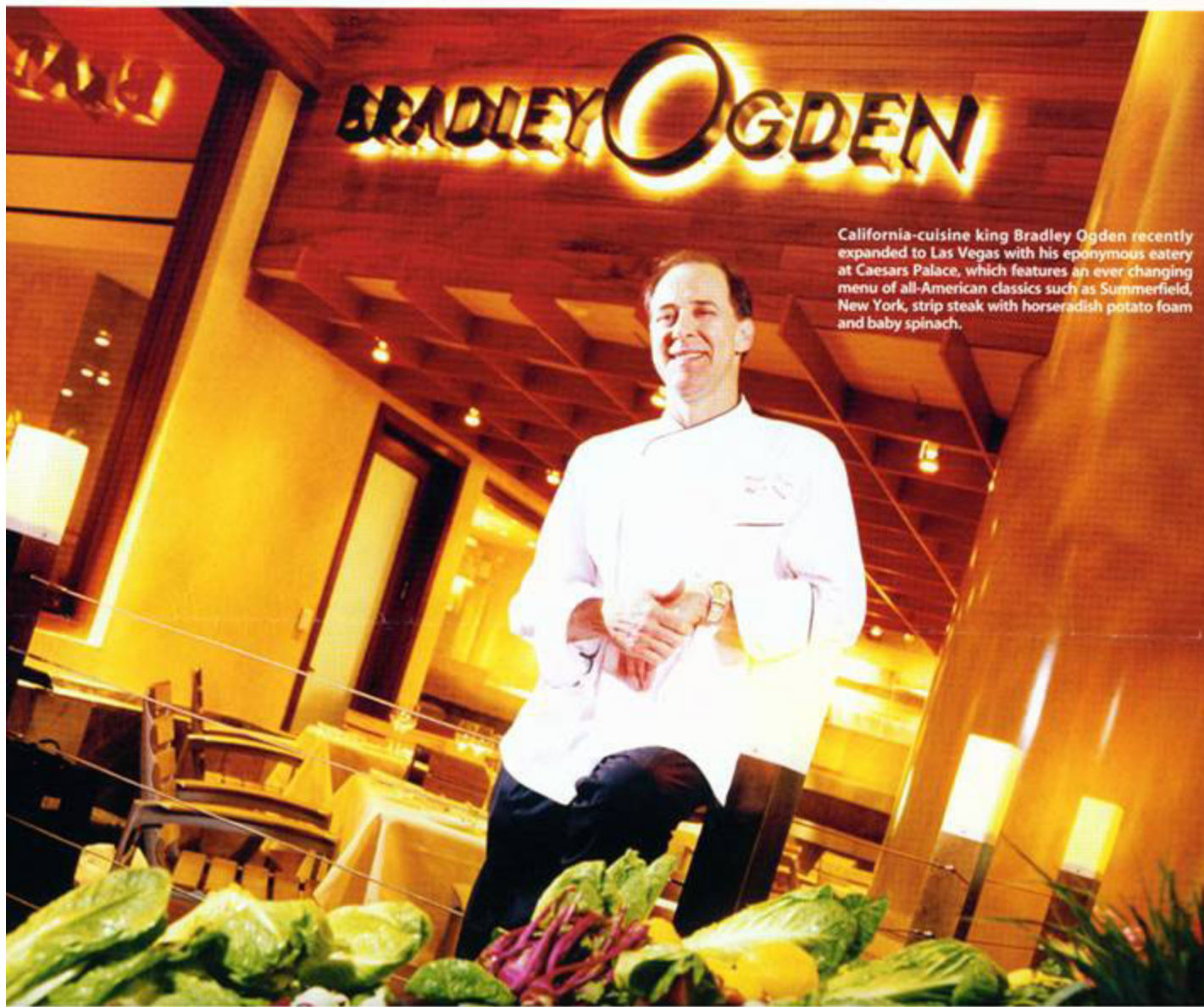


All-American Dishes at Bradley Ogden



California-cuisine king Bradley Ogden recently expanded to Las Vegas with his eponymous eatery at Caesars Palace, which features an ever changing menu of all-American classics such as Summerfield, New York, strip steak with horseradish potato foam and baby spinach.

Several wags in the national press have anointed Vegas as America's top dining destination, and who are we to argue? Insiders concede, though, that a number of our superstar chefs are present in name only. They'll put their moniker on a door or menu, but then they will decamp for some glitzy, new project elsewhere.

One ingredient that makes chef Bradley Ogden really special is his serious commitment to Las Vegas. He's one superstar who has been working here nonstop during the past four months,



Maine lobster with crispy sweetbreads, morels, honey tangerine and hazelnut.

putting in 14-hour days and seven-day weeks in his eponymous new Caesars Palace station.

The still-boyish-looking chef (who, incidentally, just hit the big Five-O) rose to stardom as the executive chef at Campton Place Hotel in San Francisco—where he was celebrated for making the best breakfasts in America—before cementing his legacy with elegant comfort foods served at his venerable Marin County restaurant, Lark Creek Inn.

