

Where to Dine

You may have heard that a great part of the fun in Vegas these days is the eating. This is true. Where once Vegas was, at best, ignored by anyone with a palate and, at worst, openly mocked, it is now considered one of the best dining towns in the country. All sorts of celebrity chefs have set up shop here, from the ubiquitous Emeril to Julian Serrano. Branches of a number of significant restaurants (**Bouchon, Fleur de Lys, Commander's Palace, Aqua, Aureole, Le Cirque, Lutèce**) can be found here, though of course, rare is the day you are going to find the signature chef in the kitchen. But the city boasts a few Vegas-based master chefs who can compete with any of those dudes on the Food Network.

On the other hand, the town of the great meal deal—the 99¢ shrimp cocktail or \$4.99 all-you-can-eat buffet!—has now reversed itself. For the most part, if you want to eat well, you need to be well-heeled. But you, the non-gambler, with all that money you've saved from the clutches of the craps table, may well be able to take full advantage of the haute cuisine currently offered. And while little hole-in-the-wall ethnic places aren't nearly as abundant as we would like, there are a few noteworthy spots—including perhaps the best Thai restaurant on the continent—and we will help you find your way to them. We may make you drive to certain finds, but don't worry; we've included even a few hotel-based midprice restaurants worth your patronage as well, plus we've picked our favorites among the many buffets around—after all, it's not a trip to Vegas unless you've piled your plates with a mound of shrimp and endless helpings of prime rib.

1 South Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Aureole ★★★ NOUVELLE AMERICAN This branch of a New York City fave (it's pronounced are-ree-*all*) run by Charlie Palmer is noted for its glass wine tower. Four stories of carefully chosen bottles (including the largest collection of Austrian wines

outside that country—well worth trying) are plucked from their perches by comely, cat-suited lasses who fly up and down via pulleys. It's quite the show, and folks come in just to watch.

Should you come for the food? You bet. The current chef is a wonder, serving a seasonal three-course prix-fixe menu, though flirting with your waiter might earn you luxurious extras like pâté on brioche topped with shaved truffles or an espresso cup of cold yellow pepper soup with crab. Expect other marvels like a tender roasted lamb loin and braised shoulder, or a rack of venison accompanied by sweet potato purée and chestnut crisp. Everything demonstrates the hand of a true chef in the kitchen, someone paying close attention to his work and to his customers. Service is solicitous, and desserts are playful, including a bittersweet chocolate soufflé with blood orange sorbet and a Bartlett pear crisp with toasted cinnamon brioche and lemongrass foam. There is also an excellent cheese plate. Do try the wine list; it comes on a handheld computer, designed not just to guide you through their vast tower but also to recommend pairings with your meal choices.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/632-5300. www.aureolelv.com. Reservations required. Fixed-price dinner \$69–\$95. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm.

Charlie Palmer Steak ★★ STEAKHOUSE There are many, many steakhouses in Vegas, as if there is some natural law which states that any hotel without one will suffer from entropy and eventually collapse into a black hole. Discerning palates know there can be a significant difference among steakhouses; discerning wallets might not care. If you find yourself among the former, do try Charlie Palmer's, probably the best of the costlier Shrines to Beef. Those with the latter can be reassured that with entrees weighing in at around 22 to 45 ounces *each*, diners can legitimately, and in the name of decency ought to, share portions, which makes this a much more affordable experience than it might appear at first glance. And why not? Those enormous slabs o' meat are as tender as anything because with the big bucks, you do get the best cuts. Charlie Palmer, by the way, is the chef mind behind Aureole on the other side of Mandalay Bay; this makes two for two for this one celeb chef.

In Four Seasons Las Vegas, 3960 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/632-5120. www.charliepalmersteaklv.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$21–\$42. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5–10:30pm.

Commander's Palace ★★ CREOLE This is an offshoot of the famous New Orleans restaurant, which is considered the best in that

Dining on the Strip

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DOWNTOWN
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town, and sometimes even the best in the country. Vegas's version isn't nearly all that, but it's one of the better choices in town, with a menu where nary a dish fails. You would be best off getting the \$39 three-course Creole favorite, featuring the justly legendary turtle soup with sherry, Louisiana pecan-crusting fish, and signature bread pudding soufflé, three things Commander's does very, very well indeed. Pork chops sound humble, but here they are thick cut and juicy. Try the Chocolate Sheba in addition to the bread pudding for dessert. The menu is shorter at brunch and lunch, but just as delightful. Revel all the while in the fantastic, doting service.

In the Desert Passage in Aladdin Resort & Casino, 3663 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ **702/892-8272**. www.commanderspalace.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$22–\$25 at brunch, \$16–\$28 at lunch, \$25–\$39 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 9am–11am, 11:30am–2pm, and 5:30–10pm; Sat–Sun 10:30am–2pm and 5:30–10pm.

Emeril's New Orleans Fish House ★ CONTEMPORARY CREOLE Chef Emeril Lagasse, a ubiquitous presence on cable's Food Network, probably needs to focus on his name restaurants; the original in New Orleans is just as good as ever, but this one has lost some of its punch. How else to explain that the best dish is Creole-spiced rib-eye? And that the duck on the duck salad is better than the salad itself? But the famous savory lobster cheesecake is still a must-try, and we do love his version of barbecue shrimp, slathered in a garlicky herb-Worcester-tinged sauce, paired with a rosemary biscuit. And it all seems worthwhile when you have a slice of the banana cream pie with banana crust and caramel drizzle.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ **702/891-7374**. Reservations required. Main courses \$12–\$18 at lunch, \$18–\$38 at dinner (more for lobster). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2:30pm and 5:30–10:30pm.

Fleur de Lys ★★ FRENCH CONTINENTAL One of the most sophisticated restaurants in Las Vegas, this is an offshoot of a highly regarded San Francisco establishment run by chef Hubert Keller. Continuing the tradition of visually show-stopping restaurant spaces in Mandalay Bay, most tables are set in the semicircular two-story interior consisting half of '70s-style stone brick walls, half of billowing drapes, behind which are concealed a few dining booths. It's one of the few places in town where you ought to dress up to dine, but in a good way. At this writing, one orders from a three-, four-, or five-course tasting menu (including a well-thought-out vegetarian option), featuring seasonal choices such as an appetizer of delicate seared ahi tuna with a gelee of chili and garlic, a sily

appearing but hearty ocean “baeckeoffe” (a collection of seafood options including a sort of seafood burger-style crab cake on a brioche), pan-seared diver scallops with parsnip fires served in a cunning mini flower pot, perfect roasted Maine lobster with an artichoke purée soup, and roasted guinea hen breast and leg confit topped with crispy basil. Our descriptions won’t do these playful, sexy dishes justice. It’s food as art, certainly, but not so that the point of food—the eating of it, the very taste—is lost. Despite the presence of a perfect white and dark chocolate mousse on the “Chocolate Feast” sampler plate, you owe it to yourself to try the fresh fruit minestrone—basil sorbet, raspberries, mango, and more, all strong fresh fruit flavors that harmonize beautifully—for once, a no-fat dessert worth ordering.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/632-9200. Reservations recommended. Jacket recommended. 3- to 5-course menu \$68–\$88. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Red Square ★★ CONTINENTAL/RUSSIAN It’s the restaurant with the giant beheaded statue of Lenin out front and the bar made of ice (all the better to keep your drinks chilled) inside. It’s the place for vodka and blow-your-expense-account Beluga (we prefer Osetra, in case you are treating us), along with Roquefort-crusted, tender filet mignon—one of the best filets in a town full of red meat. Silly theme drinks keep up the goofy quotient (the “Cuban Missile Crisis,” for example, features rain vodka, dark rum, sugarcane syrup, and lime juice), but do consider trying a vodka flight. Dessert is not so clever but is worth saving room for; we liked the Chocolate Trilogy, a white-chocolate cake tower topped with chocolate mousse and wrapped in chocolate.

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/632-5300. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$17–\$31. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 5:30pm–midnight.

EXPENSIVE

Border Grill ★★ MEXICAN More entries from Food Network denizens—in this case, the “Two Hot Tamales,” Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger. In a riotous-colored venue (the highly popular original is in Los Angeles), you will find truly authentic Mexican home cooking—the Tamales learned their craft from the real McCoy south of the border—but with a nuevo twist. So don’t expect precisely the same dishes you’d encounter in your favorite corner joint, but do expect fresh and fabulous food, arranged as brightly on the plates as the decor on the walls. It might be hard to get kids interested in anything other than tacos and enchiladas, but

you should try the *cochinita pibil* (marinated shredded pork) or some of their excellent tamales. Stay away from the occasionally bland fish and head right toward rich and cheesy dishes such as the chiles rellenos (with perfect black beans), or try the mushroom empanadas. Don't miss the dense but fluffy Mexican chocolate cream pie (with a meringue crust).

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/632-5300. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$15–\$20. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–11pm.

MODERATE

Burger Bar ⚡ DINER What to do, what to do? We get exhausted by the relentless Vegas-high-concept that takes a simple idea like a hamburger and gives it an entire restaurant, an entire menu designed so you can “build” your own burger with dozens of options available—People, cheese! Ketchup! Onions! Why do you need more? Why, why, why?—so that the naïve could suddenly turn their affordable lunch into something approaching \$20 a person. Assuming, of course, that you didn't fall for pricey gimmicks like Kobi beef (*Tip:* too soft for a good burger) and foie gras, in which case you would be looking at more like \$50 a person. But then again, we love gimmicks. We also see the point of avocado bacon burgers. Plus, they make excellent shakes here, and there is that “sweet burger” (a donut “bun” with a chocolate pâté patty and fruit!), which is so charming we are disarmed. And the burgers are good. So. Order carefully, don't show off, and don't forget about the genuine (and appropriately priced) hamburgers sold at the Tiffany's coffee shop near the Strat.

In Mandalay Place in Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/632-9364. Burgers \$8–\$20. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 10am–11pm; Fri–Sat 10am–1am.

Dragon Noodle Co. ⚡★ ASIAN FUSION A strong choice for a reasonably priced meal, Dragon Noodle is one of the better Chinese restaurants in town. We were glad to see that in addition to the usual suspects, there are some other interesting (if not radically less safe) choices on the menu. Note also the many Asian clients (part of our criteria for the authenticity of a place) and that the restaurant can handle large groups. Food is served family style and prepared in an open kitchen, so you know it's fresh. Be sure to try the very smooth house green tea. You might let your waiter choose your meal for you, but try the crispy Peking pork, the sweet pungent shrimp, the potstickers, and perhaps the generous seafood soup. We were a little

disappointed by the popular sizzling black-pepper chicken, but you may not be, so don't let us stop you. And they now have a sushi bar! In Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. South (between Flamingo Rd. and Tropicana Ave.). ☎ 702/730-7965. Main courses \$5.50–\$17 (many under \$10). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11am–midnight.

