

Cozy Local Diners Crop Up Near the Las Vegas Strip



This March 21, 2014 photo shows a chicken sandwich with pan-seared free-range chicken, fresh mozzarella, tomato, local baby greens and pesto mayo on ciabatta at Eat in Las Vegas. Eat is part of a boom in cozy neighborhood restaurants in what was once the derelict core of Las Vegas. Chef and owner Natalie Young says she designed the restaurant as an alternative to the glitzy cuisine on the Strip. (AP Photo/Hannah Drier)

LAS VEGAS (AP) — You might not expect to find farm-to-table dining in Las Vegas. But that's exactly why tourists are lining up at a rundown corner a few blocks near the old casinos in the town's seedy core.

It takes visitors arriving by cab a few minutes to locate the nouveau diner Eat on the ground floor of a motel-style apartment complex that rents rooms by the month and looks like a place where a down-on-his-luck crime caper hero might live.

But this is Las Vegas' first neighborhood restaurant with an emphasis on freshness and locally sourced ingredients. Eat has been a favorite among locals since it opened two years ago, when more than 100 people lined up to get their first taste. Chef and owner Natalie Young temporarily closed the restaurant that first night to regroup.

She conceived the restaurant as an antidote to the caviar-drenched, truffle-infused upscale restaurants most commonly associated with Sin City. She spent more than a decade working at some of the Strip's fanciest venues, including the restaurant at the top of the ersatz Eiffel Tower. At Eat, she's kept the linen napkins, but chucked the overheated menu descriptions and steep prices.

"There's enough Vegas in Vegas," she said, raising her voice a little to be heard

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above the buzz of a typically packed morning at Eat.

The menu is small, with a Southern accent, and it's closed for dinner. Breakfast offerings include buttery cinnamon biscuits served with berries piled on top, free-range eggs any way you like, and pillowy beignets with seasonal jam and mascarpone. For lunch, there are salads, sandwiches on thick toasted bread, shrimp and grits, and the best grilled cheese in town. There can be a two-hour wait for a table on weekends — though it's more like 15 minutes on weekdays.

The place tends to be noisy, and that's by design. The ceilings are high, the tables are spread out, and there is no Wi-Fi, to encourage diners to interact with each other.

For locals, there's another major appeal: You can walk there. Other cities take for granted the ability to stroll from lunch to a store to a cafe, but until recently in Las Vegas, residents have had to choose between driving to strip malls or braving the sprawling indoor mall that is a modern casino.

Now, however, downtown Vegas is starting to cohere into the city's first traditional neighborhood. Within the past 12 months, a critical mass of boutique restaurants has moved downtown, a novelty in an area long dominated by the Heart Attack Grill, where people who weigh over 350 pounds (about 160 kilos) eat free.

Visitors wary of the wait at Young's restaurant can walk a few blocks south to MTO, which serves fresh comfort food in a brightly lit space. Or they can amble north toward the touristy Fremont Street, where the Rat Pack once gambled, and check out Wild, a whimsical gluten-free pizza and salad place that is much more delectable than you might think. A block away, Le Thai offers addictive, spicy Thai food in a tiny space.

Wild and Eat were both funded by the Downtown Project, which is remaking the once-derelict heart of Las Vegas with funding from Zappo's CEO Tony Hsieh.

The project also is responsible for a new park built out of shipping containers opposite Eat. One of the containers is home to Pinches Tacos, arguably the city's best Mexican food. But no matter where you eat, the Container Park is an appealing after-meal destination. It offers beer, wine and giant twirling slides for adults as well as kids. This is still Vegas, after all.

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If You Go...

EAT: 707 Carson St., Las Vegas, 702-534-1515, <http://eatdtlv.com> [1]

LE THAI: 523 Fremont St., Las Vegas, 702-778-0888, <http://www.letthaivegas.com> [2]

MTO: 500 South Main St., Las Vegas, 702-380-8229, <http://mtocafe.com/> [3]

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PINCHES TACOS: 707 East Fremont St. at Container Park, Las Vegas, 702-910-3100, <http://pinchestacos.com> [4]

WILD: 150 North Las Vegas Blvd., Las Vegas, 702-527-7717, <http://eatdrinkwild.com> [5]

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Links:

[1] <http://eatdtlv.com>

[2] <http://www.lethaivegas.com>

[3] <http://mtocafe.com/>

[4] <http://pinchestacos.com>

[5] <http://eatdrinkwild.com>