Ogden uses only farm-fresh American products, and his cooking is highly seasonal. His new Vegas effort, where the menu changes daily, is

IN THE KITCHEN

stunningly good, from a Point Reyes blue cheese soufflé on the appetizer menu, clear through to a childhood chocolate tasting of bread pudding, s'mores and a thick milkshake that wows for dessert.

Park Place Entertainment, Caesars' parent company, is betting that Ogden will be the ideal complement to Celine Dion and her brand-new, \$95-million-dollar amphitheater across the casino floor. The diva performs her glittery *A New Day* spectacle there, and the pairing represents the quantum version of dinner and a show. The \$6-million-dollar restaurant is a gorgeous series of rooms created by famed San Francisco-based restaurant designers Engstrom Design Group, the team behind the renaissance of Wolfgang Puck's *Postrio* at the Venetian Resort-Hotel-Casino.

The décor features warm woods, earth-toned fabrics, oil paintings from Bay Area



Bradley Ogden, located across the casino from Celine Dion's amphitheater, is a \$6 million complex of elegant rooms decorated by Engstrom Design Group.

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artists and a balance of simplicity and sophistication in sharp contrast to the banks of slot machines just outside the door. But, in spite of this sexy pedigree, you can't help wondering why a chef like Ogden, who has an empire of nine top restaurants scattered across California, would bother expanding to a strange town.

To better understand, I sat for a long, casual conversation with Ogden and his wife and partner of nearly 30 years, Jody. Part of the answer is that he is again, in his own words, "where he wants to be, back in the kitchen." Ogden is the quintessential American chef, a small-town boy from Traverse City, Michigan, with sandy, blond hair that is just beginning to gray.

"I never ate in a gourmet restaurant before I became a chef," Ogden reveals, "but somehow, because of hunting, fishing and foraging for my not-so-rich family, I developed a palate. Here in Vegas, I am getting the chance to source out for a number of new products—only American. If I can't get a good American tomato, I won't be serving you one from Brazil."

Another aspect to this man is that he radiates calm, whether at work in the kitchen or speaking quietly over a cup of coffee. Metaphorically speaking, he was raised by wolves: old-style chefs who ruled by terror and intimidation. So call him a Zen master of cooking, a 9th Dan black belt of the stoves.

Ironically, he never dreamed about becoming a chef until his father, a rock 'n' roll impresario, told him "if he could cook, he'd always have a job." So after high school, he enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America, America's most prestigious



The warm décor at Bradley Ogden matches the innovative fare.

cooking school. After graduating with honors, he landed at American Restaurant in Kansas City, where he learned the craft under the legendary Joe Baum.

Baum, a chef and consultant, had a legendary temper, and one day made a point Ogden would never forget. Ogden was putting the finishing touches on something he created for the restaurant's lunch buffet: seared beef tenderloin with

horseradish vinaigrette and a garnish of snow peas. The dish was being served in an expensive ceramic dish that Baum had just purchased, and in Ogden's words, "it looked just perfect." But Ogden overlooked a single, discolored snow pea, and when Baum came to inspect it, he shattered the new bowl on the floor, spilling its contents. "Never serve even one bad pea," said the maestro, stalking out. Ogden dissolved in tears, but the point was taken.

Ogden doesn't train his chefs that way, though that same attitude permeates his cooking philosophy today. He teaches by example. "What you put into what you do envelops the rest of the crew. If you demand excellence from yourself, you can demand it from others." That he has. The roster of chefs who have graduated from his kitchens reads like a veritable Who's Who of leading American

chefs, including Chicago's Charlie Trotter and San Francisco's Michael Mina (the founder of *Aqua* at the Bellagio).

"Brad is amazing," Jody gushes. "He's like a symphony conductor behind the line who can manage a team of chefs without so much as moving his head. 'That salmon is done,' he'll tell the sauté chef, all the while listening to the sizzle of meats in the broiler. It's like the conductor saying, 'Second oboe, that's B-natural, not B-flat.'"

Ogden works with a team of chefs in his spotless kitchen, all prodigies from top American cooking schools such as his alma mater, and Johnson & Wales. "In time, you develop an instinct for recognizing talent," he says, in a rare burst of self-analysis. The bet here is that talent, in this case, is genetic; one apprentice is his third son, Bryan, 25, also a Culinary Institute graduate.

Ogden still considers his new restaurant a work in progress. He's taking things one step at a time, but he still plans to add a few gimmicks, such as carving meat tableside, a mini-degustation menu, and ramping up the wine program, which has only American wines, at present.

But for now, those of us who have experienced Bradley Ogden The Restaurant can be contented with thoughts about his blue-corn dill muffins; the Summerfield, New York, strip steak with horseradish potato foam and baby spinach; his artisan cheeses from Vermont and Wisconsin served with a fresh Marshall Farms honeycomb; and the knowledge that one of the best chefs in the land has devoted such a great deal of time to us. It truly is *A New Day* for Las Vegas dining. ♦