Grand Wok and Sushi Bar ★★ (Value) PAN-ASIAN A pan-Asian restaurant runs the risk of attempting to be a jack-of-all-trades and master of none, but somehow, this new MGM eatery pulls it off. You can choose among Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and probably more—we just aren't sure what Laotian food looks like (but would love to learn). Sushi is fresh and lovely, and the Vietnamese soups are enormous, full of noodles and different kinds of meat or fish; four people can easily split an order, so this is a great budget option for lunchtime.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/891-7777. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$9–\$14; sushi \$4.50–\$9.50. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Restaurant Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm, Fri–Sat 11am–midnight; sushi bar Mon–Thurs 5–10pm, Fri–Sat 11am–midnight, Sun 11am–10pm.

Wolfgang Puck Bar & Grill ★★ CALIFORNIA This transformed Puck Café is still a desirable, if slightly less affordable, option in MGM Grand. There is nothing surprising on the menu if you've eaten in any modern café in the post-Puck era; it's not his fault his influence has extended so far. There is enough variety that everyone in your party should find something to please them, from crab cakes with basil aioli, to a prime rib sandwich, to homemade veal ravioli, to Puck's pizzas, plus a good wine cellar. The fresh salads (we love the seasonal roasted beet) are better constructed than those at comparable eateries in town while Puck's hand is still on someone's helm; witness the silly potato chips drizzled with truffle oil and melted bleu cheese. It's all set in an almost entirely open space, a minimalist art take on a country kitchen, and it's a bit noisy, thanks to proximity to the casino floor and cheers from the nearby sports book. Expect it to be crowded right before and after *K&A* but possibly quiet during.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/895-9653. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$10–\$23. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11:30am–11pm; Fri 11:30am–11:30pm; Sat 10am–11:30pm; Sun 10am–11pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Calypsos ★ (Value) DINER Here's a solid, reasonably priced place to eat, which is pretty rare on the Strip. Honestly, it's kind of like a Denny's, but its traditional coffee-shop choices (including a “create

You Gotta Have a Theme

It shouldn't be too surprising that a town devoted to themes (what hotel worth its salt doesn't have one, at this point?) has one of virtually every theme restaurant there is. For the most part, these establishments glorify some aspect of pop culture: movies, sports, rock music, and so forth. Almost all have prominent celebrity co-owners and tons of "memorabilia" on the walls, which in virtually every case means throwaway items from blockbuster movies or some article of clothing a celeb wore once (if that) on stage or on the playing field. Almost all have virtually identical menus and have gift shops full of logo items.

This sounds cynical, and it is—but not without reason. Theme restaurants are, for the most part, noisy, cluttered, overpriced tourist traps, and, though some have their devotees, if you eat at one of these places, you've eaten at them all. We don't want to be total killjoys. Fans should have a good time checking out the stuff on the walls of the appropriate restaurant. And while the food won't be the most memorable ever, it probably won't be bad (and all are moderately priced). But that's not really what you go for. In any case, here are our two best bets in the theme department:

The **House of Blues** (★★), in Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/632-7607) is, for our money, food and theme-wise, the best of the theme restaurants. The food is really pretty good (if a little more costly than it ought to be), and the mock Delta/New Orleans look works well, even if it

your own burger") are somewhat better than you might expect. There are also some eccentric items, such as a chopped Mediterranean shrimp salad, a smoked salmon plate, a rosemary chicken sandwich on onion focaccia bread, and a strawberry puff swan for dessert. Note also a very good (and low-fat!) Thai shrimp satay, loaded with vegetables, which is listed under "classic American" dishes.

In Tropicana Resort & Casino, 3801 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/739-2222. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$6–\$19. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Jodi Maroni's Sausage Kingdom (★★★ Kids SAUSAGES There are several worthy fast food stands in the New York–New York food

is unavoidably commercial. You can dine here without committing to seeing whatever band is playing since the dining room is separate from the club (note that HOB gets very good bookings from nationally known acts). The gospel brunch might also be worth checking out (the food is good, but there's too much of it), but be warned: It's served inside the actual club, which is miked very loudly, and it can be unbelievably loud, so bring earplugs (we left with splitting headaches). Open daily from 8am until 2am on event nights and midnight on non-event nights.

Presumably filling the hole left by the demise of the All Star Café, so you sports fans won't feel left out in the theme restaurant race, the gigantic **ESPN** ★, in New York–New York, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ **702/933-3776**), actually has rather wacky and entertaining sports memorabilia (such as Evel Knievel set up as the old Operation game, displaying his many broken bones), plus additions such as a rock-climbing wall/machine. It's pretty fun, actually, and the food, in a couch-potato junk-food-junkie way, is not bad, either, especially when you sit in La-Z-Boy recliners to watch sports and order delights such as three Krispy Kreme donuts topped with ice cream, whipped cream, and syrup. Sadly, we find this entire concept tremendously appealing. It's open Monday through Thursday from 11:30am to 12:30am, Friday from 11:30am to 1am, Saturday from 11am to 1:30am, and Sunday from 11am to 12:30am.

court, but this one deserves an individual mention. What began as a humble stand on the Venice boardwalk in Los Angeles has expanded into a sausage empire, and we are glad. You will be, too, especially if you take a chance on the menu and don't just stick with the basic hot dog (though they do offer three tempting varieties—and kids love 'em) and instead try something a little more adventurous, like the tequila chicken sausage made with jalapenos, corn, and lime. Maybe some chili fries, too. Our first choice for fast food in the immediate area.

In New York–New York Hotel & Casino, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ **702/740-6969**. Everything under \$10. No credit cards. Daily 10am–11pm.

Tips Quick Bites

Many Vegas hotels have food courts, but the one in the **New York–New York**, 3790 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/740-6969), deserves a mention for two reasons: It's the nicest setting for this sort of thing on the Strip, sitting in the Greenwich Village section of New York–New York, and the choices, while not surprising (except at Jodi Maroni's Sausage Kingdom, listed above), are superior. Expect Chinese food and pizza (as befitting an ode to NYC) and excellent, if expensive (for this situation), double-decker burgers, plus **Ben & Jerry's** ice cream.

If you head farther down the Strip, to The Grande Canal Shoppes at **The Venetian**, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/414-1000), you can find another decent food court, with a Panda Express, a good pizza place (despite the confusing name **LA Pizza Kitchen**), a burrito stand, and a juice joint, and best of all, a **Krispy Kreme**, where they actually make the donuts on the premises. Plus, it's right by the canals of this faux Venice, one of our favorite places in Vegas.

Monte Carlo Pub & Brewery ★★☆☆ *(Finds Kids PUB FARE)* Lest you think we are big, fat foodie snobs who can't appreciate a meal unless it comes drenched in truffles and caviar, we hasten to direct you to this lively, working microbrewery (with a sort of rustic factory appearance) and its hearty, not-so-high-falutin' food (pizza, ribs, shrimp salads, chocolate fudge brownies). No fancy French frills and, best of all, no inflated prices. Combine the general high quality with generous portions—a nachos appetizer could probably feed eight (though it was not the best nachos appetizer ever)—and this may be a better deal than most buffets. It's not, however, the place for a quiet rendezvous, with about 40 TVs spread throughout (a sports fan's dream) and music blaring. After 9pm, only pizza is served, and dueling pianos provide dance music and other entertainment.

In Monte Carlo Resort & Casino, 3770 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/730-7777. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$6–\$15 (most under \$10). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–3am; Fri–Sat 11am–4am.

2 Mid-Strip

VERY EXPENSIVE

Alizé ★★☆☆ CONTINENTAL Situated at the top of the Palms, this restaurant's divine dining room has three sides of full-length

windows that allow a panoramic view of the night lights of Vegas; it may also have the best chef in town. It consistently has some of the best chefs in town working in the kitchen. The menu changes seasonally, but anything you order will be heavenly.

On our last visit, we had perhaps 14 different courses, and not a single one disappointed. In the appetizer department, the marinated jumbo lump crabmeat and avocado salad with heirloom tomato consommé and basil oil was a riot of freshness, while the gnocchi with sautéed wild mushrooms, black truffle, and mushroom emulsion was the kind of dish clearly created by someone thoughtful and clever. Fish can be a little dry here, so we suggest either the stunning New York steak with summer truffle jus and potato herb pancakes, or the meltingly tender lamb chops with some shredded lamb shank wrapped in a crispy fried crepe. Desserts are similarly outstanding, and often of great frivolity, such as sorbet in a case of browned marshmallow, floating in raspberry soup. Yeah, we're going over the top on this one, but we bet you won't think we're wrong.

Note: Obviously, window-side tables here are best, but even seats in the center of the room have a good view, so don't despair if you aren't seated right next to the glass. The romance oozes, regardless of where you are seated.

In the Palms, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. ☎ 702/951-7000. Fax 702/951-7002. www.alizelv.com. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses \$28–\$37. AE, MC, V. Daily 5:30–11pm.

Buccaneer Bay Club ★ *finds* AMERICAN/CONTINENTAL
Here's a solid alternative to some of the higher-priced, higher-profile haute restaurants in town. Serious foodies will know that this is a midlevel restaurant in more than just price, but even they will admit that the food isn't bad. And did we mention the free pirate show outside, easily viewable from the windows? (It's a hoot to see all the nicely dressed diners abandoning their tables and dignity to rush to the windows when the show's on.)

Appetizers come in both hot (shrimp Jamaica and escargot brioche) and cold (shrimp cocktail and Parma prosciutto) varieties; the savory celery-root flan and the quail are the true standouts. (The quail wasn't on the menu on our last visit, so be sure to ask about specials.) Entrees range from poultry to beef to seafood. Consider the Colorado buffalo prime rib, which is roasted and grilled over mesquite wood and served with creamy horseradish potatoes. Desserts include apple beignets, white chocolate cheesecake with raspberry sauce, and the house specialty,

apricot or harlequin (Grand Marnier and white and dark chocolate) minisoufflés.

In Treasure Island, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 866/286-3809. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$20–\$35. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5–11pm.

Delmonico Steakhouse ★★ CONTEMPORARY CREOLE/STEAK This, the latest of Emeril Lagasse's Vegas variations on his Big Easy brand-name eateries, is a steakhouse version of his hard-core classic Creole restaurant; and this ever-so-slight twist is just enough to make it a superior choice over the more disappointing New Orleans locale. You can try both Emeril concoctions and fabulous cuts of red meat. You can't go wrong with most appetizers, especially the superbly rich smoked mushrooms with homemade tasso over pasta—it's enough for a meal in and of itself—any of the specials, or the gumbo, particularly if it's the hearty, near-homemade country selection. If you want to experiment, definitely do it with the appetizers. You're better off steering clear of complex entrees, no matter how intriguing they sound. The bone-in rib steak is rightly recommended (skip the gummy béarnaise sauce in favor of the fabulous homemade Worcester or the A.O.K. sauce). Too full for dessert? No, you aren't. Have a chocolate soufflé, a bananas Foster cream pie, a chocolate Sheba (a sort of dense chocolate mousse), or the lemon icebox pie, a chunk of curd that blasts tart lemon through your mouth.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/414-3737. Reservations strongly recommended for dinner. Main courses \$10–\$36 at lunch, \$21–\$36 at dinner. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2pm; Sun–Thurs 5:30–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 5:30–11pm.

