decided that "the only thing that matters is who's cooking dinner, not whose name appears on the door." As a result, most of the nine fine-dining restaurants at Wynn Las Vegas (among 22 food operations) are run by younger chefs, well known in the cities where they formerly cooked but not nationally celebrated. All have relocated to Las Vegas as a condition of employment, except Mr. Strata, who has moved over from the Mirage, and Daniel Boulud.

"A sense started spreading that something was fishy here," Mr. Wynn said. "If Steve Wynn paints a painting he doesn't get to sign it Picasso. So we're going down a different path. It's a bit of adventure, and I admit I'm not sure it'll work."

Gamal Aziz, who ran Bellagio's food and beverage operation and who considers Mr. Wynn his mentor, thinks not. Now the president of MGM Grand, the Egyptian-born Mr. Aziz is still reaching for stars. He persuaded Mr. Robuchon to set up shop here, where the chef is contractually required to spend just two weeks a quarter.

"I think it's an uphill battle to bring in these relatively unknown chefs and introduce them," Mr. Aziz said. "Most of our clients come to the desert for four or five days, not long enough to get used to new faces. They want to recognize names. I think we gain a competitive advantage by associating ourselves with the very best, and it will not be easy to top Joël Robuchon."

Well, Guy Savoy, another Paris heavyweight, holder of three Michelin stars, may come close if he wants to. His Las Vegas entry, on the second floor of the new Augustus Tower at Caesars Palace, a kitschfest even by Las Vegas standards, is set to open early in 2006; Mr. Savoy's son, Franck, has arrived to oversee it.

Some equally big names have decided not even to pretend to reproduce the food they serve at their home bases. At Wynn, Mr. Boulud runs a brasserie, not a replica of Daniel, his brilliant Manhattan establishment (although the executive chef, Philippe Rispoli, who grew up near Lyon, like Mr. Boulud, makes a rough-textured pâté de campagne, unctuous pork and goose rillettes and other dishes that would evoke cheers in New York).

Thomas Keller transplanted his bistro, Bouchon, not the French Laundry or Per Se, to the Venetian in Las Vegas. And the omnipresent Alain Ducasse, with two Michelin three-star restaurants, in Paris and Monte Carlo, eschews French classicism for a more populist approach at his local spot, Mix, perched on the 64th floor of a tower at Mandalay Bay. With sensational views across Sin City, it is much more endearing than its recently departed New York namesake. Thai beef salad and curried lobster cohabit happily on the menu with the best baba this side of the Atlantic, served with a choice of three premium rums. Hanging from the ceiling, thousands of shimmering Venetian glass baubles, said to have cost \$500,000, remind you that you are in the world capital of wretched excess.

"Trying to replicate a Paris three-star on the 64th floor, maybe anywhere in Vegas, would have been a big mistake," said John Cunin, Mix's general manager.

Obviously Mr. Aziz and Mr. Robuchon don't think so, and for now at least they seem to have brought it off. Mr. Robuchon took an almost obsessive interest in the design of the menu and the kitchen and put two seasoned Breton friends in day-to-day charge: Loïc Launay as general manager, and Claude Le Tohic, who worked at Mr. Robuchon's side during the glory days at Jamin in Paris, as executive chef.

Mr. Le Tohic holds the title of Meilleur Ouvrier de France (Best Craftsman of France), a coveted distinction awarded by a jury of his peers, so no one doubts his credentials. Seven cooks and six front-of-the-house people also came from Robuchon operations in Paris and Tokyo. Only time will tell, however, how long they will stay and who will replace them when they go.

Two set menus are offered at Joël Robuchon at the Mansion, 9 small courses plus coffee for \$165, and 16 small courses plus coffee for \$295. Many items are also served à la carte. The 750-entry wine list includes risibly expensive items, presumably for those who have hit several jackpots, such as 1978 Le Montrachet from the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti at \$8,845 a bottle. But for mere mortals, 2002 Puligny-Montrachet from Dujac at a modest \$108 should more than suffice. It did so for me.

Though relaxed, service is in the grand French style, with main courses delivered on silver trays (or carved at table side, in the case of the lobster and turbot and delectable roasted guinea hen with foie gras). Breads, cheeses (all French, all ripe), digestifs and after-dinner treats roll to the table on handsome wooden carts. The lighting is subtle, the air-conditioning far less overpowering than the Las Vegas norm; the tables are well spaced. Only 40 people can be seated in the square dining room, centered on a black fireplace with gas-fired flames, with room for a dozen more on a side terrace and 10 in a small private room.

If the gelée amuse-bouche attested to Mr. Robuchon's unflagging creativity, a mille-feuille consisting of two triangular layer cakes of fresh king crab, Fuji apple, watercress and bibb lettuce with perfectly fitted tomato lids bespoke his artistry. They rested on a red disk formed by a coulis of tomato and Périgord verjus (unfermented juice of unripe grapes), delightful in its balance of acid and fruitiness, with minuscule green dots of parsley-infused mayonnaise around its circumference. So precisely was all this applied, each dish reportedly requiring 20 minutes to complete, that I thought for a second that it was part of the decoration of the plate. Magic.

