



November 7, 2011

## Getting Lucky In Las Vegas 1 Sip, Swizzle And Nibble At A Time

I couldn't think of a better place on the planet to flex a few decadent muscles this summer than Vegas. After one too many hikes and hill runs in the Pacific Northwest, I knew it was time to head in another, more hedonistic direction. Cut to a Saturday night flight to Vegas.

We hopped a flight that first weekend in August and to my surprise, the city was sold out. In the heat of summer, typically Sin City's slowest season, the city was at full tilt and full capacity. That was a big win for the city.

As our trip was so last-minute our first night in, we were planning on winging it and grabbing accommodations once we landed. After a very close call -- almost overnighing in the airport -- we finally managed to book a room in the middle of the night at the Venetian, where the rooms were super luxe, but the crowd... Not so much.

We had to fight our way through a crowd of Jersey Shore look alikes and heaps of girls who had mistaken their belts for skirts. We saw way more than we bargained for. Yet the room was gorgeous. After a few hours of blissful sleep, we literally ran to The Cosmopolitan to kick start our booze infused culinary adventure.

### **Jump to photos of amazing Vegas dining and drinking.**

The uber chic, newly opened Cosmopolitan is aesthetically stunning and boasts an impressive line-up of world class chefs, all stars in their own right. Many are from New York and Los Angeles, yet first timers in Vegas and on the Strip, which means you're not going to see their restaurants coming and going at every casino.

LA's acclaimed David Myers innovative French Brasserie, Comme Ca, was the pitch perfect intro to our adventure. Meyers appointed the fetching 29-year-old chef Brian Howard to be at the helm of his vibrant Vegas restaurant.

Upon arrival, Brian, an unassuming yet spirited soul asked a few questions, which basically led to our allowing him to have a bit of fun with us. Fun he did. There's nothing I love more than a chef grabbing the wheel and taking us on a wild culinary ride.

I was so immersed in the cocktail list I hadn't even looked at the menu yet. No need as we were getting the chef's best. I sensed a bit of mischief with Brian -- the silent, seductive type -- and welcomed it warmly. While the chef got busy and gutsy in the kitchen, I dove in the deep end of the cocktail list.

Cocktail luminary and Tales of the Cocktail American Bartender of the Year Sam Ross put together Comme Ca's seasonally handcrafted classic cocktail list, which consists of several categories: Short and Sharp, Rocks and Rounded, Tall and Refreshing, Stirred and Sipping, Dessert and Digestif. His list was simply insane, yet it was more than cutting-edge creativity. Each drink delivered innovative and layered flavors that mixed seamlessly.

I was barely settled into my seat when the Comme Ci, their signature drink made with white rum, fresh lime, sugar, cucumber and cracked pepper came out. It was a fresh summer drink, which went down way too easily, a perfect pool-side seductress. The Penicillin's scotch, fresh lemon, ginger, honey and Islay float was a show stopper. My partner in crime and I literally stopped mid sip, mouths agape to express the "wow."

As if we would stop there. The New York Sour's bourbon, fresh lemon, sugar, egg white and red wine float was something I enjoyed throughout the meal, a great complement to the richness that went down on the plate. Still enticed by the options, we sipped an Improved Whiskey Cocktail made of rye, maraschino, bitters, absinthe and a lemon twist towards the end.

With a few cocktails on the table and under our belt, we were ready for Howard's hedonistic showdown as the tipples were well paired throughout with just the right nibbles.

Chef Howard brought out beautiful baby baguettes and a stunning single oyster that was poached in its own juices, topped with caviar and foam of lime curd. It was so delicate yet full of flavor. A potted steak tartare made with confit egg yolk, housemade pickled vegetables and warm brioche bread quickly and convincingly converted my fear-of-tartare friend. The summer asparagus salad, pea soup with braised pork belly and a melt in your mouth turbot from California followed.

