Pyramids of Pink Shrimp: A Brief History of Las Vegas Dining, 1940s-1970s

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RESTAURANT DINING HAS ALWAYS BEEN one of the great attractions of Las Vegas. From its budget buffets and 99 cent shrimp cocktails, to the showrooms of yesterday's production shows, and today's haute cuisine restaurants run by celebrity chefs, dining has added a rich and tasty dimension to the Las Vegas tourist experience. Local residents have also long been attracted to the wide variety of restaurants that have grown along with the city since the construction of the first hotel/casino resort (El Rancho Vegas) on old Highway 91 in 1941. Hotels along the Las Vegas Strip (and a few downtown) have undoubtedly provided some of the most memorable dining experiences for both visitors and locals alike, with some of their attractions, like the Bacchanal Room at Caesars Palace, and the Sultan's Table at the Dunes, achieving near legendary status over the years. Like the grand hotels that housed them, however, many of these restaurants have long since disappeared, and exist today only in the memories of their devoted patrons, and in the menus that survive as evidence of their culinary offerings. Dining outside of the great resorts offered locals and (some tourists) the opportunity to explore restaurants that may have been a little less expensive or crowded than those within the Strip hotels. Hereewith, some brief historical sketches of the most notable restaurants that were featured both on and off the Strip between 1941-1970, a time that saw great change and development on the Las Vegas Strip and beyond.

EL RANCHO VEGAS

The El Rancho Vegas opened in 1941 as the first hotel and casino resort on Highway 91 (the future Las Vegas Strip). Its décor and dining followed a Western theme, and it was famous for the Wagon Wheel Tavern (accented with authentic wagon wheels and a hitching post) which featured old-fashioned chuck wagon (buffet) dinners overseen for many years by Chef Bill Davis. Other eateries included the Stage Door Steak House, the Nugget Nell Cocktail Lounge, and last but not least, its famous showroom restaurant, the Opera House. The latter could seat some 300 patrons, and had a dance floor that doubled as a stage, a brick wall and a ceiling from which wagon wheels were hung like chandeliers. The Opera Room was a haven for celebrities, and numerous photographs exist of celebrities dining in the showroom where hurricane lamps accented tables covered in crisp white tablecloths.

THE LAST FRONTIER / NEW FRONTIER

With a motto like the “Early West in Modern Splendor,” it’s no surprise that the Last Frontier Hotel and Casino featured Western décor, in fact, the Ramona Room, its main showroom and dining room, was constructed with flagstones and large wooden beams and featured a stage with a shake roof. For a drink and casual eats there was the Horn Room and Gay Nineties Bar which featured...
the elaborately decorated bar from the Arizona Club, one of the original drinking establishments constructed in the early days of Las Vegas near Fremont Street. Writing of the Last Frontier in its early days, George Stamos has noted that it was a long-standing tradition among Las Vegans to dine at the Last Frontier for their Sunday morning Hunt Breakfast after attending church services.

The hotel changed owners a few times after it opened in 1942, and by 1955 it was decided to re-fashion the Western-themed hotel into the “New Frontier,” a sleek and ultramodern tribute to the Atomic Age featuring chrome and aluminum accents. Drinks could be had at the Cloud 9 bar—supposedly the world’s longest bar at the time—while coffee shop dining was available in the Planet Room, and showroom dining took place in the Venus Room. Appropriately enough, the New Frontier was a frequent hangout for atomic energy scientists who worked at the neighboring Nevada Test Site some sixty-five miles northwest of Las Vegas. According to the authors of Las Vegas: Playground, U.S.A., the New Frontier’s chef knew some patrons through their orders at the time, and often recognized said scientists by the sophisticated and sometimes exotic dishes they would order on regular visits to the hotel.

FLAMINGO

Although the Flamingo, which opened in December 1946, is perhaps most well-known for its connection to Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, it had some memorable dining as well. Although it offered typical coffee shop and buffet fare, it also featured promotions such as a free roast beef dinner on Wednesday nights in its early years. Its gourmet restaurant, the Candlelight Room, opened in 1961, and was hugely popular with visitors who enjoyed dining in its elegant atmosphere. It featured primarily upscale food of the steak and seafood variety. Dinner shows were held in the 600-seat Flamingo Room theatre which featured both performers and production shows.