Le Cirque ★ FRENCH The influx of haute-cuisine, high-profile restaurants in Vegas means there are ever so many places now where you may feel like you have to take out a bank loan in order to eat there—and you may wonder why you ought to. Although we always feel free to spend your money, we aren't prepared to suggest you should blow it all at Le Cirque. Service is too haughty, the food well prepared, but nothing earthshaking. The menu changes seasonally, but you can expect genuine French cuisine—heavy, with lots of butter, though a recent visit brought a duo of cold cucumber and heirloom tomato soups that were so refreshing, every restaurant in this desert town ought to serve them. The lobster salad is sweet and tender, with a perfect black truffle dressing; risotto is French-style, almost soupy, perfect with fresh morels (in season) and Parmesan. The filet mignon is, oddly, not as good a cut as served elsewhere, but

it does come with a generous portion of foie gras. For dessert, we loved the white chocolate cream (solid but not overwhelming), layered with banana and wrapped in phyllo, along with a milk chocolate dome with crème brûlée espresso.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/234-6358. www.lecirque.com. Reservations required. Jacket and tie for gentlemen required. Main courses \$29–\$39. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Lutèce ★ *Overrated* FRENCH When the beloved NYC original closed, we feared the worst for this, once one of our favorite Vegas restaurants. And while those fears weren't entirely released, certainly the place isn't quite what it once was. Service is haphazard—just a touch chilly and careless, with long, long stretches between attention and, for that matter, courses. Appetizers like a silky foie gras au torchon and a tuna “mille feuille”—layered with granny smith apples—were adequate, and a celery root soup *amuse bouche* was utterly blah. But the roasted wild salmon main course was flawless, with the crispy skin laid separately on top in a geometrically pleasing way, and star anise-crusting scallops perfectly good, and no more. Desserts are unmemorable. Given the prices, it's just too much to pay for what looks very much like indifference.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/414-2220. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses \$26–\$38. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm.

The Palm ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD A branch of the venerable New York eatery, which has been branching ever further afield, this place attracts a star-studded clientele fond of the reliable and hearty, if not terribly exciting, bill of fare. (The famous may also be hoping to find their faces among the many caricatures that cover the walls.) This is plain but filling food—at manly prices. Red-meat lovers will be happy with the high-quality steaks found here, though those on a budget will shudder in horror. The tendency is to give the meat a good charring, so if you don't like yours blackened, start with it less well done and send it back for more, if necessary. All that money you've saved by not gambling will be well spent on one of the Palm's Buick-size lobsters. They're utterly succulent and outrageously priced, but given their size—they start at 3 pounds—they can easily be shared. Desserts are heavy and unspectacular.

In Caesars Palace Forum Shops, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/732-7256. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$9–\$21 at lunch, \$18–\$38 at dinner. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–11pm.

Picasso ★★ FRENCH A Spanish chef who cooks French cuisine in an Italian-themed hotel in Vegas? Trust us, it works. This

may well be the best restaurant in Vegas, and given the serious competition for such a title, that says a lot. Madrid-born chef Julian Serrano (whose *Masa* was considered the finest French restaurant in San Francisco) offers an extraordinary dining experience, along with the added thrill of having \$30 million worth of Picassos gazing down over your shoulders while you eat.

Needless to say, Serrano's cooking is a work of art that can proudly stand next to the masterpieces. The menu changes nightly and always offers a choice between a four- or five-course fixed-price dinner or tasting menu. The night we ate there, we were bowled over by roasted Maine lobster with a trio of corn—kernels, sauce, and a corn flan that was like slightly solid sunshine. Hudson Valley foie gras was crusted in truffles and went down most smoothly. A filet of roasted sea bass came with a light saffron sauce and dots of cauliflower purée. And finally, hope that they're serving the lamb rôti—it was an outstanding piece of lamb, perfectly done, tender, and crusted with truffles. Portions are dainty but so rich that you'll have plenty to eat without groaning and feeling heavy when you leave. Desserts are powerful yet prettily constructed. Everything is delivered by attentive staff who make you feel quite pampered.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/234-6358. Reservations recommended. Fixed-price 4-course dinner \$90; 5-course *dégustation* \$100. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Wed–Mon 6–9:30pm; closed Tues.

Moments **A Dining Room, or Two, with a View**

Both the chic **Eiffel Tower** restaurant, in Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/948-6937), located on the 11th floor of said Mid-Strip hotel, and the **Stratosphere's Top of the World**, in the Stratosphere Casino Hotel & Tower, 2000 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/380-7711), which is almost at the top of the North Strip's Stratosphere Tower, offer fantastic views. The latter revolves 360 degrees, while the former looks down on the Bellagio fountains. Both, however, match sky-high views with sky-high prices and, unfortunately, neither has food worth the price. Go for a special night out, or see if you can get away with just ordering appetizers and dessert (which are both superior to the entrees, anyway). You can also just have a drink at their respective bars, though each is set back far enough from the windows so that drinkers have less choice views than diners.

The Range ★ STEAK This place is worth visiting, if only for the spectacular view of the Strip (few Strip restaurants take advantage of this view, oddly enough) from 40-foot-high wraparound windows. The small menu features the usual steakhouse offerings—various cuts of beef and some chicken dishes, plus a few salads—but at a high-medium price. The quality, however, is better than we’ve found at the usual Vegas steakhouse suspects. We particularly liked the filet mignon on a Gorgonzola-onion croustade. All entrees come with family-style side dishes (they change nightly but can include such items as marinated mushrooms or horseradish mashed potatoes). Appetizers are also worth noting. The five-onion soup is thick, heavy, creamy, and served in a giant, hollowed-out onion. It’s delicious, as was a smoked chicken quesadilla. Don’t miss the bread, which comes with a sweet-and-savory apricot-and-basil butter.

In Harrah’s, 3475 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/369-5084. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses \$24–\$40. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5:30–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 5:30–11:30pm.

Spago ★ AMERICAN/ASIAN/CALIFORNIA With Wolfgang Puck showing up in a different incarnation at every hotel in town these days (or so it seems), his original creation might get lost in the shuffle. Certainly, it’s no longer the only foodie game in town—and you get the feeling it was so far ahead of the pack for so long that it has gotten a bit complacent. Which is not to say Spago is not worth the expense—it just means that others have caught up with and, in some cases, surpassed it.

Specialties include Puck’s signature Chinois chicken salad and a superb mesquite-fried salmon served with a tangy toss of soba noodles and cashews in a coconut-sesame-chile paste vinaigrette nuanced with lime juice and Szechuan mustard. The main dining room menu changes seasonally, but the signature dish is a Chinese-style duck, moist but with a perfectly crispy skin. It’s about as good as duck gets, served with a doughy steamed bun and Chinese vegetables. Lunch in the cafe brings nice enough pastas, salads, and quiches, but you do tend to wonder what the fuss is about.

In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/369-6300. Reservations recommended for the dining room, not accepted at the cafe. Dining room main courses \$14–\$43; cafe main courses \$9.50–\$23. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Dining room Sun–Thurs 6–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 5:30–11pm. Cafe Sun–Thurs 11am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11am–midnight.

EXPENSIVE

Bouchon ★★ BISTRO Now here is where the whole celebrity chef concept bursts into full glory. Thomas Keller made his name

with his Napa Valley restaurant French Laundry, considered by many to be the best restaurant in the United States. (It's temporarily closed while Keller operates his new New York City restaurant, Per Se.) Bouchon is a version of his Napa Valley bistro. We had mixed expectations: On one hand, a certifiably genius chef. On the other hand, he's not going to be in the kitchen, which will be producing bistro (which is to say, not innovative) food and, what's more, is based on the rather lackluster Napa Bouchon.

Our negative expectations were confounded by the right, left, and center of the menu—yeah, we've tried nearly all of it and can report that, humble though these dishes sound, in nearly every case they are gold-standard versions of classics. Someone is certainly keeping a close eye on this kitchen, and that someone has learned their lessons well. Don't miss the bacon and poached egg frisee salad, or the cleanly seared salmon over poached leaks, prepared to such rightness it doesn't need the accompanying sauce. Gnocchi is earthy and assertive, a peasant version of an Italian favorite, while beef bourguignon is exactly as you expect it to be, in the divine perfection sense. Leg of lamb has all chewy bits excised before cooking, leaving it a garlic-permeated bit of tenderness. This is a superlative Vegas restaurant, and while it may be hard to reconcile the prices with the apparent simplicity of the food, recall that it takes serious skill to make even the most humble of dishes correctly, as your palate will reassure you.

In The Venetian, 3355 S. Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/414-6200. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses \$17–\$30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 5–10:30pm.

Canaletto ★★ ITALIAN Come here for solid, true Italian fare—and that means less sauce-intensive than the red-checked-tablecloth establishments of our American youths. Here, the emphasis is on the pasta, not the accompaniments. This place is all the more enjoyable for being perched on the faux St. Mark's Square; in theory, you can pretend you are sitting on the edge of the real thing, a fantasy we don't mind admitting we briefly indulged in. A risotto of porcini, sausage, and white truffle oil was full of strong flavors, while the wood-fired roast chicken was perfectly moist. A properly roasted chicken should be a much-celebrated thing, and that alone may be reason to come here.

In The Venetian Grand Canal Shoppes, 3377 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/733-0070. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses \$14–\$35. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–midnight.

Circo ★★ ITALIAN Yes, this is the less expensive offering from the same family who brings you Le Cirque, but going to one does not excuse you from going to the other. (By the way, “less expensive” is a relative term. While dinner prices for entrees other than pasta and pizza fall into our “very expensive” category, lunch prices are less high, and there are, as you will see, ways to make this fall into the “moderate” category. So we decided to split the difference and list this as “expensive.” Just thought you’d like to know.)

Order the *mista di Campo*, a lovely little salad, both visually and in terms of taste; it’s a creative construction of vegetables bound with cucumber and topped with a fab balsamic vinaigrette. Or start with the antipasto appetizer sampler of Tuscan sheep’s milk cheese, marinated veggies, prosciutto, and Italian pastrami. Follow that with a perfect tagliatelle with rock shrimp—it comes loaded with various crustacean bits in a light sauce. Note that appetizer portions of pastas are plenty filling and cheaper than full-size servings. Night-time brings more elaborate dishes, such as breast of Moscovy duck with dried organic fruit in port-wine sauce.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/234-6358. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses \$17–\$24 at lunch (pizza and pasta \$12–\$19), \$20–\$32 at dinner (pizza and pasta \$12–\$22). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30–10:30pm.

