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Life
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By Jerry Shriver

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Food & wine

The real deal: Great Las Vegas restaurants

His place: Chef Bradley Ogden's eponymous establishment has been named the nation's best new restaurant.

Five of a kind where great experiences are no bluff

LAS VEGAS — Like the Sahara soaking up water and strippers' garters absorbing \$20 bills, casino hotels are gobbling up celebrity chefs again in an insatiable frenzy.

In this latest round, a dozen of the USA's top chefs and restaurateurs and two from France recently have opened or soon will open eye-popping, wallet-thinning eateries at the major resorts. They'll compete for diners' dollars with

Reviews

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the dozen or so who arrived and survived in the past decade, including Wolfgang Puck, Emeril Lagasse and Charlie Palmer.

Incredibly, some of those chefs already are competing against themselves with multiple outposts, sometimes in the same complex. Yet no one seems too worried about financial heartburn.

This has resulted in a superheated culinary scene that is sometimes great, frequently a rip-off, but like the city itself, always weirdly fascinating. On the upside, places such as Bradley Ogden in Caesars Palace, which just won the James Beard Award for the nation's best new restaurant, show what can happen when a talented chef commits himself full-time to the city and to his stove. On the downside, some of the new arrivals will simply lend their cachet, advice and an occasional appearance to their ventures. And as always, most food and wine prices will remain at a level that forces diners to visit the craps table in hopes of financing the next course.

But in Sin City, you pay your money, and you take your chances. To help guide the way, here are five places, a mix of the new, recently opened and undeservedly unknown, that held my interest during an early spring eating binge:



Caesars Palace

► As soon as the mirrors develop a crack and enough onion soup gets spilled, **Bouchon** will feel like the ideal place to relax and dream of that long-ago tryst in Paris (and to forget that you're in an Italian-themed hotel in Nevada). Right now, the décor and service at this spacious and sparkling brasserie are so chillingly perfect that it just doesn't yet feel French enough. Thomas Keller's original Bouchon in the Napa Valley has developed the requisite coziness and patina, and this spinoff likely will, too. For now, focus on the nicely executed brasserie classics (entrees \$16.95-\$27.50) such as mussels steamed in white wine, greasy frites, *brandade beignets* (salt-cod fritters) and garlic sausage with green lentils. And maybe splash a bit of Burgundy around. (*The Venetian*, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South; 702-414-6200)

► **Bradley Ogden** is barely a year old but already ranks among the city's best deluxe dining experiences, along with Picasso, Renoir, Valentino and a very few others. Ogden won acclaim in the 1990s as a New American guru at Lark Creek Inn and One Market in San Francisco, and this latest venture showcases exceptional ingredients from the best American producers and growers. Ogden, who report-

edly cooks full-time here with his son, Bryan, spins out deeply flavored, sophisticated delights such as Dungeness crab flan, Maytag blue cheese soufflé, and citrus-steamed cod with braised pork ravioli and glazed lobster tail. Prices are steep — entrees run \$37-\$54, desserts \$14-\$15 — but you won't find a better \$46 pork chop anywhere. And the setting of three cozy dining rooms of serene, earth-toned California cool is a welcome relief from the casino cacophony just outside. (*Caesars Palace*, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. South; 702-731-7110)

► **Michael Sima** opens owners an energetic, feel-good aquatic ambience, a menu of "jet-fresh" seafood and reasonable prices at his sleek, 9-month-old **Seablu**. He built his reputation at the upscale Aqua and Nobhill restaurants in San Francisco and here in Las Vegas, but this more casual venture feels like it's his first love. The seafood is said to be flown in fresh every day, and the entrees (\$25-\$44) are prepared simply: grilled over wood and sometimes finished in a Moroccan clay *tagine* without using butter or cream. An outstanding example of the *tagine* treatment is North Sea cod paired with wild mushrooms, white wine risotto and truffles. Tapas-style appetizers come raw, steamed, marinated or fried; the menu is structured to encourage mixing and matching and sharing. Best of all, the imaginative wine list foregoes trophy bottles in favor of eclectic, unusual and affordable selections. (*MGM Grand*, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. South; 702-891-3486)

► The most addictive place to eat in the city has no PR hype machine working for it, is hidden in a downtrodden mall away from The Strip and has little ambience to speak of. Nevertheless, serious foodies have been making their way to **Lotus of Siam** ever since a writer for *Gourmet* magazine declared it to be the best Thai restaurant in North America a few years ago. Lotus' menu is filled with dishes that are seldom found in Thai restaurants in this country, in particular those from the Issan region, where food tends to be more subtly spiced. Skip the all-you-can-eat buffet and try à-la-carte standouts such as *nam kao tod* (minced sour sausage mixed with green onion, chilies, ginger, peanuts, crispy rice and lime juice) and *pla dook yang* (charbroiled whole catfish flavored with lime and chilies). Most entrees are under \$15, and there's a surprisingly harmonious wine list, heavy on rieslings. (*Commercial Center Mall*, 953 E. Sahara Ave.; 702-735-3033)

► Even club kids on the prowl deserve a nice, adult dining experience between cocktails and dance-floor forays now and then, and Kerry Simon provides it at **Simon Kitchen & Bar**. The noise levels can grow thunderous, and the stylish, dimly lit dining room may be jammed with crazed spring-breakers, but the ultra-cool staff will more than likely deliver a delicious, creative meal promptly and gracefully. Don't underestimate how difficult that is. The mostly American comfort-food menu is studded with fresh, high-quality ingredients and presented with a dash of whimsy; the basmati rice accompanying the delicious chicken curry comes in a takeout carton, and desserts include riffs on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cookies and milk, and cotton candy. Best of all, prices are gentle, with most entrees under \$25. (*Hard Rock Hotel and Casino*, 4455 Paradise Road; 702-693-5000)

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