CAESARS PALACE

Caesars Palace opened in August 1966 with one of the grandest opening parties ever held in Las Vegas featuring mountains of expensive food and drink. Beyond the palatial Greco-Roman décor, food contributed to the aura of decadence that surrounded Caesars Palace. Although establishments like the oshorium (later renamed Café Roma) Coffee Shop provided affordable and familiar dining experiences, some of the other restaurants—the Italian Piazza and the Japanese Ah So—provided diners with a touch of the exotic. The latter was created by Nat Hart, a food expert with an international reputation who had once served as a consultant to the Japanese government, and who actually trained the entire kitchen staff in the art of Japanese cooking. It was another of Nat Hart’s creations, however, the Bacchanal Room, that set the standard for gourmet dining at Caesars Palace. The elegant velvet-flocked menu presented a set list of dishes that were designed to delight the taste buds while their presentation simultaneously dazzled the patron. The manner of service alone made the Bacchanal unique as patrons were served wine by waitresses dressed as Roman slave girls, and would often receive shoulder and neck massages after a meal. Although the dining options have changed over the years, and the Bacchanal Room eventually closed in 2000, Caesars Palace has continued to feature some of the most elegant dining options on the Las Vegas Strip.

DESERT INN

The Desert Inn opened in 1950, and made the most of its southwest surroundings with its desert-accented beauty. The congenial and well-dressed Wilbur Clark cheerfully welcomed patrons to his hotel (although it was actually owned a group of men led by Moe Dalitz) and to his elegant showroom, the Painted Desert Room. As the hotel’s main dining room and showroom, it was known for its beauty and technological innovations as
as the galaxy of stars that appeared on its stage. Menus from the Painted Desert Room featured a variety of exquisite desert flora on the cover and would alternate from show to show, with each menu featuring the night’s program on the left, and its gourmet bill of fare on the right. Clark had imported Chef Maurice Thominet from the Clift Hotel in San Francisco (once on the staff at the Ritz Hotel in Paris) to create some of the Desert Inn’s most elegant cuisine. Henri Petitjean later took over as the hotel’s main chef in the early 1960s.

Casual, coffee shop dining could be had at the Skillet Room in the early days of the Desert Inn, and later on in the Cactus Room. More upscale dining could be had later on in the Crystal Room which featured the essentials such as lobster, prime rib, filet mignon but interestingly, included a children’s menu as well.

The hotel was later famously purchased by Howard Hughes and was part of his Vegas empire for a few years. It went through a number of owners and succeeded in reaching its 50th birthday in 2000 before it was purchased by Steve Wynn and later imploded in 2001 to make way for his eponymous hotel casino resort which opened in 2005.

**SANDS**

Although the Sands Hotel and Casino will forever be associated with the Rat Pack, who performed in its famous Copa Room in the early 1960s, it also provided patrons with a variety of culinary options. The Garden Room, with its terrazzo floor and tropical plant décor, provided quality coffee shop fare as well as delicious Chinese food in a room framed by giant windows that offered a panoramic view of the Las Vegas Strip and the surrounding mountains. The Copa Room featured typical upscale prime rib-style showroom dining for patrons eager to see some of the best entertainers in Las Vegas. Beyond the Rat Pack, the Copa Room featured performers such as Robert Goulet, Danny Thomas, Wayne Newton, and Jerry Vale among others. To some degree, perhaps, it may have overshadowed the Regency Room, the Sand’s gourmet restaurant, which was less well-known than the fine dining establishments at some of the other hotels on the Las Vegas Strip.

**STARDUST**

One of the largest casinos in Nevada at its opening in 1958, the Stardust was home to the very first French production show imported to Las Vegas—the Lido de Paris. The show was performed in the Café Continental, the Stardust’s main showroom and dining room, which featured a massive stage with six hydraulic lifts. Show patrons could dine on a number of upscale steak and seafood dishes while the Bluebells and showgirls in their glamorous costumes provided a feast for the eyes on the stage above.

Other dining experiences at the early Stardust included its reliable coffee shop, the Palm Room but diners soon

