

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

February 2011

Circulation: 487,524

Las Vegas's Best Restaurants



Courtesy of Caesars Palace

Rao's

The last meal is upon you. There's an 11:30 red-eye to catch. You and Jack are at Caesars, wrestling with a dilemma. You have a table booked upstairs at Restaurant Guy Savoy—meaning you have the chance to eat three dinners, on three consecutive nights, by three of France's greatest living chefs.

But to be honest, you are craving pasta something fierce. And just downstairs from Guy Savoy is...Rao's. Rao's! Whose 10 tables in Harlem are still the toughest booking in New York, 115 years on. And here it is in Caesars Palace, overflowing with marinara sauce and the whoops of wine-soaked celebrants. And there's a booth available! You marvel at the absurdity of the choice: Guy Savoy...or Rao's! Only in Vegas. So which will it be?

The Vegas outpost is four times larger than Manhattan's, but it's divided into separate dining rooms, each scaled like the original. There's a warmth here that's hard to quarrel with: soft-glowing sconces, burnished plank floors, the obligatory head shot. Waitstaff are prone to laughter; even the busboys slap your back. Rao's inspires confidence. This is a place where, when they offer grated Parmesan, you say, "Yes," and when they offer another bottle, you say, "Hell, yes."

You say "Hell, yes" to a lot at Rao's. To a zesty insalata di mare—calamari, shrimp, PEI mussels, lobster, and sweet crabmeat. To penne alla vodka and toothsome fiocchetti, stuffed with ricotta and pear, in a sage-butter-cranberry sauce. "That's my jam!" shouts Jack, knocking over his wine glass. You realize how much you've missed this kind of food. (Except the meatballs. Biting into Rao's polpetta is like gnawing on a Birkenstock.)

More wine is brought. You try to find the bathroom and wind up on the bocce court. When you return, the woman in the next booth is giving her consort a lap dance. Bombed on Barolo and cheesecake, you and Jack defer your departure. JetBlue can wait. Instead, you're hatching plans for your own casino resort. Jack's idea: Vegas, Vegas. Scale models of all the hotels on the Strip, each with just one room. "Very exclusive," he reasons.

"What'll the restaurants serve?" you ask.

"Small plates, of course."