Pinot Brasserie ★★ BISTRO Pinot reliably delivers French and American favorites that are thoughtfully conceived and generally delicious. It’s an excellent choice if you want a special meal that is neither stratospherically expensive nor too complex. And the space is highly attractive, with various props culled from French auctions and flea markets forming the archetypal, clubby bistro feel. (We particularly like the small room off the bar to the right—just perfect for a *tête-à-tête*.)

Salads are possibly fresher and more generous than other similar starters in town, and they can come paired with various toppings for crostini (toasted slices of French bread), such as herbed goat cheese. The signature dish, beloved by many, is a roasted chicken accompanied by heaping mounds of garlic fries, but if you wish to get a little more elaborate (and yet rather light), thin slices of smoked salmon with celery *rémoulade* could be a way to go. Desserts are lovely, and the ice cream is homemade—the chocolate alone should make you wish you’d never eaten at 31 Flavors because those were wasted calories compared to this. **Note:** It’s easy to graze through this menu and have a less costly meal here than at most other high-end places, and

the long operating hours mean you can also pop in for a nosh at times when other fine-dining options are closed.

In The Venetian, 3355 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/414-8888. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses \$12–\$18 at lunch, \$19–\$30 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–3pm and 5:30–10:30pm.

MODERATE

See also the listing for **Spago** (p. 79), an expensive restaurant fronted by a more moderately priced cafe, and **Circo** (p. 81) and **Pinot Brasserie** (p. 81), which are both in the expensive category but provide opportunities for moderately priced dining.

Isla ★★ MEXICAN Unless you absolutely do not consider Mexican food anything other than a specific form of Southern California burrito, you really should try this new establishment run by Richard Sandoval, who specializes in “modern Mexican cuisine.” This means dishes both traditional and with potentially dangerous twists, but since the place starts with handmade tortillas and heads right to guacamole made on demand, it’s all trustworthy, even if some of that guac contains lobster and passion fruit (it’s a sweet and curious take on tradition). Roast pork *pipian* with tamarind marinade and pumpkin seed sauce is a lovely dish, as are the needlessly fried (though pleasantly crunchy) beef empanadas with dried cherries and chipotle tomato sauce, a satisfying mix of sweet and spice. For the more timid, there is a nice assortment of particularly good tacos and burritos. Isla also has the most charming dessert menu in town, with Mexican themes both culinary and visual, like a desert scape represented by a chocolate cactus stuck into a fudge hill, to complement the caramel cupcakes.

In Treasure Island, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 866/286-3809. Main courses \$10–\$25. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–2am.

Mon Ami Gabi ★★ BISTRO This charming bistro has it all: a delightful setting, better-than-average food, affordable prices. Sure, it goes overboard in trying to replicate a classic Parisian bistro, but the results are less cheesy than most Vegas attempts at atmosphere, and the patio seating on the Strip (no reservations taken there—first come, first served) actually makes you feel like you’re in a real, not a pre-fab, city. You can be budget-conscious and order just the very fine onion soup, or you can eat like a real French person and order classic steak and *pommes frites* (the hanger steak is just a nice, juicy, and sweet cut of meat). There are plenty of cheaper options (which is why we listed this place in the “moderate” category, by the way),

especially at lunch. Yes, they have snails, and we loved 'em. Desserts, by the way, are massive and should be shared (another way to save). The baseball-size profiteroles (three or four to an order) filled with fine vanilla ice cream and the football-size bananas foster crepe are particularly good. Ooh, la la!

In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/944-GABI (944-4224). Reservations recommended. Main courses \$9–\$27. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–11pm; Fri–Sat 11:30am–midnight.

Olives ★★ ITALIAN/MEDITERRANEAN If there were an Olives cafe in our neighborhood, we would eat there regularly. A branch of Todd English's original Boston-based restaurant, Olives is a strong choice for a light lunch that need not be as expensive as you might think. Here's how to enjoy a moderately priced meal here: Don't fill up too much on the focaccia bread and olives they give you at the start (on the other hand, budget-obsessives, go ahead), and skip the small-size and thus costly salads, and instead go right to the flatbreads. Think pizza with an ultrathin crust (like a slightly limp cracker), topped with delicious combinations such as the highly recommended Moroccan spiced lamb, eggplant purée, and feta cheese, or the fig, prosciutto, and Gorgonzola. They are rich and wonderful—split one between two people, along with that salad we just maligned, and you have an affordable and terrific lunch. Or try a pasta; we were steered toward the simple but marvelous spaghettini with roasted tomatoes, garlic, and Parmesan, and were glad. The food gets more complicated and costly at night, adding an array of meats and chickens, plus pastas such as butternut squash with brown butter and sage.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 877/234-6358. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$15–\$19 at lunch, \$20–\$38 at dinner; flatbreads \$10–\$15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10:30pm.

Stage Deli ★ DELI New York City's Stage Deli—a legendary hangout for comedians, athletes, and politicians—has been slapping pastrami on rye for more than half a century. Its Las Vegas branch retains the Stage's brightly lit Big Apple essence.

In addition to being handy for those staying at Caesars, it's easy to pop over if you're staying next door at The Mirage, making it a satisfying breakfast alternative to the often overcrowded, overpriced, and not very good hotel breakfast joints in the area. The huge (we mean it) menu means finding something for even the pickiest of eaters. Most of the fare—including fresh-baked pumpnickel and rye, meats, chewy bagels, lox, spicy deli mustard, and pickles—

Value **Great Meal Deals**

We've already alluded to the rock-bottom budget meals and graveyard specials available at casino hotel restaurants—quality not assured and Pepto-Bismol not provided. Prices and deals can change without notice, though Binion's had a full steak dinner for \$14.95, last we checked, and the San Remo was offering a prime rib special for \$4.95. Your best bet is to keep your eyes open as you travel through town, as hotels tend to advertise their specials on their marquees.

comes in daily from New York. The Stage dishes up authentic 5-inch-high sandwiches stuffed with pastrami, corned beef, brisket, or chopped liver. Maybe “overstuffed” is a better description. Unless you have a hearty appetite, are feeding two, or have a fridge in your room for leftovers, you might want to try a half-sandwich and soup or salad combo. Help yourself to other deli specialties, and wash it all down with a genuine chocolate egg cream.

In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ **702/893-4045**. Reservations accepted for large parties only. Main courses \$10–\$14; sandwiches \$6–\$14. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 8am–10:30pm; Fri–Sat 8am–11:30pm (takeout stays open 30 min. later).

INEXPENSIVE

Canter's ★★ DELI This is an offshoot of the venerable (1931!) Los Angeles establishment. That one is decidedly genuine old-school, while this one pretends it was built during the Jetson's-Googie age, but it wasn't. You know. Still, that perfect pastrami scent hits you as soon as you walk up, and if the portions aren't as large and the menu is only ½ the size of the one in LA, they still have some grand sandwiches (brisket with cole slaw and Russian dressing; we are fools for it). Not to mention black-and-white cookies. And it's open late, like a good deli should be.

In Treasure Island, 3300 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ **866/286-3809**. Everything under \$15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–12am.

Cypress Street Marketplace ★★ *Kids* FOOD COURT An interesting middle ground between the food court and the buffet, owing to an original arrangement wherein patrons get a card that gets swiped at whichever food booth is patronized, with the total added up at the end. Given the wide assortment—Vietnamese food, potstickers, very fine burgers and pizza, salads, wraps, and pulled-pork

sandwiches, there ought to be something for every single member of even the most finicky of families—the real china and napkins, and the overall quality, we wish other hotel-casinos would put in a version of their own.

In Caesars Palace, 3570 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/731-7110. Everything under \$10. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 7am–11pm; Fri–Sat 7am–midnight; closed Sun.

3 North Strip

MODERATE

Cafe Heidelberg German Deli and Restaurant ★ GERMAN

A once-ponderous and dated German restaurant has been transformed into a German cafe well packed (admittedly, with only six booths, that's not hard to do) with locals. Certainly, it's not a Vegas type of place, and since it's close enough to the Strip, it's a good place for refuge. The food is better than fine, though certainly not "lite" fare, by any means; you will be moaning and holding your stomach in sorrow if you don't share the huge portions. Recommended is the sausage sampler platter so you can finally learn the difference between knockwurst and bratwurst, and the schnitzel sandwich of delicious breaded veal. Wash it down with a vast choice of imported beer. As you nosh, enjoy traditional (or, at times, not so) accordion music and note that the entire staff is German. This is also a full-service deli and German market, so it's a good place to pick up a picnic for sightseeing outside the city.

604 E. Sahara Ave. (at 6th St.). ☎ 702/731-5310. Reservations strongly recommended for Fri–Sat nights. Main courses under \$10 at lunch, \$15–\$20 at dinner. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Capriotti's ★★ ★ (Finds) SANDWICHES It looks like a dump, but Capriotti's is one of the great deals in town, for quality and price. They roast their own beef and turkey on the premises and stuff them (or Italian cold cuts, or whatever) into sandwiches mislabeled "small," "medium," and "large"—the latter clocks in at 20 inches, easily feeding two for under \$10 total. And deliciously so. The "Bobby" (turkey, dressing, and cranberry sauce, like Thanksgiving dinner in sandwich form) would be our favorite sandwich in the world had we not tried the "Slaw B Joe": roast beef, cole slaw, and Russian dressing. But other combos, such as the aforementioned Italian cold cuts, have their fans, too, and Capriotti's even has veggie varieties. There are outlets throughout the city, but this one

is not only right off the Strip, but right by the freeway. We never leave town without a stop here, and you shouldn't, either.

324 W. Sahara Ave. (at Las Vegas Blvd. South). ☎ 702/474-0229. Most sandwiches under \$10. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 10am–5pm; Sat 11am–5pm; closed Sun.

Dona Maria Tamales ★★ MEXICAN Decorated with Tijuana-style quiltwork and calendars, this is your quintessential Mexican diner, convenient to both the north end of the Strip and Downtown. They use lots of lard, lots of cheese, and lots of sauce. As a result, the food is really good—and really fattening. Yep, the folks who did those health reports showing how bad Mexican food can be for your heart probably did some research here. That just makes it all the better, in our opinion. Locals apparently agree; even at lunchtime the place is crowded. Meals are so large that it shouldn't be a problem getting full just ordering off the sides, which can make this even more of a budget option. Naturally, the specialty is the fantastic tamales, which come in red, green, cheese, or sweet. They also serve up excellent enchiladas, chiles rellenos, burritos, and fajitas. All dinners include rice, beans, tortillas, and soup or salad.

