

**BigMemory from Terracotta**
[Start your free trial now >](#)

**Larry Olmsted**, Contributor  
 I travel to learn, eat, golf and ski, but mostly for travel's sake  
[+ Follow \(275\)](#)

LIFESTYLE | 9/16/2013 @ 7:29AM | 2,005 views

# America's Toughest Restaurant Reservation Just Got Easier, As Rao's Hits LA

[+ Comment Now](#) [+ Follow Comments](#)

If you are the Mayor of New York City, the Empire State's Governor, or a starter (benchwarmers take heed) for the Mets or Yankees, you have almost certainly dined at Rao's, and your photo may even be on the wall. If you are not one of the above, or at least a longtime A-list New Yorker celebrity like Woody Allen, chances are good you have never (and will never) experienced a meal in this legendary Italian-American eatery, as Rao's, the 100-plus year old East Harlem institution, is simply the toughest restaurant reservation in this country, if not the world. But it's far from snobby or exclusive: Rao's is tiny, and its longstanding cadre of regulars, stretching back decades, have priority. And they eat here a lot.



The famed meatballs at Rao's are large, ultra-light and tender and a favorite of many customers going back decades.

If you think I am exaggerating the difficulty of eating a meal at Rao's, I'm not. Sure, Michelin 3-star eateries like The French Laundry book months out, and Ferran Adria's late elBulli, often ranked the world's top eatery, would sell out the second phone lines opened, but none of these holds a candle to Rao's, where the phone lines never open. There are about a dozen tables in the tiny but jubilant eatery, and each is spoken for, semi-permanently. It's technically public, but just one step removed from a private supper club, as regulars have had their reservations for years, and when they can't use them, they often gift them to friends, leaving everyone else to get in if they know someone who has a table or by fluke. It is so small that the owners rarely have the flexibility to do favors even for people they know, and since it is perennially busy they have never courted publicity. The last prominent national review of the restaurant came from *New York Times* restaurant luminary Mimi Sheraton – more than 35 years ago (it was already a tough table, but she raved about it and reservations have been non-existent ever since). As a result, Rao's is equal parts legend and myth, so hard to get into that very few restaurant critics have been – and not for lack of trying.



## More Celebrity Chefs Flock To Las Vegas With New Eateries

Larry Olmsted Contributor



## Giada Does Vegas: New Restaurant Doubles Female Celebrity Chefs On Strip

Larry Olmsted Contributor



## Enjoy America's Best Regional Foods In Your Own Home

Larry Olmsted Contributor



## The World's Best Barbecue - Really

Larry Olmsted Contributor

I am very, very lucky to have dined at Rao's a few times, more by good fortune than my profession, and I have loved every visit, since the experience and theater rival the tasty food. Every meal begins with a drink at the stand-up bar, served by Nick "The Vest," so named because he always wears a colorful vest (Looney Tunes one time I visited), of which he owns hundreds, and you have to eat there nightly for years to see a repeat. There are no menus, and one of the proprietors will pull up a chair and run through the massive list of options, allowing you to customize by mixing and matching virtually any protein with any classical Italian style of cooking, and any sauce or preparation with any pasta. They don't take credit cards, they aren't open on Saturday or Sunday, they aren't open for lunch, and at some point during your meal the one-room restaurant will almost inevitably breakout in song. It is truly one of a kind.

The New York original offers an experience shaped by its minuscule size and the personality of one of its omnipresent principals, and this is tough to replicate elsewhere, but a few years ago [Rao's opened a satellite in Las Vegas' Caesar's Palace](#), and they did a pretty good job.

One reason is because the family that owns Rao's takes turns coming out to oversee the operation, and like New York, there is always an owner on hand. There is even a "Rao's room" within the much larger eatery, which is basically a reproduction of the entire New York space, and the staff wear vests as an homage. There is a very pleasant outdoor dining terrace, more appropriate in Vegas than the Big Apple, and even a bocce court. It's not as intimate but it tries hard and has a good vibe and it features the signature classics for which Rao's is best known: lemon chicken, a very rich seafood salad, the famous huge but ethereally light meatballs, and a simple but amazing salad of roasted red peppers, pine nuts and golden raisins with olive oil, a combination that must be tried to be believed. I've actually made this several times for guests at my