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Wilbur Clark’s Desert Inn “Painted Desert Room” menu for Sunday, July 30, 1950
Although the Dunes struggled financially upon opening in 1955 and for a few years afterward, it regained its footing with the aid of Major A. Riddle, who was brought in to direct the hotel and casino in 1956. His creative innovations brought the hotel back to life, and one of the most significant was bringing fine dining to the Strip. Indeed, some of the most elegant dining in Las Vegas could be found at the Dunes. The Sultan’s Table, reportedly inspired by the Villa Fontana of Mexico City, opened on March 4, 1961, and was considered by many to be the first true gourmet restaurant in Las Vegas. It was known not only for the exquisite cuisine it served (initially prepared by Chef Jean Bertraneau from Beverly Hills) and its elegant décor, but also for the music of Arturo Romero’s Magic Violins whom Riddle had imported from the Villa Fontana. In addition, the Dunes’ uniquely-shaped Dome of the Sea restaurant provided the ultimate in seafood dining and offered distinctive surroundings as well. Patrons sat at tables draped with blue and green tablecloths, with flying fish images projected against the walls, and a “mermaid” sitting in an gondola in a pond playing a harp. Last but certainly not least, the Top O’ the Strip was another restaurant at the Dunes that combined fine dining with a spectacular view of the Strip and live music.

RIVIERA

At its opening in 1955, the Riviera gained headlines as the first high rise constructed on the Las Vegas Strip, and for the enormous salary—$50,000 per week—it paid to showroom headliner Liberace. The elegant mid-century modern resort also featured a number of eateries to tempt patrons. The wood-paneled Hickory Room was known for its grilled meats and featured an open hickory fire and a large rotisserie that showcased meat directly in front of diners. More casual dining could be found at the Riviera’s charming coffee shop, the Café Noir. For many years, showroom dining at the Riviera was to be found in the Clover Room, which at 10,000 square feet, was one of the largest showrooms on the Strip at its opening. Later on, the Versailles Room featured entertainment as well as fine cuisine with Liza Minnelli and Engelbert Humperdinck some of the most popular performers to appear there in the 1970s. It was the Delmonico, however, that offered the ultimate in gourmet dining at the Riviera. Aside from its menu, its elegant surroundings included what was to become classic Las Vegas décor—biscuit-tufted leather booths.

FREMONT HOTEL

The Fremont Hotel and Casino, the first downtown high rise at its opening in 1956, also had the reputation of having some of the best food in Las Vegas at this time. It was particularly well known for its Chinese food, created by New York chef Bill Gwon who was said to have been the originator of the sweet barbequed spare rib.

INTERNATIONAL HOTEL (LATER THE HILTON)

One of the largest and most luxurious hotels built off the Strip, the International (later the Hilton) opened in July 1969, and was known for the big-name entertainers it hosted over the years. Elvis Presley was perhaps the most famous celebrity to play its showroom and packed them in from 1969-1976. Yet it was equally notable for the international nature of its cuisine and for its many specialty gourmet restaurants. Mexican food could be found at the El Patio, Japanese teppan
yaki at Benihana's, German food at the Bavarian Inn, Italian food at Leonardo’s and classic French cuisine in the Imperial Room. The hotel became part of the Hilton chain of hotels in July 1970 but continued on with its tradition of fine international dining.

**LANDMARK**

The Landmark Hotel and Casino was perhaps most well-known for its tower which stood at the corner of Paradise and Convention Center Drive. It was one of a number of hotels purchased by Howard Hughes in the late 1960s and opened on July 2, 1969. Like most hotels in Las Vegas it featured both casual and elegant dining. Along with a coffee shop (Cascade Terrace) and 250-seat showroom that provided a 360-degree view of the city, the Landmark had two fine dining establishments—the Prime Rib and the Mandarin Room. The coffee shop was known for its house specialty of roast baron of beef which was served from a carving station at its entrance and always attracted a crowd of diners.

**SAHARA**

The African-themed Sahara Hotel and Casino (formerly the Club Bingo) opened in 1952, and was known for the delicious fare it served in the Caravan Room where the likes of John Wayne, Don Rickles, Fred MacMurray and many other celebs went to eat. In an interview with George Stamos in 1979, Fairlene Trousdale—who started working at the hotel on November 25, 1952—remembers, “The food wasn’t mass-produced like it is today. For instance, we mixed the Caesar salads right there at the guest’s table. Everything, in fact, was cooked to order.” The dinner buffet for $1.50 started at 11pm. The hotel’s showroom, the Congo Room, flanked by two life-size models of African warriors with spears, provided value for money by enabling patrons to see a top-notch show and have a good meal at the same time. Later restaurants that opened in the Sahara included the Polynesian chain, Don the Beachcomber, with its miles of tropical drinks, and the gourmet restaurant House of Lords, which was frequently singled out as one of the finest restaurants in Las Vegas in gourmet and travel magazines of the period.