910 Las Vegas Blvd. South (corner of Charleston Blvd.). ☎ 702/382-6538. Main courses \$5.50–\$8 at breakfast, \$6–\$13 at lunch and dinner. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

Tiffany's at the White Cross Pharmacy ★★ *Value* DINER You can go to any number of retro soda-fountain replicas (such as Johnny Rockets) and theme restaurants that pretend to be cheap diners, but why bother when the real thing is just past the end of the Strip? The decidedly unflashy soda fountain/lunch counter at the White Cross Pharmacy was Las Vegas's first 24-hour restaurant, and it has been going strong for 60 years. Plunk down at the counter and watch the cooks go nuts trying to keep up with the orders. The menu is basic comfort food: standard items such as meatloaf, steaks, and chops; fluffy cream pies; and classic breakfasts served anytime—try the biscuits and cream gravy at 3am. But the best bet is a ½-pound burger and “thick creamy shake,” both the way they were meant to be and about as good as they get. At around \$5, this is half what you would pay for a comparable meal at the Hard Rock Cafe. And as waitress Beverly says, “This is really real.” Places like this are a vanishing species—it's worth the short walk from the Stratosphere. Note, however, that the neighborhood remains stubbornly rough in appearance, and that can be a turnoff.

1700 Las Vegas Blvd. South (at East Oakley Blvd.). ☎ 702/383-0196. Reservations not accepted. Most items under \$7. No credit cards. Daily 24 hr.

4 East of the Strip

In this section, we cover restaurants close by the Convention Center, along with those farther south, on Paradise Road, Flamingo Road, and Tropicana Avenue.

VERY EXPENSIVE

Lawry's The Prime Rib ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD If you love prime rib, come here. If you could take or leave prime rib, Lawry's will turn you into a believer. Yes, you can get prime rib all over town for under \$5. But, to mix a food metaphor, that's a tuna fish sandwich when you can have caviar at Lawry's.

Eating at Lawry's is a ceremony, with all the parts played the same way for the past 60 years. Waitresses in brown-and-white English maid uniforms, complete with starched white cap, take your order—for side dishes, that is. The real decision, what cut of rib you are going to have, comes later. Actually, that's the only part of the tradition that has changed. Lawry's has added fresh fish (halibut, salmon, or swordfish, depending on the evening) to its menu. Anyway, you tell the waitress what side dishes you might want (sublime creamed spinach, baked potato, and so on) for an extra price. Later, she returns with a spinning salad bowl (think of salad preparation as a Busby Berkeley musical number). The bowl, resting on crushed ice, spins as she pours Lawry's special dressing in a stream from high over her head. Tomatoes garnish. Applause follows.

Eventually, giant metal carving carts come to your table, bearing the meat. You name your cut (the regular Lawry's, the extra-large Diamond Jim Brady for serious carnivores, and the wimpy thin English cut), and specify how you'd like it cooked. Flavorful, tender, perfectly cooked, lightly seasoned, this will be the best prime rib you will ever have. Okay, maybe that's going too far, but the rest is accurate, honest. It just has to be tasted to be believed. You can finish off with a rich dessert (English trifle is highly recommended), but it almost seems pointless.

4043 Howard Hughes Pkwy. (at Flamingo Rd., between Paradise Rd. and Koval Lane). ☎ 702/893-2223. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$22–\$35. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sat 5–11pm.

Pamplemousse ★ FRENCH A little bit off the beaten path, Pamplemousse is a long-established Vegas restaurant that shouldn't be overlooked in the crush of new high-profile eateries. Evoking a cozy French-countryside inn (at least, on the interior), it's a catacomb of low-ceilinged rooms and intimate dining nooks with rough-hewn

beams. It's all very charming and un-Vegasy. The restaurant's name, which means grapefruit, was suggested by the late singer Bobby Darin—one of the many celebrity pals of owner Georges La Forge.

Your waiter recites the menu, which changes nightly. Recent menu offerings have included out-of-this-world soups (French onion and cream of asparagus, to name a few) and appetizers such as shrimp in cognac cream sauce and Maryland crab cakes with macadamia nut crust. Recommended entrees include a sterling veal with mushrooms and Dijon sauce, and an even-better rack of lamb with pistachio nut crust and rosemary cream sauce (all sauces, by the way, are made with whatever the chef has on hand that evening in the kitchen). Leave room for the fabulous desserts, such as home-made ice cream in a hard chocolate shell.

400 E. Sahara Ave. (between Santa Paula Dr. and Santa Rita Dr.). ☎ 702/733-2066. Reservations required. Main courses \$18–\$26. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 5:30–10pm; closed Mon except during major conventions and holidays.

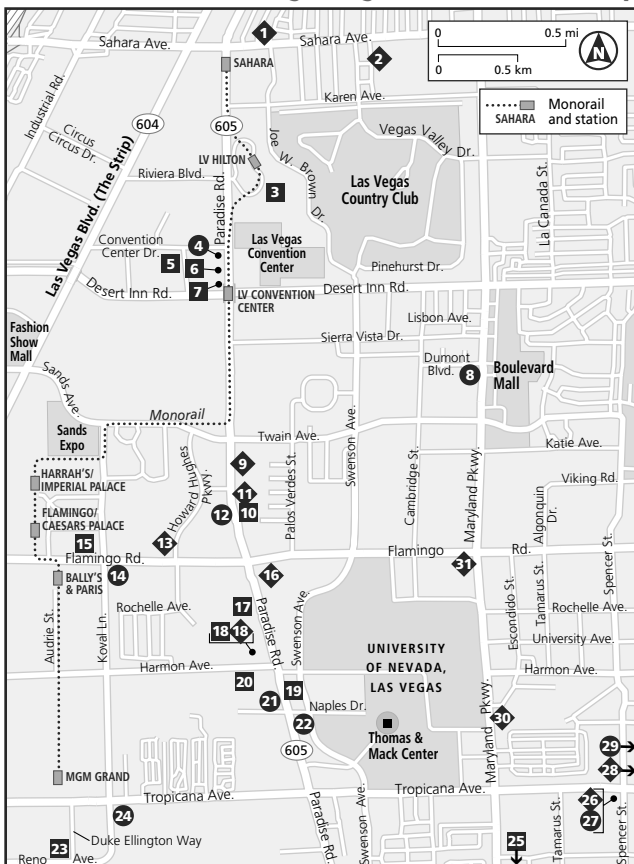
MODERATE

Carluccio's Tivoli Gardens ★ (Finds) ITALIAN A bit of a drive, but well worth it for those seeking an authentic—read: older than 10 years—Vegas experience. This otherwise unimposing joint used to be owned by none other than the Rhinestone King Himself, Liberace. See, it was formerly Liberace's Tivoli's Gardens, and he designed the interior himself, so you know what that looks like (it was reopened a few years after his death, and they've kept the decor pretty much as is). Expect traditional Italian food (pasta, pasta, and scampi). This kind of history is more and more rare in this town with no memory, plus—no coincidence—it's right next door to the Liberace Museum, so go pay your giggling respects in the late afternoon and then stop in here for dinner.

1775 E. Tropicana Ave. (at Spencer St.). ☎ 702/795-3236. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$10–\$25. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 4:30–10pm; closed Mon.

Memphis Championship Barbecue ★★ BARBECUE Okay, we refuse, simply refuse, to get into the debate about Texas vs. Kansas City vs. Mississippi barbecue (and if you've got another state with the best dang barbecue, we really don't want to hear about it). But we can say that if you aren't physically in those places, you gotta take what you can get—and luckily for you, Memphis Championship Barbecue is hardly settling. Their vinegar-based sauce is sweet but has a kick. Food is cooked over mesquite applewood, and the meat falls off the bone just the way you want it to. And they

Accommodations, Dining & Nightlife East of the Strip



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- Las Vegas Hilton 3
- Las Vegas Marriott Suites 5
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Las Vegas Is for (Wine) Lovers

The Vegas restaurant boom of the late '90s continues unabated, which is also welcome news for those who worship the grape. If you're one of them, here's a sampling of places to eat *and* drink that we think you'll enjoy. They range from wine bars to haute cuisine, with a few in between:

The Wine Cellar & Tasting Room, in Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino (☎ 702/777-7614), offers nearly 100 wines by the glass, ranging from under \$10 to over \$100. Its more than \$10 million worth of inventory includes more than 6,500 labels. Though some may only be gazed upon, not purchased (like the 1890 bottle of Madeira once owned by Thomas Jefferson or the vertical of Chateau d'Yquem going back to 1898), you can indulge yourself with a flight of luxury champagnes. The nonsmoking tasting room is open Monday through Thursday from 3 to 11pm, Friday from 3pm until midnight, and Saturday and Sunday from noon until midnight.

If you agree with Oscar Wilde that "only people with no imagination can't find a good reason to drink champagne," then **Petrossian Bar**, in Bellagio (☎ 702/693-7111), is the place for you. If you're seeking crumpets with your chardonnay, you'll be glad to know that afternoon tea is served from 2 to 5pm; caviar (Petrossian, of course) is available from noon to midnight. To wash it down, you can select from any of 21 champagnes and sparkling wines (7 of them available by the glass) in addition to non-bubbly whites, reds, and ports. It's open 24 hours.

While you enjoy pizza, pasta, steak, and other expertly prepared traditional Italian dishes at **Valentino**, in The Venetian

have hot links, baked beans, and everything else you would want and hope for. Standouts include a pulled barbecue chicken sandwich, onion straws, and delicious mac and cheese. **Note this special:** A \$50 feast includes a rack of baby back ribs, three-fourths of a pork shoulder, ¾-pound of beef brisket, ½-pound of hot links, a whole chicken, baked beans, cole slaw, rolls, creamed corn, and fries. It reportedly feeds four, though even if two of those four are teenage boys, we think you might have leftovers.

(☎ 702/414-3000), you can select a wine from the 2,600 bottles on their full list. They also offer 40 different wines (which change regularly) by the glass or in 2-ounce pours. It's open daily from 11:30am to 11:30pm.

Rosemary's Restaurant, 8125 W. Sahara Ave. (between Buffalo Dr. and Cimarron Rd.; ☎ 702/869-2251), is well off the Strip but equally well worth the trip. In addition to its impressive and well-balanced full-bottle list, Rosemary's offers 30 wines by the glass and three dozen by the half-bottle. For a full review, see p. 95.

Sure, you may want to visit just to see the "wine angels" rappel up and down the four-story glass wine tower at **Aureole**, in Mandalay Bay (☎ 877/632-5300; www.ewine-tower.com), to fetch your bottle, but the real reason we like this place is its innovative (patent-pending, even) Internet-based wine list. Customers use an "eWine Book" at their table to wirelessly access the restaurant's wine database. Better still, with a few taps of the stylus, you can check out which wine(s) the restaurant recommends to accompany various menu items before discussing your choices with the sommelier. Smoking is permitted in the bar and lounge only.

One of the most intriguing wine cellars is actually a wine loft, perched two-plus stories above the restaurant **Fleur de Lys** (in Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South; ☎ 877/632-9200), visible through floor-to-ceiling, candlelight-framed glass. With advance notice, diners can eat here, one of the most stunning, if chilly, tables in town. The "loft" is growing and promises to be most impressive.

2250 E. Warm Springs Rd. (near I-215). ☎ 702/260-6909. www.memphis-bbq.com. Main courses \$8–\$17. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–10:30pm.