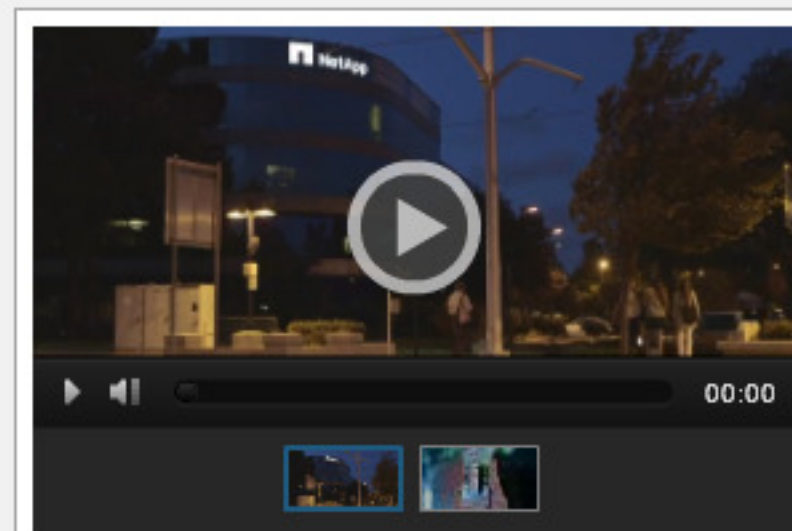
own house, safe in the knowledge that they won't recognize the source, and they are always wowed. Then I tell them where I borrowed the combination from.

This week, hopefully as early as tomorrow (restaurant openings are always notoriously iffy) Rao's will open its third location in Los Angeles. Size wise, it is smack in the middle with seating for 95, still a small place but huge compared to New York and intimate compared to Vegas. Chef Nicole Grimes is a James Beard Award semi-finalist and comes to LA from Vegas, where she has been at the stove since the day that successful spot opened, so she has plenty of experience with Rao's cuisine.

Can a spin off Rao's match the uniquely colorful original? Probably not. Will they have great Italian American cuisine and a playful sense of fun? Almost certainly. With almost any restaurant successful enough to spawn satellites, regulars will insist that the original is the best, and in this case it likely is, but the bottom line is that if you can get into the one in New York you probably won't be visiting the Las Vegas or Los Angeles locations, and if you can't get into the one in New York, you should absolutely make a reservation at one of the others – though I am hearing that reservations at the new LA spot have been going fast. No surprise there.

Rao's LA occupies the space that was formerly the Hollywood Canteen, and for now, reservations can be made by calling (323) 962-7267 and the restaurant will serve dinner only, from 5pm to 10:30pm. Like NYC it will only be open on weekdays, at least initially. Mangia!

Follow Me on [Twitter Here](#)



**FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT**  
 RACE DATE: 04 SEPTEMBER 2013  
[Get details >>](#)  
  
 EMC Corporation 12 Sep  
 @EMCCorp  
 Where high performance business demands high performance technology.  
 #EMC delivers emc.in/18eLXg8 Do you  
**#SPEED2LEAD**

## Most Read on Forbes

[NEWS](#) [People](#) [Places](#) [Companies](#)

**Why 'Breaking Bad' Is The Best Show Ever And Why That Matters**  
+227,849 views

**With iOS 7 Looming, Should You Wait To Upgrade?** +151,352 views

**Inside The 2013 Forbes 400: Facts And Figures On America's Richest**  
+150,259 views

**The Complete List Of The Forbes 400 Members** +72,566 views

**A Visual Reminder Of How Far Xbox 360 Games Have Come In Eight Years**  
+67,703 views

[+ show more](#)

**Larry Olmsted**  
 Contributor  
[+ Follow \(275\)](#)

I have been traveling the world as a journalist and passionate lover of all things fun for nearly 20 years. I have had weekly columns in USA Today and Investors Business Daily, published thousands of articles in leading magazines from Playboy to Popular Science, and am the author of Getting Into Guinness. I am the Contributing

[+ show more](#)

*The author is a Forbes contributor. The opinions expressed are those of the writer.*

### LARRY OLMSTED'S POPULAR POSTS

**Food's Biggest Scam: The Great Kobe Beef Lie**  
988,558 views

**Unlocking Your iPhone Could Save You Big, At Home And Overseas UPDATE** 370,741 views

**Food's Biggest Scam, Part 2: 'Domestic' Kobe And Wagyu Beef** 331,387 views

**10 Coolest All-Inclusive Resorts** 315,409 views

**The 10 Best Cities For Weekend Vacations**  
157,127 views

### MORE FROM LARRY OLMSTED

