

# NATION'S Restaurant News

THE NEWSWEEKLY OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

12 PUBLISHED EVERY MONDAY • A LEBHAR-FRIEDMAN® PUBLICATION • \$5 PER ISSUE • <http://www.nrn.com>

MARCH

## Celeb chefs, top restaurateurs steal show in Las Vegas with new dining destinations

By Alan J. Liddle

**LAS VEGAS (Oct. 4)** - Diners who've grown accustomed to miles of bright neon, flashing lights and sequin-clad servers continue to be dazzled by incoming streams of stellar chef-restaurateurs, whose latest clusters include France's Alain Ducasse, Joel Robuchon and Guy Savoy and U.S. operators Daniel Boulud, Bobby Flay and Hubert Keller.

Flay, of New York's [Bolo](#) and [Mesa Grill](#), presided over a soft opening Sept. 22 of his Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace here. And Keller and his wife, Chantal, whose new Fleur de Lys Las Vegas at the Mandalay Bay resort borrows from their long-successful Fleur de Lys in San Francisco, did likewise the next day.

"My goal with Mesa Grill has always been to create boldly flavored food in a high-energy environment," Flay said in a statement about his new 218-seat Southwestern-cuisine restaurant with three-tiered dining room. "Las Vegas, especially Caesars Palace, is the perfect fit."

"Las Vegas has some energy that you don't find anywhere else," Hubert Keller said, explaining one reason he and his wife decided to open a sister concept to the San Francisco restaurant that they operate with Maurice Rouas. "When people are crying about business in other cities, it is popping [in Las Vegas]," Keller observed.

He said he believes that the more celebratory atmosphere of Las Vegas and the livelier bar action there could boost his new restaurant's per-person tab above the average ticket in San Francisco, which many years ago topped the \$100 mark.

Slated to soon join the Kellers at Mandalay Bay are chef-restaurateur Ducasse, whose [Alain Ducasse at the Essex House](#)

in New York is one of his several establishments worldwide. Ducasse is accomplishing his Las Vegas debut along with Jeffrey Chodorow, his partner at Mix in New York. Rick Moonen of New York's [rm](#) restaurant also is slated to open soon at Mandalay Bay, the hotel-casino confirmed.

Caesars Palace sources said Savoy, whose [Guy Savoy](#) in Paris holds a rare three-star rating from the Guide Michelin, will open a restaurant in the resort's new luxury hotel tower in 2005. [Robuchon of L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon](#) in Paris is targeting an opening next April for a 75-seat restaurant in The Mansion supersuites complex at the MGM Grand, representatives of that Las Vegas Strip landmark said.

New York-based Boulud of [Daniel](#) next April is scheduled to open Brasserie Daniel Boulud at the Wynn Las Vegas mega-resort now under development, according to Elizabeth Blau, the multibillion-dollar luxury property's vice president of restaurant marketing and development.

Officials at The Venetian said they could not confirm that chef-restaurateur Mario Batali of New York's [Babbo](#) would open a seafood trattoria at that resort in 2005, as was recently reported. A Batali representative confirmed, "Mario has not yet signed a deal." Mandalay Bay spokesman Gordon Absher said that by year-end Ducasse and Chodorow are expected to open their new Mix restaurant atop The Hotel tower complex of the Las Vegas resort. The restaurant will be a variation of their multicultural Mix in New York. Absher also said Moonen would debut a two-level seafood concept in the Mandalay Place retail and dining annex within that same time frame. The annex connects Mandalay Bay to the neighboring Luxor resort-casino.

Debbie Munch of Caesars Palace said an expansion of that hotel-casino's Forum Shops retail and dining arcade set to open

in late October will include Joe's Seafood, Prime Steak and Stone Crab restaurants, operated by [Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises](#) and its sister organization, Icon, both of Chicago. Also set to premier then is a Las Vegas branch of Los Angeles-based Innovative Dining Group's [Sushi Roku](#) concept, she said.

By the end of October, Munch said, the 85-acre Caesars Palace complex will host a total of 24 restaurants and cafes.

Like some of the other renowned restaurateurs who have opened outposts in Las Vegas, the Kellers of San Francisco will share in the cash flow and profits of their Nevada venture in exchange for their expertise and drawing power, Hubert Keller indicated.

The debut of the \$4.5 million Fleur de Lys Las Vegas — whose kitchen alone cost \$1.2 million — followed the Kellers' successful launch earlier this year of their full-service, 140-seat Burger Bar in Mandalay Place. The dinner-only Fleur de Lys features Hubert Keller's contemporary French cuisine in three- to five-course presentations and as à la carte offerings. Guests are served in a 105-seat dining room, a 25-seat lounge with a disc jockey and four private "dining cabanas," which seat from two to 20 people. The new Fleur de Lys also boasts a "cellar master's table" within its elevated, glass-walled "wine loft," which holds 12,000 bottles and 650 different labels.

Keller's initial menu, created with input from executive chef Laurent Pillard, features such dishes as "Black Jack," a playing-card-shaped assemblage of cod brandade with osetra caviar, tomato diamond and cucumber gelée. Other offerings are pan-seared foie gras on crisp almond galette with herbal, spiced duck infusion; roasted Maine lobster with artichoke puree, tangerine salad and porcini oil; lamb loin and lamb sweetbreads with spiced honey and toasted-cumin-seed sauce and mint oil.

The three-course menu is \$68; the four-course is \$76. Keller's five-course feast is \$88. "We have the same emphasis on fresh ingredients and quality that we have in San Francisco," Keller said. "We'll show the same spirit here in Las Vegas as we do there, but the dishes will be different."

Fleur de Lys executive chef Pillard previously cooked at the renowned Lucas Carton in Paris, among other establishments. General manager Philippe Tosques previously worked with chef-restaurateur Jean Joho at Chicago's Everest, and sommelier Michelle Moray is a veteran of Masa's in San Francisco, Keller said.

San Francisco special-events specialist Stanley R. Gatti, in his first restaurant job, designed Fleur de Lys Las Vegas' dining spaces, service ware and logo. Gatti reportedly took the job only on the condition that he be involved in all aspects of design.

Keller said that despite his personal knowledge of Gatti's "genius" for creating memorable ambiances and spaces, his lack of experience in restaurant design made him "a hard sell" in convincing Mandalay Bay executives he was right for the job. However, the ultimately successful pitch to hire Gatti was worth the effort, Keller added, as the resulting restaurant space — with its 30-foot-high ceilings, stone walls, draping fabrics and floral imagery — is "sexy."

The space is decorated primarily in shades of brown, with a pink flourish provided by Gatti's leaf-shaped, rose-lined wall carving. Wait staff uniforms, designed by Chantal Keller, combine brown pants with peach shirts.

Hubert Keller said the Las Vegas lounge would stand out for its use of drink mixes made from fresh ingredients and for such signature libations as a Champagne cocktail made with 24-karat gold leaf.