

A taste of science

Sampling experimental cuisine at the Restaurant at Platinum

By Max Jacobson

Like many proponents of the new wave in cooking, namely that which falls under the influence of the widely misunderstood term "molecular gastronomy," Brenton Hammer

looks as if he'd be more at home on a skateboard than behind the range.

Hammer, a boyish 30-year-old, hints at this phenomenon at his venue, the Restaurant at Platinum, a new resort hotel targeting convention-goers and those who want an upscale off-Strip experience, by using ingredients such as effervescent beer powder and "rosemary air" in his various creations.

A small but select group of chefs, such as Grant Achatz of Chicago's Alinea and the British star Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck, are making this a hot trend. Ferran Adrià, who owns a restaurant called El Bulli, in Rosas, Spain, is the Louis Pasteur of molecular gastronomy. He spends half the year in a lab, monkeying around with stuff like sodium alginate, which allows liquids to form beads, machines called dehydrators for powdering oils and other Popcicle-like contraptions.

This sort of cuisine, if you want to call it that, hasn't yet surfaced in Vegas, but it's getting close. So the question becomes, can this food work in a tourist economy? Time will tell.

Luckily, there are plenty of other options on the menus here, in a room that manages to be innovative at breakfast, lunch and dinner. The dining rooms, located on the hotel's fifth floor, has views of the hotel pool, and a warm, slightly generic feel.

Tables, which feature natural wooden tops, are either at tall booths swathed in brown upholstery, or free-standing, flanked by plush chairs. A series of floor-to-ceiling curtains add a touch of class, and there is a luxurious marble floor, so you know that no expense was spared in the room's design.

One Sunday evening, my wife and I sit in the back of the restaurant, facing a spray of fresh flowers. Soon we are nibbling on a tomato-crust ciabatta roll, hot from the oven, and on a tiny ceramic spoon holding beef tenderloin topped with yep, effervescent beer powder. It's an acquired taste. Odder fare follows.

One dish, gargouille of young vegetables,



Australian lamb; cranberry miso sauce; smoked maple syrup; braised spinach; Nexavis bacon

is a mishmash of 12 vegetables on top of a trio of colorful vegetable purees, with the occasional dollop of foam and the addition

of a sweet and salty parsnip cake. What's a gargouille? It's a made-up term invented by a French chef named Michel Bras, an alchemist chef that Hammer admires. How does it taste? Alternately muddy and delicious.

Along with the vegetables, we have a delicious dish called new-style Tasmanian salmon pad Thai, composed of "noodles" that are made from pure shrimp, peanut, lychee, rapini and the caper, bunks of salmon cooked by simply being splashed with hot oil. It's incredibly good, but will it play with the blue hairs from Idaho Falls? I think not.

Later, we graduate to roasted Colorado lamb shoulder on a bed of smoked maple syrup, cranberry miso, peppered bacon and rosemary air (they spray a rosemary scent onto the dish), which causes my wife to shrug. I focus on my poached and roasted *poussin*, with whispsers of Parmesan. *Poussin* turns out to be game hen, here prepared with braised leek and paprika, brushed with Parmesan foam. It's nothing too strange, and in this context, the dish seems almost medieval.

Dessert can be something like flexible chocolate mousse, which can be converted into different shapes. Don't look for whipped cream. Instead, the accoutrements run to items such as Merlot-soaked berries, Concordium wine-soaked basil and apricots and a blood-orange sorbet studded with Pop Rocks and sprinkled with sea salt. Whew!

Hammer is constantly retooling the menus, though, and there are several more

familiar options for breakfast and lunch. At lunch, don't miss the soup tasting, four mini-cups of soup like mushroom and a hearty turkey noodle, or a number of top-drawer sandwiches, such as a Cuban-style braised pork sandwich on an inside-out Hoagie roll.

I would have loved my Argentinean chicken sandwich, filled with chicken confit, peanuts, cucumber, olives, sprouts and fresh spinach, if the roll had been less cottony, but at least I ate the filling. There are burgers, too, from a classic cheeseburger to a \$50 Kobe beef burger, topped with Kobe short ribs, foie gras and black truffle.

At breakfast, Hammer serves what is easily the most creative breakfast menu in town without bending the rules relentlessly. Breakfast sandwich, for instance, is two soft eggs, crisp prosciutto, roasted tomatoes, frisee and Gruyere cheese—sort of a yuppified Breakfast Jack. Elvis Pancakes, meanwhile, are a stack of dollar-sized cakes layered with peanut butter, Nueske's bacon and bananas. Vegans have tofu Benedict, poached tofu, grilled eggplant, mushrooms and avocado on sourdough bread, smeared with olive oil Hollandaise.

Perhaps the most conventional meal is Petaluma eggs and Nueske's meats, a choice of bacon, ham or sausage, plus Kennebec potato home fries, or fresh seasonal fruit.

Platinum is betting that the convention crowd isn't conventional when it comes to food. ■



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Pin Know

This popular Thai restaurant serves authentic Thai food—if you ask them to hold the sugar. Shrimp cakes are terrific, and so is pad see ew, flat rice noodles cooked with broccoli, egg and a choice of meats. The Thai barbecue chicken might just be the best version of this dish around. 7835 S. Rainbow Blvd., 614-4805 and 1974 N. Rainbow Blvd., 638-2346. 11 a.m.-10 p.m. daily



Vegas Diner

Everything on the extensive menu at this '50s-themed diner is served all day, like a crusty chicken-fried steak with gravy for breakfast; a Reuben burger for lunch and a traditional turkey dinner with trimmings for dinner. There is a nice homemade cheese cake—just ask them to leave the strawberry sauce in the can. 6840 W. Sahara Ave. 396-7800. 6 a.m.-10 p.m. daily