Pink Taco ✨ MEXICAN A megahip Mexican cantina, this folk-art-bedecked spot is a scene just waiting to happen, or rather, it's already happened. There are no surprises in terms of the food—you know the drill: tacos, burritos, quesadillas—but it's all tasty and filling, and some of it comes with some surprising accompaniments,

such as tapenade, along with the usual guacamole and sour cream. This is hip Mexican as opposed to a mom-and-pop joint, and it's a good place to eat on this side of town.

In Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, 4455 Paradise Rd. ☎ 702/693-5525. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$9–\$18. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–midnight.

Shalimar INDIAN In a town full of buffet deals, it's hard to get excited about another one, but on the other hand, all those other buffet deals offer carbon-copy experiences: carving stations, various cafeteria hot dishes, and so forth. Here at Shalimar, a lunch buffet means about two dozen different North Indian-style dishes, all for about \$7.50. It's not as colorful or huge (in fact, it's just a table covered with steam trays) as those buffets up the street, but it is far more interesting. The buffet usually includes *tandoori* (chicken marinated in spiced yogurt cooked in a clay oven), *masala* (tandoori in a curry sauce), *naan* (the flat Indian bread), and various vegetable dishes. (Vegetarians will find plenty to eat here—they offer special veggie dishes daily.) In the evening, a full Indian menu, with *vindaloo* (an especially hot curry where the meat is marinated in vinegar), flavored naans (try the garlic or onion), and other Indian specialties, is offered a la carte. They will spice to order: mild, medium, hot, or very hot. If you make a mistake, you can always order *raita* (yogurt mixed with mild spices and cucumber); it cools your mouth nicely.

In the Citibank Plaza, 3900 Paradise Rd. ☎ 702/796-0302. Reservations recommended. Lunch buffet \$7.50; main courses \$11–\$16 at dinner. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:30am–2:30pm; daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Z Tejas Grill ★ TEX-MEX Because the original chef, a Frenchman, kept referring to it as “Zee” Tejas Grill—we know you were wondering. Enjoy large and excellent margaritas, possibly on the unusual-for-Vegas vine-covered patio, and then hit the “South by Southwestern” menu. The starters are huge, and making a meal of one would be a very cheap meal option. In particular, we like the generously portioned grilled-fish tacos, which come wrapped in fresh tortillas, stuffed with all kinds of veggies and served with a spicy Japanese sauce. Not your usual drippy, fattening tacos. Less of a bargain, but mighty tasty, is the tender and piquant black sesame tuna, with black-peppercorn vinaigrette and soy mustard sauce. A great main course is the spicy-grilled Jamaican-jerk chicken, nuanced with lime and served with peanut sauce and rum-spiked

coconut-banana ketchup; it comes with two side dishes—when we were there, garlic mashed potatoes and a corn casserole soufflé.

3824 Paradise Rd. (between Twain Ave. and Corporate Dr.). ☎ 702/732-1660. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$7.25–\$12 at lunch, \$8.75–\$17 at dinner. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–11pm; Sun 4–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Bougainvillea ★★ (Value) COFFEE SHOP Oh, how we love a Vegas coffee shop. You’ve got your all-day breakfasts, your graveyard-shift specials (build your own three-egg, three-ingredient omelet for \$4.99), your prime rib, and, of course, your full Chinese menu. And it’s all hearty and well priced; we’re talkin’ New York steak and eggs for \$5.99 all day long. You can get a full dinner entree or a nice light lunch of a large half a sandwich and soup, also for \$4.99 (is that someone’s lucky number?). And 24-hour specials, including a slab of meat, potato or rice, veggie, soup or salad, and a 12-ounce draft beer, run between \$7.99 and \$12.99. Yep. That’s the ticket.

In Terrible’s Hotel, 4100 Paradise Rd. ☎ 702/733-7000. Main courses \$2–\$13. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Einstein Bros. Bagels ★ BAGELS You may not like digging into an enormous buffet first thing in the morning, and the continental breakfast in most hotels is a rip-off. A welcome alternative is a fresh-baked bagel, of which there are 15 varieties here—everything from onion to wild blueberry. Cream cheeses also come in many flavors, anything from sun-dried tomato to vegetable and jalapeño. Four special-blend coffees are available each day.

In the University Gardens Shopping Center, 4624 S. Maryland Pkwy. (between Harmon and Tropicana aves.). ☎ 702/795-7800. All items under \$6. MC, V. Mon–Fri 6am–6pm; Sat 6am–5pm; Sun 6:30am–4pm.

Lotus of Siam ★★ (Finds) THAI So we drag you out to a strip mall in the east end of Nowhere and you wonder why? Because here is what critic Jonathan Gold of *Gourmet* magazine called “no less than the best Thai restaurant in North America.”

What makes this place so darn special? First of all, in addition to all the usual beloved Thai and Issan favorites and others, they have a separate menu featuring lesser-known dishes from Northern Thailand—they don’t routinely hand this one out (because most of the customers are there for the more pedestrian, if still excellent, \$5.99 lunch buffet). Second, the owner drives at least twice a week back to Los Angeles (where his original venue, Renu Na Korn, is still operating under

another family member) to pick up the freshest herbs and other ingredients needed for his dishes' authenticity. That's dedication that should be rewarded with superlatives.

You might be best off letting them know you are interested in Northern food (with dried chiles, and more pork, "it's not un-Cajun-like," says the owner) and letting them guide you through, though you must assure them that you aren't of faint heart or palate (some customers complain the heat isn't enough, even with "well-spiced" dishes, though others find even medium spice sufficient). Standouts include the Issan sausage, a grilled sour pork number, the *Nam Kao Tod* (that same sausage, ground up with lime, green onion, fresh chile, and ginger, served with crispy rice), *Nam Sod* (ground pork mixed with ginger, green onion, and lime juice, served with sticky rice), and *Sua Rong Hai* ("weeping tiger"), a dish of soft, sliced, grilled marinated beef. If you insist on more conventional Thai, that's okay, in that it's unlikely that you are going to have better *Tom Kah Kai* (note that this beloved soup can also be served Northern style, if asked, which is without the coconut milk). If in season, finish with mango with sticky rice, or if not, coconut ice cream with sticky rice, something you would find at many a street stall in Thailand.

953 E. Sahara Ave., #A-5 (west of Maryland Pkwy.). ☎ 702/735-3033. Reservations strongly recommended for dinner. Lunch buffet \$5.99; other dishes \$4–\$14. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5–9:30pm.

Mediterranean Café & Market ☞ MEDITERRANEAN It's just so darn nice to find ethnic food in this town, and when it's served in a courtyard with some real, as opposed to ordered-up, character, full of pillows and fabrics and next to an honest-to-goodness hookah lounge, it's even nicer. It's not the best Middle Eastern food we've ever had, but getting away from the Strip makes it taste special. Kabobs take, the menu warns, 25 minutes, so order a maza plate to while away the time. The hummus is too reminiscent of its chickpea origins, but the babaganoush is properly smoky, and the falafel has the right crunch. Gyros may not be the most adventurous thing to order, but who cares about that when you've got a well-stuffed pocket of pita goopy with sweet yogurt sauce? *Fresenjan* is a dish of falling-apart chicken swimming in a tangy pomegranate sauce; ask to ensure that the ratio of sauce to chicken is greater than 10:1.

In the Tiffany Square strip mall, 4147 S. Maryland Pkwy. (at Flamingo Rd.). ☎ 702/731-6030. Reservations not accepted. Main courses \$8–\$16 (all sandwiches under \$8). AE, DISC, MC, V. Restaurant Mon–Thurs 11am–1am, Fri–Sat 11am–3am, Sun 11am–5pm; lounge Mon–Thurs 5pm–1am, Fri–Sat 5pm–3am, closed Sun.

Toto's ★★ (Value) MEXICAN A family-style Mexican restaurant favored by locals, with enormous portions and quick service, this is good value for your money. With all that food, you could probably split portions and still be satisfied. There are no surprises on the menu, though there are quite a few seafood dishes. The non-greasy chips come with fresh salsa, and the nachos are terrific. Chicken tamales got a thumbs-up, and non-meat eaters happily dug into the veggie burrito (although it's not especially healthful, all the ingredients were fresh, with huge slices of zucchini and roasted bell peppers). The operative word here is *huge*; the burritos are almost the size of your arm. The generous portions continue with dessert—a piece of flan was practically pie size. The Sunday margarita brunch is quite fun, and the drinks are large (naturally) and yummy.

2055 E. Tropicana Ave. (at Burnham Ave.) ☎ 702/895-7923. Main courses \$6.25–\$14. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 9:30am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–11pm.

5 West Las Vegas

EXPENSIVE

Austins Steakhouse ★★ (Finds) STEAK/SEAFOOD Now, understand that we don't send you out to nether regions such as Texas Station lightly. We do so here because, improbably, Austins Steakhouse has gained a reputation for the best steak in town. Really. Even the snooty critics at the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* agree with the hoi polloi. And here's what has everyone, and us, raving: a 24-ounce rib-eye—yes, we know, just split it—aged and marinated, cooked over mesquite applewood, and then rubbed with peppercorns and pan-seared in garlic, butter, and cilantro. A massive chunk of meat with a smoky garlicky flavor like no other steak we can think of. Most of the dishes have a southern twist, such as fried green tomatoes with a remoulade dipping sauce, and for those not watching their cholesterol, shrimp sautéed in garlic butter sauce, dipped in cheese, and wrapped in bacon. The Maui onion soup is also a standout, as is, over in the dessert category, the chocolate decadence cake, which is actually more of a molten-center semisoufflé. Note that a comparable meal on the Strip would cost \$10 to \$20 more per person—yet another reason to head out to the hinterlands.

In Texas Station, 2101 Texas Star Lane. ☎ 702/631-1000. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$17–\$35. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sat 5–11pm.

