CULINARY WAVE

In With the New...

As Las Vegas expands its reputation as a dining destination, four celebrity chefs get set to open restaurants

By HEIDI KNAPP RINELLA

It's been said that if you build it, they will come. But in the case of new celebrity-chef restaurants in Las Vegas, they've both building and coming, in wave after ever-circling wave.

The latest tidal surge to hit our shores brings chefs Hubert Keller, Rick Moonen and Alain Ducasse to Mandalay Bay and Bobby Flay to Caesars Palace. Keller's Fleur de Lys is scheduled to open Thursday. Reservations for Flay's Mesa Grill are being taken for dinner as of Oct. 4 and lunch a week later, although a soft opening may quietly occur before those dates.

Restaurant consultant Clark Wolf said the new Mandalay Bay restaurants represent another phase in the resort's development. When Mandalay Bay opened, it was with a crop that included celebrity chef offerings Aurore from Charlie Palmer and Border Grill from "Too Hot Tamales", Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger, plus the high-styled rumjungle, Red Square and China Grill from China Grill Management and the Funky House of Blues. The next group, Wolf said, will, in the words of another Las Vegas celebrity chef, kick things up a notch.

The four restaurants have a few things in common, including upper-tier chefs, top-quality food and the fact that they'll all be visually stunning.

Ducasse's restaurant Mix will be atop The Hotel at the resort — with an "incomparable view," in the words of Mandalay Bay director of public relations Gordon Ahsher — and is expected to open sometime this fall. It will be a sister to Mix in New York, Ducasse's restaurant with China Grill Management. Mix in New York is defined by its name — a mix of cuisines, cultures and periods — but Wolf said the Mandalay Bay version will be "a few steps" — conceptual and more casual, a remixed Mix.

Also opening later this year will be RM from chef Rick Moonen in Mandalay Place. RM will be on two levels, with

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RM

Award-winning chef Hubert Keller will open a Las Vegas Fleur de Lys — sister to the landmark San Francisco restaurant of the same name — at Mandalay Bay Thursday.
CELEBRITY: Fleur de Lys debuts in Mandalay

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an 85-seat high-end area on the upper floor, and 350 seats inside and out downstairs. RM will specialize in seafood, and is “the kind of restaurant most demanded by our customers,” said Mike Sloan, Mandalay senior vice president.

The restaurant will be glass-fronted to give the effect of a human aquarium, but the sleek design punctuated with water elements will be such that “everyone going up and down (the nearby) escalators will be forced to crane their necks,” Wolf said.

Which is not to say they’ll feel timid about walking in.

“I want the restaurant itself to say ‘fish,'” Moonen said. There will be honey touches, such as the fresh biscuits that will be baked in front of customers.

“I don’t like pretentiousness,” Moonen said. “I don’t say ‘no.’ The goal is to be comfortable and intimate wherever you are.”

RM also will feature a takeaway window offering sandwiches, salads, fresh seafood cocktails and oyster shooters, so that customers can, for example, get seafood takeout, stop at the nearby 55 Degrees for a bottle of wine and have their own al fresco feast.

On Mandalay Bay’s restaurant row, in a spot next to Aureole that formerly was occupied by a gift shop, Hubert Keller’s Fleur de Lys — a sister to his longtime San Francisco restaurant — is decorated mainly in shades of brown. It is, however, anything but drab, thanks to 30-foot walls of rock, embossed-wood ceilings, a glass-enclosed lofted wine cellar and, on one wall, 3,000 pink roses.

Fresh pink roses. Changed every day.

Keller had an unusual choice for a restaurant designer — Stanlee Gatti, a San Francisco-based designer who’s known mainly for his meticulously executed, elaborate parties. Keller and his wife and partner, Chantal, were familiar with Gatti’s work — “Stanlee is a person who creates wonderful spaces,” Keller said — and asked if he’d like to design the Las Vegas restaurant.

“I knew he would say no,” Keller said. But Gatti asked to see the space. The response: “Let’s do it.”

Mesa Grill chef Bobby Flay works with the staff of his restaurant at Caesars Palace, demonstrating his method for preparing lobster and cod cakes.

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But Gatti said he would take on the project only if he could handle every detail.

“I said ...” Keller finishes the sentence by turning two enthusiastic thumbs up. “I think I trusted Stanlee entirely. We just needed people in between to put on blueprints what his vision was.”

Gatti’s attention to detail extended to designing the china, which was executed by manufacturers that included Rosenthal. He created a flower that doesn’t exist in nature and used it in the designs, trailing a stem up and over a cup, for example, or having it embroidered on the upholstery. It’s the leaf of that flower that inspired the rose-filled shape on the wall.

Fleur de Lys seats 105, with room for another 25 to 30 in a cozy lounge that will feature live music. The restaurant also has several private booths, draped and tented with fabric to evoke the San Francisco Fleur de Lys.

Keller’s menu is a similar blend of the innovative and the traditional. It features such appetizers as foie gras cappuccino with crisp bacon and toast of duck ham, smoked salmon ravioli with guacamole and curry-paprika chips, and braised beef ribs with carrot confit and glazed pearl onions, and, in a touch of whimsy, a “ladybug” of cod and a “blackjack” appetizer with cod, caviar and tomato formed in the shape of playing cards. Brioche will be baked in flower pots and served in a basket.

“We spent lots of time on details, but I think it’s going to show that lots of thought went in,” Keller said.

The restaurant’s executive chef is Laurent Pillard. Over at Caesars Palace, Flay’s Mesa Grill was constructed with a multilevel floor. The centerpiece is what Flay calls a “giant Weber grill,” a hammered-copper cooking area where two or three cooks will work. Some 20 feet above their heads, a giant rotisserie will cook 16-spice rotisserie chicken and coffee-spice-rubbed rotisserie filet mignon.

Other menu items include a blue corn pancake with barbecued duck and habanero chili sauce; yellow-corn-crusted chile relleno filled with wild mushrooms and goat cheese; grilled lamb chops with...