



**DINE**

Six up-and-coming dining destinations including Wales, San Antonio, and the Willamette Valley

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# LA BELLA VITA

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redefines  
life on the farm

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# VEGAS

LIKE A

# V.I.P.

Fueled by the finest food and drink Sin City has to offer, **MICHAEL KAPLAN** spent 48 exclusive, luxurious hours in Las Vegas. Here's how he rolled.





**S**PEND ENOUGH TIME IN LAS VEGAS and eventually you will hear somebody knowingly proclaim that if you're willing to blow enough cash, you can get whatever you want in this town. Sure, that's true most everywhere, but Las Vegas is particularly driven by dollars. Millions are won and lost each day — for recreation. So those who spend big in Sin City have over-the-top expectations and opportunities that just don't exist in more rational, restrained places. Vegas, after all, is the home of the \$5,000 hamburger, the \$7,000 hotel suite, and the no-limit hold 'em poker game with a minimum buy-in of \$20,000 — a sum that can be vaporized in a single high-wire hand.

My test drive of high-end Las Vegas begins with a limo pick-up at McCarran International Airport. The driver zips me to the private entrance of ultra-elite Sky Suites, a hotel within the hotel at the glassy, curvilinear Aria Resort & Casino. Passing painlessly through check-in, elevated up to my weekend digs on the 57th floor, I meet a meticulously mannered butler who promises to take care of my every need, from procuring show tickets and making dinner reservations to negotiating runs to In-N-Out Burger. He arranges for clothing to be pressed, suitcases to be packed, and parties to be arranged. For now, though, I'm happy with the gin and tonic that he has thoughtfully stirred up. Twenty-foot ceilings, curvy sofas, and endless views do it for me — and I'm not even checked into one of the duplex Sky Villas outfitted with their own hair salons, pool tables, well-stocked bars, and walls covered in textured silk.

I could laze around in the hot tub or order up room service, but instead I summon a limo that whisks me off the Las Vegas Strip and out to Shadow Creek, as lush and exotic a golf course as you will find. That it's in the middle of the desert only makes the whole thing sweeter. This is the place where Michael Jordan, Bill Clinton, and George Clooney like

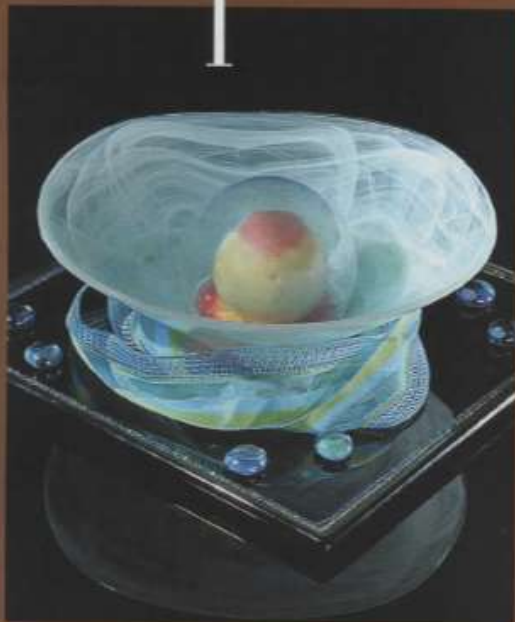
to challenge themselves while marveling at the juniper trees and blue herons flying around. On a course where every hole presents its own version of trickiness, the 18th stands out. Hit to the water trap's edge and you have a shot at a birdie. Clear the water and you're going for an eagle. Land in the drink, though, and you will most likely bogey the hole. Mark Brenneman, Shadow Creek's manager and PGA pro, describes the 18th hole as a metaphor for Vegas itself. "This is a town full of temptation. You need to know when to embrace it and when to work around it," he says, leaving me unsure as to whether we are talking about water traps or show girls. He follows that up with advice of a less philosophical nature: "Remember to get a Rhonda-rita for the ride back to your hotel." I'm not sure what's in it — and bar goddess Rhonda isn't telling — but as I sip her customized margarita in the back of the limo, I'm wishing that I had ordered a double.

En route to Aria, I detour to trendily stylish Cosmopolitan Las Vegas, where I make my way up to the 14th-floor's Sarha Spa and Hammam. As the name implies, it features a Turkish bath, essentially a dry steam room with a hot stone table in its center. This one happens to be private and large enough for a party of four. Perfect for the Red Flower Hammam Experience, which blissfully includes lots of heat, exfoliation, and a stint of wet steam before I am slathered with tangerine fig-butter cream, followed by advice that to shower now defeats the purpose of the cream. Nevertheless, I cool off under a refreshing mister and enjoy a few minutes in the vitality pool before feeling prepped for tonight's über dinner: a roving tasting menu, with small (okay, *smallish*) plates at four of Vegas' best restaurants.