Rosemary's Restaurant ★★ (Finds) You don't have to eat at a name-brand temple of haute cuisine or celebrity chef showcase to

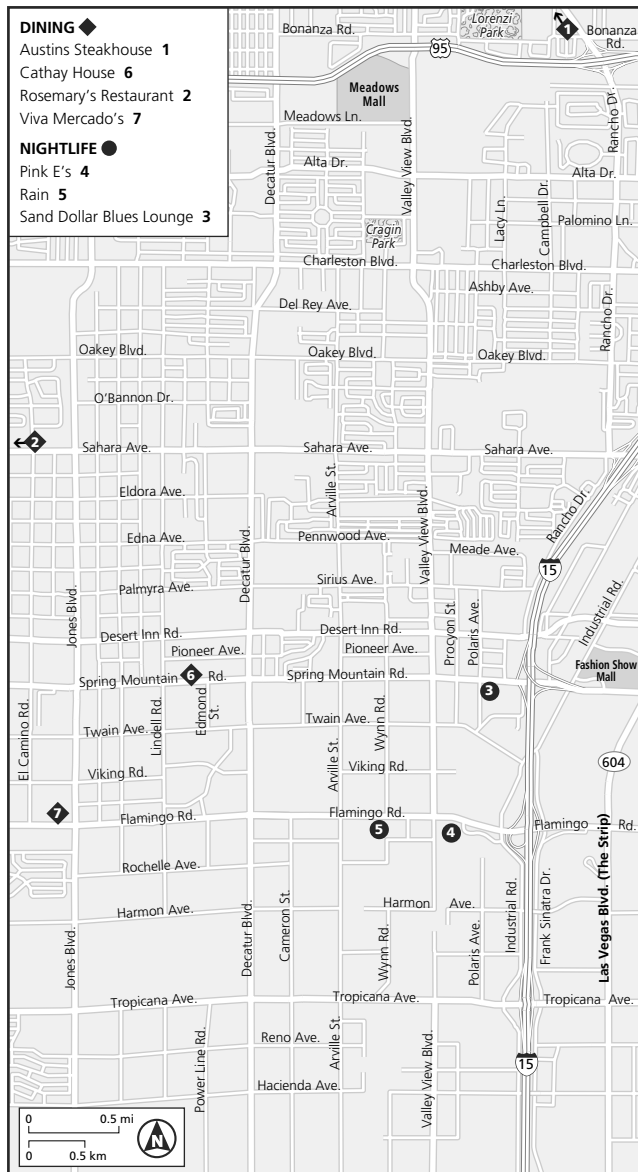
Dining & Nightlife West of the Strip

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have an outstanding meal in Vegas. Chefs Michael and Wendy Jordan cooked at some of the best places in New Orleans, came here to open Emeril's Seafood, but then branched out on their own with two restaurants that showcase their clever twists on American cuisine. This is playful but hearty food; seared foie gras with peach coulis, candied walnuts, and vanilla bean arugula is like a quilt, with distinct flavors that still all hang together nicely. Interesting sides include ultrarich bleu cheese slaw, slightly spicy crispy fried tortilla strips, and perfect cornmeal jalapeño hush puppies, to say nothing of "Grandma's pickled cucumbers." A recent visit found the crispy striped bass fighting it out with the pan-seared honey-glazed salmon for "best fish dish I've ever had." Desserts are similarly southern—lemon icebox pie!—and most pleasant.

There is a nice little wine list with a broad range, especially when it comes to half-price bottles. They also specialize, unusually, in beer suggestions to pair with courses, including some fruity Belgium numbers. This is such a rare treat that if you drink, you must try some of their suggestions.

8125 W. Sahara Ave. (between Buffalo Dr. and Cimarron Rd.). ☎ 702/869-2251. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses \$12–\$16 at lunch; \$19–\$36 at dinner. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30–10:30pm; Sat–Sun 5:30–10:30pm.

MODERATE

Cathay House CHINESE Las Vegas actually has a Chinatown—a very large strip mall (naturally) on Spring Mountain Road near Wynn. But ask locals who look like they know, and they will send you instead farther up Spring Mountain Road to the Cathay House, which is about a 7-minute drive from Treasure Island.

The standout at the Cathay House is a vegetable *bao* that includes Chinese glass noodles. Lightly browned and not overly doughy like many baos, it is slightly sweet and utterly delicious. The shrimp wrapped in rice noodles are big and plump, and anything fried is so good you should ignore your arteries for a while (we did!). Cathay House (which features quite a good view through the windows on one side) also has a full dinner menu, which includes the strawberry chicken invented by now-defunct local restaurant Chin's.

In Spring Valley, 5300 W. Spring Mountain Rd. ☎ 702/876-3838. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$6.75–\$19. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

Viva Mercado's ★★ MEXICAN Ask any local about Mexican food in Vegas, and almost certainly they will point to Viva Mercado's as the best in town. That recommendation, plus the restaurant's

health-conscious attitude, makes this worth the roughly 10-minute drive from the Strip.

Given all those warnings about Mexican food and its heart-attack-inducing properties, the approach at Viva Mercado's is nothing to be sniffed at. No dish is prepared with or cooked in any kind of animal fat. Nope, the lard so dear to Mexican cooking is not found here. The oil used is an artery-friendly canola. This makes the place particularly appealing to vegetarians, who will also be pleased by the regular veggie specials. Everything is quite fresh, and they do particularly amazing things with seafood. Try the Maresco Vallarta, which is orange roughy, shrimp, and scallops cooked in a coconut tomato sauce, with capers and olives. They have all sorts of noteworthy shrimp dishes and 11 different salsas, ranked 1 to 10 for degree of spice (ask for advice).

6182 W. Flamingo Rd. (at Jones Blvd.). ☎ 702/871-8826. Reservations accepted for large parties only. Main courses \$8–\$17. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–9:30pm; Fri–Sat 11am–10:30pm.

6 Downtown

VERY EXPENSIVE

Andre's ★★ FRENCH Andre's has long been the bastion of gourmet dining in Vegas, but with all the new big boys crowding the Strip, it runs the risk of getting overlooked. It shouldn't. Chef Andre knows his stuff as well as any celeb chef with a Food Network show. Much of the waitstaff is also French, but not the sort who give the French a bad name. They will happily lavish attention on you and guide you through the menu.

The food presentation is exquisite, and choices change seasonally. On a recent visit, an appetizer of Northwest smoked salmon *mille feuille* with cucumber salad and sevruga caviar was especially enjoyed, as was a main course of grilled provini veal tornados with chive sauce accompanied by a mushroom and foie gras crepe. You get the idea. Desserts are similarly lovely, an exotic array of rich delights. An extensive wine list (more than 900 labels) is international in scope and includes many rare vintages; consult the sommelier.

Note: An additional branch of Andre's, just as good as this one, is located in **Monte Carlo Hotel & Casino**, 3775 Las Vegas Blvd. South (☎ 702/798-7151).

401 S. 6th St. (at Lewis St., 3 blocks south of Fremont St.). ☎ 702/385-5016. www.andrelv.com. Reservations required. Main courses \$25–\$41. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat from 6pm; closing hours vary. Closed most Sun except during major conventions and holidays.

INEXPENSIVE

El Sombrero Cafe ★★ MEXICAN This kind of hole-in-the-wall Mexican joint can be found all over California but not always so readily elsewhere. It's also the kind of family-run (since 1950) place increasingly forced out of Vegas by giant hotel conglomerates, making it even more worth your time (it's becoming harder and harder, particularly in Downtown, to find budget options that present you with food that is more than just mere fuel). Mexican food fans, in particular, should seek out this friendly place, though it's not in an attractive part of town. Portions are generous, better than average, and unexpectedly spicy. They also cater to special requests—changing the beef burrito to a chicken one (an option that comes highly recommended), for example, without batting an eyelash. The enchilada and taco combo also won raves.

807 S. Main St. (at Gass Ave.). ☎ 702/382-9234. All items under \$10. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–9:30pm; closed Sun.

Ice House Lounge ★ DINER Don't let the dismal surroundings put you off; inside is a lively, popular modern-appearing club, with a menu full of, if not inspired, certainly reliable and well-priced menu options. The late-night hours (at this writing, they say 24 hours, but we are willing to bet that by the time you read this, they will have trimmed that some) also make this a good choice for those located near Downtown. Lunch, in particular, is a bargain, as basketball-circumference-size plates are loaded with towering sandwiches or wide-reaching flatbread-style pizzas, mounds of cole slaw, or piles of crinkly fries. We like the plate of three miniburgers. None of it is thrillingly spiced or especially cleverly crafted, but it's all solidly good and, given the portions, eminently shareable.

650 S. Main St. (corner of Bonneville Ave.). ☎ 702/315-2570. Everything under \$15. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

7 Buffets & Sunday Brunches

Lavish, low-priced buffets are a Las Vegas tradition, designed to lure you to the gaming tables and to make you feel that you got such a bargain for your meal that you can afford to drop more money. They're a gimmick, and we love them. Something about filling up on too much prime rib and shrimp just says "Vegas" to us. Of course, there is quite a range. Some are just perfunctory steam-table displays and salad bars that are heavy on the iceberg lettuce, while others are unbelievably opulent spreads, with caviar and free-flowing champagne. Some are quite beautifully presented as well. Some of

the food is awful, some of it merely works as fuel, and some of it is memorable.

No trip to Las Vegas is complete without trying one or two buffets. Of the dozens, the most noteworthy are described here. Mind you, almost all buffets have some things in common. Unless otherwise noted, every one listed here has at least one carving station, a salad bar (quality differs), and hot main courses and side dishes. We will try to point out only when a buffet has something original or notable.

Note: Buffet meals are extremely popular, and reservations are usually not taken (we've indicated when they are accepted, and in all those cases, they are highly recommended). Arrive early (before opening) or late to avoid a long line, especially on weekends.

SOUTH STRIP **MODERATE**

Aladdin's Spice Market Buffet ★ BUFFET This is a particularly good buffet that's gaining in popularity, though it's not perhaps quite good enough to justify the price. Come for lunch, as a more affordable compromise, and you can take advantage of the better-than-average salads (on our last visit they had one with white balsamic vinegar that was quite good), plus an especially notable Mexican station, Middle Eastern specialties, and other fun goodies. Of course, once the whole Planet Hollywood revamp kicks in, expect this all to change accordingly. Burger bars, anyone?

In the Aladdin, 3667 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/785-9005. Breakfast \$12.99; lunch \$15.99; dinner \$22.99; champagne brunch \$20.99. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 8am–2:30pm and 4–9:30pm; Sat–Sun 8:30am–2:30pm and 4–9:30pm.

Mandalay Bay's Bay Side Buffet ★ BUFFET This is a particularly pretty, not overly large buffet. Actual windows—floor to ceiling, no less—overlooking the beach part of the elaborate pool area, make it less stuffy and eliminate that closed-in feeling that so many of the other buffets in town have. The buffet itself is adequately arranged but features nothing particularly special, though there are some nice cold salads, hearty meats, and a larger and better-than-average dessert bar (they make their own desserts, and it shows).

In Mandalay Bay, 3950 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/632-7402. Breakfast \$12.25; lunch \$14.75; dinner \$21.75; Sun brunch \$21.75. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

MGM Grand Buffet ★ BUFFET This rather average buffet does feature a fresh Belgian waffle station at breakfast. Dinner also has all-you-can-eat shrimp and an all-you-can-eat shrimp and prime-rib

option. Also available: low-fat, sugar-free desserts! And at all meals, you get a full pot of coffee on your table.

In MGM Grand, 3799 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/891-7777. Breakfast \$11.99; lunch \$14.99; Mon–Thurs dinner \$21.99; Fri–Sat dinner \$24.99; brunch \$16.99; reduced prices for children under 10, free for children under 4. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 7am–10pm; Fri 7am–10:30pm; Sat–Sun 10am–2:30pm and 4:30–10:30pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Excalibur's Roundtable Buffet ★ BUFFET This one strikes the perfect balance of cheap prices, forgettable decor, and adequate food. It's what you want in a cheap Vegas buffet. But they don't always have mashed potatoes or macaroni salad, which are essential for an archetypal buffet. The plates are large, so you don't have to make as many trips to the buffet tables.

