

THE CITY

Asian flavours come to life in Las Vegas

Casinos are adding more diverse dining options, but true food lovers know the city’s most exciting meal is served off the Strip

STEVE DOLINSKY LAS VEGAS

I can just make out the image of Celine Dion’s naked backside at the Coliseum entrance as I peer through the wooden slits in the Nobu Lounge, looking past banks of flashing lights and slot machines.

I’m at the base of the first-ever Nobu hotel, but there is no lobby: just a 12,000-square-foot restaurant, plus a bar and a small elevator bank. The exotic touches – Chinese silk, furniture built in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur and lighting fixtures that glow like enormous, white amoebas – are the work of superstar architect David Rockwell.

In a city full of bets, this is a \$30-million gamble. Can famed chef Nobu Matsuhisa attract both gourmands and gamblers to a formerly abandoned tower – and deliver Caesars Palace a slice of a lucrative audience? Despite what you might hear at the Sports Book, there are no sure things. But here in Vegas, the Asian culinary tourist is increasingly the one to woo. Which is good news for any lover of Chinese and Japanese food, really.

“Canadians represent the largest international group of tourists coming to Vegas, and North American Asians are the fastest growing subset,” says Gary Selesner, president of Caesars Palace. He travels to Asia several times a year, keeping tabs on food trends and attempting to steer some of the Macau-bound gambling business his way.

In Vegas, Caesars faces serious competition for these diners’ dollars. The MGM Grand recently spent more than \$100-million installing Hakkasan, an 80,000-square-foot outpost of the London-based upmarket Chinese restaurant. (It joins Pearl, serving traditional Canton cuisine, and Shibuya, which boasts an impressive sake lineup.) At the Cosmopolitan, New York-based Blue Ribbon Sushi offers a mash-up of Japanese/brasserie on the 4th floor (think fried chicken and oxtail fried rice to go along with five types of salmon sashimi), plus Jose Andres’s playful China Poblano one floor below. Masa, Manhattan’s high temple of sushi, has a pricey location in Aria. At the Bellagio, Noodles requires a wait most nights, and the Sunday Fountains Brunch offers an impressive buffet at Jasmine that includes a number of Asian touches: fresh maki rolls, thick bowls of congee (rice porridge) and some of the best Peking duck service I’ve had outside of Beijing.

But like most things on the Strip, you pay for the privilege (Jasmine’s buffet costs \$58, not including drinks). True food lovers know the city’s most exciting Asian food is experienced in that other strip: the malls.

“The Strip has a reputation for overcharging tourists,” said John Curtas, a Las Vegas food writer and critic who blogs at eatinglv.com. “The strip malls have become a destination. You want real Asian soul food? Go to Spring Mountain Road.”

Just a \$15 cab ride from the



Asian offerings on the Las Vegas Strip include the sushi platter at Blue Ribbon, above, and steamed dumplings at the MGM Grand’s Hakkasan.



IF YOU GO

Kabuto Go for one of the three omakase menus available: \$48, \$80 or \$120. 5040 W. Spring Mountain Rd., #4; kabutolv.com Monta Ramen The milky white tonkotsu (pork broth) ramen is my favourite. 5030 W. Spring Mountain Rd. #6; montaramen.com Raku Japanese Charcoal Grill You can’t go wrong with anything grilled, but definitely try the homemade tofu. 5030 W. Spring Mountain Rd. #2; raku-grill.com	Korean Delicious The best bets are the pork bulgogi, <i>dolsot bibimbap</i> (stone bowl with rice, veggies and beef) or “very spicy chicken.” 5030 W. Spring Mountain Rd.; 702-477-0363 Chada Thai & Wine Standout dishes include chicken <i>larb</i> , and spicy crab with curry and rice noodles. 3400 S. Jones Blvd. #11A; chadavegas.com Shaanxi Gourmet Try the Lamb and cumin sandwich, handmade noodles with lamb or noodles with ground pork. 3400 S. Jones Blvd. #16; 702-586-3311
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shimmering lights and sweaty tourists, down a wide, well-paved six-lane thoroughfare past beauty shops and mom-and-pop restaurants, Spring Mountain Road is Las Vegas’s culinary portal to Asia. The Seoul Plaza Mall doesn’t look like much – its enormous tenant sign lists Kilroy’s Video Poker Bar and a massage parlour – but it is where you’ll find three of the best expressions of Japanese cuisine in the city.

The door for Kabuto is hard to miss, and the narrow window, no bigger than a baseball bat, is hard to see through. But once inside, it’s as if you’ve suddenly teleported to Tokyo’s Ginza District: three Japanese men, each dressed identically in white hat, jacket and apron, serve delicate, pristine nigiri and sashimi in a blond-wood room that barely seats 24. Get one of the 10 counter seats, and choose from one of three *omakase* (tasting) menus, which include far more than the usual fatty tuna or sea urchin. Delicate strips of baby amber jack, plump red rockfish or oily jack mackerel are imported nearly every day from Tsukiji Market in Japan, and the chefs know how to deftly slice and present them over perfectly cooked and seasoned sushi rice.

A few doors away, Raku has been a chef favourite for years, and its izakaya-style pub continues to impress. Whether it’s soft, homemade silken tofu with wisps of dried bonito flakes, grilled-and-blistered shishito peppers and juicy chicken thighs or finely minced striped jack with miso, the lively, boisterous atmosphere is fuelled by an impressive list of junmai and daiginjo sakes.