I convene with my friend Sarah, and we start at sushi maestro Masa Takayama's BarMass at Aria. His toro tartare conspires with black caviar to create one of the tastiest pairings on the planet. The sommelier matches it with a



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT THIS PAGE: Parfait of smoked salmon, caviar, egg white, and creme fraiche on crisply fried potato at Michael Mina at Bellagio; Stolichnaya Elit at the well-chilled Red Square; the FleurBurger 5000 at chef Hubert Keller's Fleur at Mandalay Bay; La Sphère de Sucre at Joël Robuchon in the MGM Grand. OPPOSITE PAGE: A Cirque du Soleil show in the Light Nightclub at Mandalay Bay Hotel & Casino.

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cold, dry sake that plays perfectly off the rich, aquatic flavors. Transcendentally experienced, we head out to a waiting limo and zip over to Bellagio and Michael Mina's eponymous restaurant for whole-roasted foie gras, carved table side and accompanied by a perfectly sweet sauterne. As a bonus, we sample Mina's idea of a parfait — layers of smoked salmon, caviar, egg white, and creme fraiche on a foundation of crisply fried potato. Supposedly he concocted this on his honeymoon, cobbling together a room-service order to make something special for his wife. His towering bite tastes like a labor of love. We finish up the entrees with buttery rich A5 Japanese steak — three different cuts — at the Bellagio's beef mecca, Prime, which easily lives up to its name. Then we hit Joël Robuchon in the MGM Grand for treats from a rolling dessert cart that is nothing less than an adult candy store on wheels. With 70-odd one- and two-bite offerings on hand, it's tough to narrow down what we really want, but we go for white chocolate goodies to accompany Robuchon's signature La Sphère de Sucre, a looks-too-good-to-eat globe of sugar filled with lemon mascarpone and raspberry granité.

After a quick peek at jam-packed and sprawling Hakasan — a newly opened restaurant/disco/lounge spread out over five floors in the MGM Grand, which has managed to sign exclusive contracts with the most coveted disc jockeys (including Calvin Harris, Tiësto, and deadmau5) — it's just a short limo ride down the Strip, heading south to Mandalay Bay Hotel & Casino and its newly opened Light Nightclub. We walk in and figure that the wall of high-definition visuals that surrounds the DJ would be enough to wow us — and it is — but it's outdone by performers who come swooping down from the ceiling, sexily clad and in various forms of entanglement. Cirque du Soleil has partnered with the venerable Light Group to create a spectacular show within the club. Coordinated to images on the screens, performers drop from the ceiling and pull off acrobatics that steal attention from the endless beats of house music. Prime tables are either of the two that flank the DJ booth and provide a perfect view of the Cirque action overhead. Or else book the one upstairs, alongside the lighting director, if you want to watch the Cirque performers preparing for takeoff.

Danced out, we nip next door to the Russian-themed Red Square for nightcaps inside its frigid vodka locker — so cold that you don a faux fur before entering. The decor and concept are on the kitschy side, but there is nothing hokey about the vodka selection. There are more than 100 varieties, headlined by Stolichnaya Elit at \$450 per bottle. It's 3 a.m., the club is still rocking, but I'm stuffed, a little tipsy, and a lot tired. So it's back to Aria's Sky Suites for a quick night's slumber before hitting it hard the next day.

Canyon. A fleet of Lamborghinis, Porsches, and Ferraris, courtesy of World Class Driving Experience, awaits. Hooded the color of blood oranges, a picturesque desert range looms in the distance. I enjoy a leisurely cruise through the southwestern equivalent of countryside, generally obeying the speed limit with occasional bursts of lawlessness to experience the power of these awesome cars with their track-worthy engines.

Off the mountain, back on the Vegas Strip and feeling peckish, I return to Mandalay Bay for what gets touted as the FleurBurger 5000. An off-menu item for lunch at chef Hubert Keller's Fleur, it can be ordered as a \$70 super burger — made with Kobe beef, topped with foie gras and truffles — or a \$5,000 extravaganza, souped up with a 1995 bottle of Petrus. I ask restaurant manager Michael Kaplan (no relation), if his pricey vintage qualifies as good hamburger wine and he nods assuredly. The burger itself is a tasty beast and one of the best in Vegas.



It may not be the perfect thing to eat prior to doffing one's shirt and putting on a swimsuit, but Daylight, also in the Mandalay, beckons. This is the newest pool club in Vegas — where that generally means big-name DJs, cabanas, day-beds, bottle service, and, basically, the equivalent of a nightclub under the sun — and draws a good-looking crowd of bronzed music lovers who turn the pool into a de facto dance floor. Best advice for enjoying an afternoon at Daylight: Corral 20 of your closest friends and rent one of two oversize cabanas, situated near the handstand-style stage and decked out with private swimming pools.

With so much going on, it's easy to forget that the main reason for coming to Las Vegas is to gamble. So I make my way in the poker room at Aria, the plushiest and most comfortable card spot in Las Vegas. It also boasts the highest-stakes action, usually perpetrated in The Ivey Room, a sequestered space (a poker room within the poker room, if you will) named for the legendary pro Phil Ivey. There is also, there, five flat-screen TVs, a Lalique secret space for cashing in chips after the set of these is a necessity when you figure

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