I could not resist trying langoustines, a Robuchon specialty, which are not often seen in the United States. Pulled into tight circles, enveloped in ephemeral ravioli cases with more than a few slivers of truffle, and cooked for only a few instants, these were meltingly sweet and ultratender. A hillock of barely steamed baby Savoy cabbage shared the plate, along with a slick of glossy veal reduction. Nothing else.

The langoustines had been flown across the Atlantic, of course, but the milk-fed veal was all-American, from the highly regarded Four Story Hill Farm in Pennsylvania. Listed on the menu as a veal chop, it was in fact two rectangles, less than half an inch thick, judiciously cooked to a uniform pink from edge to edge and moistened with deeply flavored pan juices. This time the accompanying act was a nest of taglierini made from carrots, zucchini and broccolini and lightly sauced with pesto. Somebody somewhere may do a more succulent veal dish - there are lots of restaurants in this world - but if so I have never sampled it.

Everything I ate was thought-out and free of frivolous gestures. Each combined delicacy with a certain muscularity of taste in a most unusual equilibrium. And each left my palate fresh as the dawn.

THINGS have gotten off to a bumpy start at Wynn. Its nightclubs are already being revamped, its computer system has been plagued by bugs and one of its regional chefs, Jimmy Sneed, formerly at the Frog and the Redneck in Richmond, Va., left before the resort even opened, after personality clashes and a dispute over what style of food he should cook.

Some of the other restaurants still seem a little ragged, including Okada, where the gifted Takashi Yagahashi cooks European-influenced Japanese food.

The look of the place is a bit of a letdown as well. Whereas Bellagio's lyrically swaying fountains evoke Busby Berkeley musicals, Wynn's ersatz Yosemite, waterfalls and all, comes straight out of B-movies.

But Wynn has had its triumphs as well, including Alex, the new domain of Mr. Strata and his rich, layered Franco-Italian food, which is one of the town's handful of truly successful haute cuisine restaurants. Its two steakhouses are booming, too; Las Vegas has always loved beef.

From my viewpoint, Paul Bartolotta's Ristorante di Mare is as thrilling as it is unexpected: an Italian seafood trattoria smack in the middle of the American desert. Although forewarned, I leapt with surprise when he wheeled out a trolley banked with bright-eyed orata, branzino, triglia (red mullet), spigola and other fish - even ugly, fiery red scorfano, the rascasse so vital to bouillabaisse - from Venice, Sicily, Liguria and other maritime parts of Italy, which come directly from a Milanese broker.

Milwaukee-born, trained in top kitchens in New York, France and Italy, Mr. Bartolotta, 44, made Spiaggia in Chicago the best Italian restaurant between the coasts. When they met, Mr. Wynn said, "I wanted a normal Italian menu - you know, veal piccata - but he insisted on doing something different and wore me down."

So seafood it is: steamed mussels with cannellini beans, tender octopus salad, linguine with clams and tomatoes, charcoal grilled lobster or langoustines and those beautiful fish, simply poached or roasted whole with olive oil and perhaps a touch of grapefruit for balance, dressed with herbs and some simple condiment like salsa salmoriglio (olive oil, lemon, garlic and oregano) - real seaside stuff - with a few token meat dishes like rabbit, chicken and rack of lamb. No veal piccata.

"I'm shooting for extreme simplicity and explosive flavor," Mr. Bartolotta said, and he is hitting those targets.

Another veteran of the Chicago restaurant wars, Taiwan-born Richard Chen, who won acclaim at the Peninsula Hotel's Shanghai Terrace in Chicago, also seems to have hit his stride in Las Vegas. He cooks Western-inflected Chinese food at Wing Lei at Wynn, including a fabulous Peking duck salad that owes a debt to a similar dish at Hakkasan in London, a lobster spring roll, thinly sliced abalone with a spicy green papaya salad and a memorable Dungeness crab slow-cooked with ginger, scallions and garlic in a clay pot.

All fine eating - and a joy to look at as well, as is the miniature garden that lies just beyond a wall-size window, with a pair of 100-year old pomegranate trees and a big black Fernando Botero sculpture.

Still, the question remains: as important as dining has become to Las Vegas, where gambling now accounts for only 40 percent of revenues, can a rootless place with no indigenous gastronomic traditions and no local raw materials (except for the odd blood orange and sprig of rosemary) ever be a great restaurant town, as opposed to a resort town with good restaurants - "a Disneyland for foodies," as the restaurant consultant Clark Wolf calls it?

"I doubt that you will ever have a true food culture here, in the sense that Lyon and Venice and San Francisco have food cultures," commented Elizabeth Blau, executive vice president for restaurant development at Wynn Resorts, who is considered one of the savviest food people in the city. "Nothing is local."

I asked Mr. Aziz whether Las Vegas is yet a great restaurant city.

"No, not yet," he replied, "but we've made some quantum leaps. We've built a strong foundation, and eventually we'll get there. This is a large, prosperous region now. We have the economic means to support not only great restaurants in the casinos, but also the bistros and other places that are popping up in the neighborhoods."