Howard's years with Thomas Keller and elsewhere really showed throughout the meal, but what was distinctly his own was his unrivaled sense of culinary creativity. Wanting to bring nature and the great outdoors to the table, his main course was head-to-toe veal, which included cheeks, liver and the thymus gland. This was presented on granite and served on and around a log with root vegetables surrounding it. It looked like a meal made for Red Riding Hood and delivered straight from the forest.

A proponent of experiential dining and interaction with the chef, Howard still wanted to outdo himself. He created our dessert, a "landscape," by bringing in the colors and textures of the surrounding Nevada area by painting with ice cream, sauces and popcorn, a sweet landscape on a table-sized white stone, his culinary canvas. This was done in real time, like a mad culinary artist at our table. We were privy to witness and taste it, as he all but signed his piece of sweet artistry. If it didn't melt, we would have hung it on the wall -- with a few bites missing. It was going to be a tough one to top.

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In between drizzles we took a quick dip in the Cosmopolitan pool or shall I say we hung, appropriately, in the lazy river. Then after being pulled out due to potential lightening, I to my surprise hit the gym with reckless abandon to repent my recent sins while my friend opted for a necessary disco nap.

A few hours later that night, we were off to Bubbles and Bites for dinner at Guys Savoy's restaurant at Caesars Palace. This was a tough rezzie to secure, especially on such short notice. The three Michelin

starred chef from Paris came to Vegas in 2006. He and his haute cuisine have been wowing critics and consumers alike in his sleek dining arena in Caesars.

Guy Savoy's head chef in Vegas, Mathieu Chartron, is another culinary savant. The devilishly handsome 24-year-old French chef is the youngest head of a kitchen on the Strip. Set up in the Bubbles Bar, the only two in the Bond-like bar, we started with the Henriot Champagne (1998) together with the oysters in ice gelee, lobsters in cold steam and the mosaic of milk fed poularde, foie gras and artichoke with truffle jus, which was so teeny-tiny, yet packed a power punch full of flavor. It was a culinary explosion in the mouth. This montage was complemented with an effortlessly sexy staff full of French accents, including Guy Savoy's GM, Alain Alpe, a dead ringer for Eric Roberts, if he were French. Asked by Alpe if we had any food issues or no-gos on the culinary front, we echoed a quick "No!" He said, "You must be French." No, but we were willing to play the role.

I tend to be a red head when it comes to wine, but I thoroughly enjoyed the whites as I moved on to the Meursault (2008), the perfect white as I savored their signature showstopper, the artichoke and black truffle soup and toasted melt-in-your-mouth mushroom brioche and black truffle butter. We could have made a meal on that dish alone, chef Chartron's favorite. Apparently it was the single dish that led to Guy Savoy coming to Vegas and to Caesars. One taste of it in Paris five years ago led to the Vegas outpost.

The roasted john dory and their famous, beautiful burger, a signature for the Vegas outpost only, finished the delectable bites -- but not before a desert cart arrived at the table. It was an endless array of sweets: marshmallow tarts and ice cream sorbet and every elegant treat you could imagine. It was presented by another culinary wonder, their 24 year old pastry chef, Jon Giovanni who says, "It's a pastry cart on wheels." Giovanni claims that they do tasteful, seasonal and simple desserts and many classics from Guy Savoy Paris.

Having had the proper disco nap, my friend headed in a disco direction while I continued my cocktail exploring. The final liquid finish to my first full day in Vegas was at Cosmopolitan's Chandelier Bar. The hip and sophisticated spot is several levels within the casino, each with a different offering. I met another twenty-something wonder, the statuesque 27-year-old Mariena Mercer is the GM of The Chandelier and one of the Cosmopolitan's property mixologists. Her exquisite direction is seen throughout.

The bottom floor of The Chandelier offers culinary cocktails. My favorite of the bunch was The Libertine designed with women in mind to get them on the whiskey trail. I needed no convincing as I was well on my whiskey way. With Maker's 46, rosemary, simple syrup, orange marmalade and maple syrup foam, it's great both after dinner drink and as dessert, as if I needed either. It was a little heavier and sweeter than I typically like, but the whiskey leveled it to perfection. Other standouts were the herbaceous bed thyme and the spicy Thai down.

