

# The New York Times

June 26, 2012

## A Rat Pack of Reviewers

“THE food industry and the sex industry have a lot in common,” Al Mancini, the restaurant critic for [Las Vegas CityLife](#), told me over pork buns on a recent blindingly bright morning.

He should know. Mr. Mancini has been reviewing restaurants here for 10 years, but his first writing job was reviewing strip clubs, a feat he pulled off elegantly in serious columns evaluating establishments that the “entertainment” columns in most cities tend to ignore.

Mr. Mancini is not a typical restaurant critic, but of course Las Vegas is not a typical restaurant city. Brooklyn residents are incensed at the [mere prospect of a Hooters in their borough](#). Here, when the popular former mayor Oscar Goodman decided to open (yet another) steakhouse, he gave it the name Oscar’s Beef-Booze-Broads.

The city has been engaged in a high-stakes restaurant arms race since it welcomed Spago 20 years ago. Money, entertainment and food are uniquely entwined here, and even the city’s dozen or so food writers can barely keep up.

Feeding the city’s tourists — who will number 40 million this year, according to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority — is a vast endeavor. Restaurants on the Strip alone employ about 35,000 people, and in Clark County over all, upward of \$8 billion was spent in restaurants last year, said Brian Gordon of Applied Analysis, a Nevada economic analysis firm.

This translates into ever more spectacular dining rooms, themed restaurants (last year’s opening of [Lynyrd Skynyrd BBQ and Beer](#) inspired feverish coverage) and culinary concepts like [China Poblano](#), the delicious Mexican-Chinese meditation that the chef José Andrés opened last year. And because most restaurants on the Strip are owned by hotel casinos, the writers must navigate among the competitors and their publicity teams, who dole out access as carefully as truffle shavings.

“We are big fish in a small but well-stocked pond,” said John Curtas, a lawyer who was the longtime food critic for Nevada Public Radio and now writes at the Web site [Eating Las Vegas](#).

They are wooed with press dinners, celebrity-studded opening parties and a veritable avalanche of perks and free food. “There is no such thing as an anonymous food critic in Las Vegas,” said Max Jacobson, who worked at The Los Angeles Times food section before moving here in 1999; he now writes for [Vegas Seven](#).