Next door is the Korean Delicious Restaurant, offering fiery bowls of bibimbop, and beside

that is Monta Ramen, offering bowls of a different sort: Japanese comfort in the form of toothsome noodles, soft-cooked eggs and sheets of nori (seaweed) all swimming in deep pools of miso or pork-based broths.

A mile away, the Mountain View Plaza houses two more restaurants I can’t wait to return to: Shaanxi Gourmet, with its incomparable Northern Chinese food, including homemade noodles I had both cold (bathed in a bowl of chili oil embedded with spongy cubes of tofu) and as piping hot (served flatter and wider with hunks of braised lamb). A few doors down, Chada Thai & Wine combines the fiery, complex flavors of Bangkok street food with a wine list better than it needs to be.

As I drank Alsatian riesling and savoured a heaping plate of warm *larb* (ground chicken salad) flecked with toasted rice powder and spicy crab in a homemade red curry with rice noodles, I was reminded of a meal I had at the home of a cooking instructor in Thailand 10 years ago. Granted, she wasn’t playing Cold War Kids, Gotye and the Cure on her stereo. Still, I closed my eyes for a moment and thought of those steamy nights near the Chao Praya River, when all an intrepid eater needs is a few dollars and a sense of adventure.

As I head back to the Strip, blinded by a thousand pulsing lights and a gigantic, illuminated billboard of Donny and Marie Osmond, the air is rife with perfume and plastic surgery. This may be the middle of the desert, but the flavours of Asia are everywhere. You just need to know where to look.

Special to The Globe and Mail

THE INSIDER

A chef’s guide to Sin City – minus the sin

KARAN SMITH

Las Vegas chef Kim Canteenwalla has come a long way since cooking school in Montreal.

He’s worked in top hotel kitchens around the world and alongside his wife, restaurant maven Elizabeth Blau, has reworked culinary offerings at a string of top-end properties, including The Plaza Hotel in New York and the Trump International Hotel in Toronto. But it’s Vegas he now calls home. It’s here that he led Society Café at Wynn Encore to critical acclaim (named one of Esquire’s best new restaurants), ran the kitchens at MGM Grand (that’s 14 food and drink outlets), opened Honey Salt off the Strip last year (with a menu inspired by the couple’s dinner parties) and partnered with the just-opened Buddy V’s at the Venetian, the first restaurant of the *Cake Boss* star.

“You get used to living in this city that is a continuous entertainment venue for everyone. You’re feeding the very high end. You’re feeding the family that comes in on a budget weekend. Everyone melds together.” Canteenwalla shares his favourite places to eat out, and chill out.



Kim Canteenwalla suggests hiking through Red Rock Canyon and catching a Las Vegas 51s game. ISAAC BREKKEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

RED ROCK CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

“Red Rock, the national park, is unbelievable. There’s a 13-mile loop in there. There’s hiking and waterfalls. You can take a car. You can take a bike. There are multiple places to get off and hike. There are wild mules and the further out you go, coyotes. It’s probably 40 to 45 minutes

max from the Strip. I just love getting out doors, hiking, hanging out with family.” [redrockcanyonlv.org](#)

BARTOLOTTA RISTORANTE

“Bartolotta at Wynn has been a favourite of mine and my wife’s. My wife brought chef Paul Bartolotta into the city for Wynn. That’s an amazing restaurant

and it’s been open for seven or eight years now. They’re redesigning this year. It’s the freshest seafood. He brings a lot of the seafood in from the Mediterranean. He does pasta. The venue itself is phenomenal. There’s a lagoon outside with seating and it’s pretty special when you’re out there. And Paul is a very, very talented chef.” 3131 Las Vegas Blvd. South, [wynnlasvegas.com](#)

MONTA RAMEN

“It’s a place I go after I’m leaving the Strip. For \$12 or \$13 you get a bowl of noodles and you’re set. The pork broth is so rich, and so clean. They do kimchi rice phenomenally well. They do takana rice as well, which is a little spicy. They do some great dumplings. And it’s just fun watching these guys work. It’s a small open kitchen, 26 seats. It’s two woks in the whole place.” 5030 Spring Mountain Rd., [montaramen.com](#)

LAS VEGAS 51S

“The Las Vegas 51s Triple-A ball team: It’s really a family scene. It’s small. It’s intimate. You can take the kids out just beyond the outfield area where there’s grass

and they’re roaming around but watching the game at the same time. These guys are the next generation. They’re on the verge of going to the major leagues. You see them at this point and they end up becoming superstars. It’s kind of cool.” *Cashman Field, 850 Las Vegas Blvd. North, [milb.com](#)*

SPAGO

“One of the old standbys is Spago, Wolfgang Puck’s place at Caesars Forum Shops. They just celebrated their 20th anniversary last year. They’ve been doing it so well for so long. Eric Klein is the chef there. You’ve got to take your hat off to anyone who has been 20 years in one spot. When Wolfgang came in the celebrity chef thing was in its infancy. He’s got multiple restaurants here and Spago is one of the mainstays. What I like is it’s got two parts: the front, which is casual, and the back that is more fine dining. There’s always a good buzz.” 3500 Las Vegas Blvd. South, [wolfgangpuck.com](#)

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Special to The Globe and Mail