**TROPICANA**

At the time of its opening in 1957, the elegant Tropicana with its chandeliers, mosaic tile entrance, and lush landscaping was accented by an impressive sixty foot tulip-shaped fountain that was located just in front of the hotel. The hotel’s first executive chef was the German-born F. Martin Appelt whose experience included time at the famous Waldorf Astoria in New York, as well as the Kenilworth and Golden Strand in Miami Beach, Florida. The Theatre Restaurant was home to the Tropicana’s world famous Folies Bergere French production show revue which debuted at the hotel in 1959; it featured typical upscale showroom cuisine with seafood and expensive cuts of meat. The Brazilian Room featured coffee shop fare, and gourmet dining was the highlight of the Tropicana’s appropriately named “Le Gourmet Room” restaurant. The Gourmet Room restaurant showcased the hotel’s most expensive cuisine (exotic seafood dishes, poultry and grilled meats) and was presented on the menu in the classic French style.

**DINING OUTSIDE OF THE GREAT RESORTS**

Although locals often dined at Las Vegas Strip hotel restaurants, they also enjoyed a variety of delicious eateries that were free-standing establishments on or off the Strip. Although it moved to a few different locations on Las Vegas Boulevard, Lougi’s Charcoal Broiler
always remained a popular destination for tourists and locals alike beginning in the 1950s, and was one of the first restaurants to compete with Strip hotel restaurants. Although known for its steaks, it also featured, as one observer put it “every Italian dish known this side of Naples.” Guests could select their own prime cut of meat from a grocer’s showcase on the restaurant floor, and even play a few slots as they waited for their entrée; although, in that respect, they were never any serious competition for the surrounding casinos. Louigi’s was definitely the place to be seen back in the 1950s-1960s, and was frequented by celebrities; one anecdote found in Las Vegas, Playground U.S.A. claims that celebrated burlesque dancer Lilli St. Cyr (who often appeared at the El Rancho Vegas) was a frequent customer, often turning up three to four nights per week at Louigi’s when she was in town. Her record of attendance at the restaurant was finally broken by none other than Louis Prima.

Other popular local restaurants served ethnic fare. Before the Chinese restaurant became a ubiquitous fixture in Las Vegas, the family-owned Fong’s Garden on Charleston was one of the earliest and most respected Chinese restaurants in town. Ed Reid of Green Felt Jungle fame once described Fong’s Garden as the place “where the locals go for exotic Chinese fare and well-constructed cocktails.” Mexican fare could be found at the El Cholo and El Sombrero, the latter of which is still serving patrons today in a small building on Main Street in downtown Las Vegas. For many years, Las Vegas and tourists alike who favored German food would dine at the Alpine Village Inn. Designed to resemble a German Chalet with heraldic ornaments and dirndl-attired waitresses, the Alpine Village Inn served a variety of German dishes—some in iron kettles, but its most dramatic offering was probably the whole roast suckling pig.

On the lower end of the culinary scale, drive-ins popular with Las Vegas teens (and adults) included the Blue Onion (located near the intersection of Charleston, Fremont and Boulder Highway) or the Round-Up at Fifth (later Las Vegas Boulevard) and Main. For a terrific and affordable steak off of the Strip, locals frequented the Ranch House off the Tonopah Highway which Ed Reid’s Las Vegas: City Without Clocks recommended as having some of the best steaks in town.

This is by no means a complete accounting of Las Vegas eateries over the year; it focuses instead on those restaurants whose menus survive as evidence of their popularity with both tourists and residents alike. To view almost 300 images of these historical Las Vegas menus, visit the UNLV Digital Collection “Menus: the Art of Dining” at http://digital.library.unlv.edu/collections/menus.

REFERENCES:

George Stamos’ Las Vegas Sun series, “The Great Resorts of Las Vegas” from 1979, is still one of the best sources for the history of the most notable hotel-casinos on the Las Vegas Strip and provides valuable information on the restaurants within the hotels.

Contemporary accounts, such as Katharine Best and Katharine Hillyer’s Las Vegas, Playtown U.S.A. (1955), and Ed Reid’s Las Vegas: City Without Clocks (1961), also provide amusing and useful anecdotes about dining in Las Vegas during the golden resort years.

Su Kim Chung is Manuscripts Librarian & Archivist in Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she is responsible for selecting materials that document the history of Las Vegas and southern Nevada. She curated the digital collection “Menus: The Art of Dining,” which is featured on the UNLV Libraries website. A PhD candidate in the Information Studies Department at UCLA, she is currently writing her dissertation on Jeanne Wier and the development of the Nevada Historical Society.