The top floor had "Feminine & Flirty" cocktails like the Violet Femme with Plymouth gin, Luxardo maraschino liqueur and elderflower syrup, while the inside level boasts unexpected molecular mixology. Their Campfire Delight with Toasted Marshmallows and the Fire Breathing Dragon were seriously pushing the cocktail envelope, as much show as it was cocktail.

Needless to say, I was up at 5 am, a mere three hours later, in the gym when I managed to slip in to Cosmo's Sahara Spa and Hammam for a HydraFacial to once again erase the previous day's decadence. This was done before our lunch at China Poblano, where culinary wizard Jose Andres seamlessly fuses Chinese and Mexican, yet pays proper homage to each individually as well.

His signature Salt Air Margarita, with fresh lime salt air, was a perfect pairing to both his lamb pot stickers and his "Like Water for Chocolate," made with fried quail, dragon fruit, rose petals and chestnut and dragonfruit sauce. We then checked out of Cosmo, leaving the stunning and expansive view of the desert and the Strip and a great balcony behind.

After a chakra balancing at Caesars famous Qua Spa, I was realigned and ready to dip deeper into the pleasure playground. We continued our cocktail and culinary conversation with Jose Andres that evening with a sampling at Jaleo, back at the Cosmo. It's in the simple that you find the sublime. His *pan con tomate* was pure perfection, bringing my friend and I back to our Barcelona days, where we both lived for a year.

The buzzing atmosphere, our table neighbors, dead ringers for a Jersey Housewife cast mate and her husband, a Gaultier look alike who turned out to be Ed Hardy's own Christian Audigier and others around us set the tone. The small plates he is famous for -- succulent oysters with gin and tonic, croquettes with Iberico ham, grilled hanger steak -- were excellent. Drinks were a mix of cavas by the glass or in a punch for the table, Spanish Riojas, Cuba Libres and a Spanish Blood and Sand made with mezcal. We stuck with Riojas.

We were embarrassed to admit to our Jersey table mates that we had another meal to catch. Running across the floor from Jaleo to D.O.C.G., we ran in to the delightful Comme Ca's Brian Howard. Safe to say, I had a serious culinary crush. Saucy exchanges went down. Then we were off.

With barely enough room to consume air, we did manage to indulge in the rustic Italian wine bar and restaurant, in particular the pizza fonduta with egg and truffles and their melt-in-your-mouth filet with peppercorn sauce. Their staff was as delicious as the dishes they served, and the Italian wines were beyond brilliant. It was very difficult pulling ourselves out of their spirited door with business men surrounding us eating on company credit cards, but we had to make the late showing of Jubilee at Bally's.

We were happy as soon as we arrived, as Jubilee's feather-and-rhinestone riddled show is an absolute must in Vegas. It's the only old school, quintessential Vegas showgirl show in town. I love getting a window on to my parents' Vegas, that other era where true glamor reigned. Jubilee is celebrating their 30-year anniversary, so if you go anywhere near Vegas this year, make a point of seeing the campy, kitschy and *tres* glamorous showing. FYI: early shows are family-friendly, while the late-night show is topless.

We were hotel hopping as much as we were culinary and cocktail bopping. So, it seemed appropriate post-Jubilee to rest our decadent heads at Caesars, the home of old school glamor. We set up camp the next day at a primo pool-side cabana at Caesars' Garden of the Gods, one of the top hotel pools in all of Vegas. I've never been very interested in bottle service, but the Belvedere bottle that accompanies their freshly made punch bowl of fresh fruit and elixirs and served in an actual ice bowl is as good as it gets. We were easily the envy of the pool and made several faux friends that afternoon.

I was bobbing around in the pool with my punch bowl, cocktail concoction in hand, my BFF by my side and soaking in that yummy summer sun. Here we were in Vegas, yet we hadn't even attempted to gamble or hit a table. We obviously didn't need to. Clearly, we were winning.