In Excalibur, 3850 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/597-7777. Breakfast \$9.99; lunch \$10.99; dinner \$14.49; Sun champagne brunch \$12.99. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 6:30am–10pm; Fri–Sat 6:30am–11pm.

Luxor's Pharaoh's Pheast Buffet ★★ BUFFET Located on the lower level, where the Luxor showroom used to be, this huge buffet looks like it was set in the middle of an archaeological dig, complete with wood braces holding up the ceiling, pot shards, papyrus, and servers dressed in khaki dig outfits. It's a unique and fun decor, but be sure to avoid tripping on the mummies and their sarcophagi sticking half up out of the ground. The food is better than that at most cheap buffets. It features a Mexican station with some genuinely spicy food, a Chinese stir-fry station, and different Italian pastas. Desserts are disappointing, though there are plenty of low-fat and sugar-free options. A beer and wine cart makes the rounds. Word has probably gotten out about this buffet, unfortunately, because the lines are always enormous.

In Luxor, 3900 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/262-4000. Breakfast \$9.99; lunch \$10.49; dinner \$16.49. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–11pm.

Monte Carlo's Buffet ★ BUFFET A “courtyard” under a painted sky, the Monte Carlo's buffet room has a Moroccan market theme, with murals of Arab scenes, Moorish archways, Oriental carpets, and walls hung with photographs of and artifacts from Morocco. Dinner includes a rotisserie (for chicken and pork loin, or London broil), a Chinese food station, a taco/fajita bar, a baked potato bar, numerous salads, and more than a dozen desserts, plus frozen yogurt and ice-cream machines. Lunches are similar. At breakfast, the expected fare is supplemented by an omelet station,

and choices include crepes, blintzes, and corned beef hash. Fresh-baked New York–style bagels are a plus.

3770 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/730-7777. Breakfast \$9.99; lunch \$10.49; dinner \$14.49; Sun brunch \$15.95. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

MID-STRIP

VERY EXPENSIVE

Bally's Sterling Sunday Brunch ★★ BUFFET Now, the admittedly high cost of this brunch seems antithetical to the original purpose of a buffet, which is a lot of food for minimal money. If you're a dedicated buffet fan, however, this is probably a better spree than one of the many new high-priced restaurants. It works out to less money in the long run, and you will get, for your purposes, more bang for your buck. It's a fancy deal—linen- and silver-bedecked tables, waiters to assist you, if you choose—and while the variety of food isn't as massive as at regular buffets, the quality is much higher in terms of both content and execution. We're talking unlimited champagne, broiled lobster, caviar, sushi, and rotating dishes of the day (items such as monkfish with pomegranate essence, tenderloin wrapped in porcini mushroom mousse, and even ostrich). No French toast that's been sitting out for days here! Perfect for a wedding breakfast, business brunch, or just a big treat; stay a long time and eat as much as you can.

In Bally's Las Vegas, 3645 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/739-4111. Reservations recommended. Brunch \$58. AE, DC, MC, V. Sun 9:30am–2:30pm.

EXPENSIVE

Bellagio's Buffet ★★ BUFFET Pricier than its counterpart over at The Mirage, Bellagio's buffet gets comparably higher marks. The array of foods is fabulous, with one ethnic cuisine after another (Japanese, Chinese that includes unexpected buffet fare like dim sum, build-it-yourself Mexican items, and so on). There are elaborate pastas and semitraditional Italian-style pizza from a wood-fired oven. The cold fish appetizers at each end of the line are not to be missed—scallops, smoked salmon, crab claws, shrimp, oysters, and assorted condiments. Specialties include breast of duck and game hens. There is no carving station, but you can get the meat precarved. The salad bar is more ordinary, though prepared salads have some fine surprises, such as eggplant tofu and an exceptional Chinese chicken salad. Desserts, unfortunately, look better than they actually are.

In Bellagio, 3600 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 888/987-6667. Breakfast \$13; lunch \$16; dinner Sun–Thurs \$25; dinner Fri–Sat \$32; Sat–Sun brunch \$22. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 8am–10pm; Fri–Sat 8am–11pm.

Paris Las Vegas's Le Village Buffet ★★☆☆ BUFFET One of the more ambitious buffets, with a price hike to match—still, you do get, even at the higher-priced dinner, a fine assortment of food, and more value for the dollar than you are likely to find anywhere else (unless it's another buffet).

Plus, the Paris buffet is the most pleasing room of the buffet bunch. It's a Disneyland-esque two-thirds replica of your classic French village clichés; it's either a charming respite from Vegas lights or sickening, depending on your tolerance level for eye candy. Buffet stations are grouped according to French regions, and though in theory entrees change daily, there do seem to be some constants, including most of the following dishes. In Brittany, you find things like made-to-order crepes, surprisingly good roasted duck with green peppercorn and peaches, and steamed mussels with butter and shallots. In Normandy, there's quiche and some dry bay scallops with honey cider. The carving station shows up in Burgundy but distinguishes itself by adding options of chateaubriand sauce and cherry sauce Escoffier. Lamb stew is a possibility for Alsace, while Provence has pasta to order and a solidly good braised beef. The salad station isn't strong on flavors, but the veggies are fresh, and there is even some domestic (darn it) cheese.

You can largely skip the dessert station in favor of heading back to Brittany for some made-to-order crepes, but you might want to try the bananas foster.

In Paris Las Vegas, 3655 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 888/266-5687. Breakfast \$12.95; lunch \$17.95; dinner \$24.95; Sun brunch \$24.95. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 7am–10pm; Fri–Sat 7am–11pm.

MODERATE

Mirage's Cravings ★ BUFFET Newly remodeled so that it looks like a space-age cafeteria, this is both an ultramodern and a retro buffet, and as such it doesn't quite have any specific personality. You move through a line (you can jump ahead) past various stations—decent Chinese (fine potstickers and barbecue pork), Japanese (tepid), quite good wood-oven pizza, solid barbecue, basic daily hot entrees with extra grease, decent Mexican (including sweet but dry slow-roasted pork), a dessert bar with strawberry soup (or was it sauce? Either way, we liked it), a sandwich stop with salads that is easy to miss (and a made-to-order salad spot that is always backed up), and cookies worth smuggling out in your purse—none of which are as vastly sized as one has come to expect from Vegas buffets over the years. On one hand, this helps reduce the amount

of waste these places are prone to; on the other, it feels stingy, not good at these new inflated prices. Seniors may have trouble reading the small signs, and small children are likely to get fretful before they get through. Sure is nifty looking, though.

In The Mirage, 3400 Las Vegas Blvd. South. ☎ 702/791-7111. Breakfast \$12.50; lunch \$17.50; dinner \$22.50; Sun brunch \$22.50. Reduced prices for children ages 5–10; free for children under 5. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Rio's Carnival World Buffet ★★ BUFFET This buffet has long been voted by locals as the best in town and just recently reopened after an extensive makeover. It's going to get mixed reactions. Quality-wise, it's probably as good as ever, and maybe even better. Decor-wise, it's better still, since the overhaul was devoted mostly to improving the dining areas. The bad news? It can no longer pretend to be inexpensive—it's right at the top of the "moderate" category. Consider this an upscale food court, with "South American" cooked-to-order stir-fries, Mexican taco fixings and accompaniments, Chinese fare, a Japanese sushi bar and teppanyaki grill, a Brazilian mixed grill, Italian pasta and antipasto, and fish and chips. There's even a diner setup for hot dogs, burgers, fries, and milkshakes. (Make your own milkshakes—is there a happier concept anywhere?) All this is in addition to the usual offerings of most Las Vegas buffets. Best of all, it has a brand new dessert station, featuring at least 70 kinds of pies, cakes, and pastries from an award-winning pastry chef.

In Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino, 3700 W. Flamingo Rd. ☎ 702/252-7777. Breakfast \$12.99; lunch \$14.99; dinner \$22.99; weekend brunch \$22.99. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Palms Resort & Casino's Fantasy Market Buffet ★★ *Finds* BUFFET As a rule, you are better off fulfilling your buffet desires (unless they demand the cheapest of prices) at one of the newer hotels, and the Palms entry in the buffet sweepstakes bears this adage out. Not only does it look rather swell, but since the owners of the hotel are from a Middle Eastern background, that translates into some fresher concepts at the stations—most notably, an emphasis on Middle Eastern fare such as gyros with warm pita bread, hummus, babaganoush, and kabobs of every variety. Plus there's a huge Chinese station, complete with dumplings, a Mongolian barbecue section (where they toss all your chosen ingredients into one stir-fry vat), some Jewish foods (knishes and kugel), an ambitious carving station with ribs and pastrami, and desserts that,

as usual, aren't much of anything. And actually, this comes as close as any to classic buffet budget prices while still supplying food that can be described as better than "merely edible."

In Palms Resort & Casino, 4321 W. Flamingo Rd. ☎ 702/942-7777. Breakfast \$5.99; lunch \$6.99; dinner \$11.99; Sun brunch \$12.99. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

DOWNTOWN INEXPENSIVE

Golden Nugget's Buffet ★★ BUFFET This buffet has often been voted number one in Las Vegas. Much of the seating is in plush booths. The buffet tables are also laden with an extensive salad bar (about 50 items), fresh fruit, and marvelous desserts, including the famous bread pudding made from the secret recipe of Zelma Wynn (Steve's mom). Every night, fresh seafood is featured. Most lavish is the all-day Sunday champagne brunch, which adds such dishes as eggs Benedict, blintzes, pancakes, creamed herring, and smoked fish with bagels and cream cheese.

In Golden Nugget, 129 E. Fremont St. ☎ 702/385-7111. Breakfast \$6.75; lunch \$7.75; dinner \$11.75; Sun brunch \$12.75. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Main Street Station's Garden Court ★★ ★ *(finds)* BUFFET Set in what is truly one of the prettiest buffet spaces in town (and certainly in Downtown), with very high ceilings and tall windows bringing in much-needed natural light, the Main Street Station Garden Court buffet is one of the best in town, let alone Downtown. Featuring nine live-action stations (meaning you can watch your food being prepared), including a wood-fired, brick-oven pizza (delicious), many fresh salsas at the Mexican station, a barbecue rotisserie, fresh sausage at the carving station, Chinese, Hawaiian, and Southern specialties (soul food and the like), and so many more we lost count. On Friday night, they have all this plus nearly infinite varieties of seafood, all the way up to lobster. We ate ourselves into a stupor and didn't regret it.

In Main Street Station, 200 N. Main St. ☎ 702/387-1896. Breakfast \$5; lunch \$8; dinner \$11–\$16; Sat–Sun champagne brunch \$10; free for children 3 and under. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.