Preview: Shake-ups, surprises among 50 ‘Essential’ Las Vegas restaurants

By: Robin Leach

The much-feared and eagerly awaited “Eating Las Vegas 2013: The 50 Essential Restaurants” goes on sale next week, and Vegas DeLuxe has a preview of who’s in and who’s out.

The New York Times describes the three Las Vegas food writers John Curtas, Max Jacobson and Al Mancini as the Rat Pack of Reviewers. Their kitchen knives have been sharpened, and the comments are biting, candid, funny and relevant.

Three newcomers are part of the Top 10, including two off-Strip restaurants, a first for the book in its third year. Additionally, 11 new restaurants made the “Essential 50.” But when restaurants are added, casualties are inevitable, and 11 previously listed didn’t make the cut this time around.

The seriously studied Veto section has been expanded, and each one of the restaurants could have been included in the Top 10. That’s because all three critics have to agree on the choice, and one veto from one writer torpedoes its place in the prized position -- even if the other two desperately want it included.

That contentious section pits author against author in a free-for-all food fight. You’ll be able to watch those no-holds-barred arguments when John and Al star in their new Travel Channel show next year visiting restaurants in U.S. cities.

“The fact that we’ve made it this far without killing one another is a testament to our love for this project,” say the three authors. “Because for all our differences in age, area of expertise, level of experience and food preferences, we continue to believe that three heads are better than one when trying to create the definitive list of must-try Las Vegas restaurants.

“In fact, it’s those differences that have always inspired this book. We write with drastically different voices and acutely different sensibilities to three totally different crowds. … If any one of us had tried to write this individually, it would have been embraced by people who enjoy our specific writings, but quickly dismissed by those who dislike us.

“There were once again a fair number of not-so-friendly debates. … It was for these much-argued-about places that we originally created, and this year expanded, the Veto section. We hope those chefs of the vetoed establishments realize that they were a mere step away from inclusion, which puts them right there with the city’s best.

“So what’s changed since last year? A lot! Of the 50 restaurants we declare ‘essential,’ 20 percent are new entries not featured in last year’s book. The Top 10 features three restaurants that didn’t receive the honor last year. Marche Bacchus:

Food writer Alan Richman comments in his foreword: “John, Max and Al do not pussyfoot. These three have
more balls than a Texas BBQ shack! They’ve mastered the sucker punch. What makes them eminently
readable is that they don’t just attack chefs and restaurateurs; they’re happiest when they’re out to get one
another. Most restaurant critics have become too polite and predictable. But these guys have it all: passion,
humor and guts. Alone without one another to annoy, they are merely very good. Put them together, and you
have a bar fight in an old World War II movie -- bodies flying through windows. Collectively, they soar to the
ultimate heights of reviewing.

"Eating Las Vegas 2013: The 50 Essential Restaurants."

Eating Las Vegas at L'Atelier

"AI likes to trash John and Max for being fogies. Ultimately, the trio’s erratic behavior results in some of the
most readable writing in the history of food reviewing. These three are incapable of writing an uninteresting
word."

Here's the culinary box score in alphabetical order:

Added to the Top 10: Marche Bacchus and Raku, both off-Strip, and Valentino in the Venetian. Added to the
Essential 50: Bread & Butter, Comme Ca, Due Forni, Fleur, Gordon Ramsay Steak, Kabuto, Le Thai, Mint
Indian Bistro, Mix, Public House and Sirio.

Dropped from the Top 10 but still in the 50: Michael Mina, Twist and Bar Masa. Dropped from the Essential 50:
Aureole, Bar+Bistro, Beijing Noodle No.9, Bouchon, Circo, DW Bistro, First Food & Bar, Los Antojos, M&M Soul
Food Cafe, Sen of Japan and Settebello.

Here’s the Top 10 in alphabetical order: Cut by Wolfgang Puck at the Palazzo; Estiatorio Milos at the
Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas; Guy Savoy at Caesars Palace; Joel Robuchon and L’Atelier de Joel Robuchon at
MGM Grand; Le Cirque at Bellagio; Marche Bacchus at Desert Shores; Picasso at Bellagio; Raku on Spring
Mountain Road; and Valentino in the Venetian.

Celebrity chefs included in the The Rest of the Best are Michael Mina with two entrants at Bellagio and Aria;
Mario Batali also with two -- Carnevino at the Palazzo and B&B in the Venetian; Wolfgang Puck’s Spago in the
Forum Shops at Caesars (celebrating its 20th anniversary this month); Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken’s
Border Grill at Mandalay Bay; Paul Bartolotta’s seafood palace at the Wynn; Hubert Keller’s Fleur at Mandalay
Bay; Gordon Ramsay Steak at the Paris; Julian Serrano at Aria; Alain Ducasse’s Mix at The Hotel at Mandalay
Bay; Rick Moonen’s RM Seafood at Mandalay Bay; Geno Bernardo’s Nove Italiano in the Palms; Frank
Pellegrino Jr.’s Rao’s in Caesars Palace; Kerry Simon’s Simon at Palms Place; Pierre Gagnaire’s Twist at
Mandarin Oriental; Sirio Maccioni’s Sirio at Aria; and Shawn McLain’s Sage at Aria.

Old favorites such as Lotus of Siam, Top of the World, Payard Patisserie, Eiffel Tower and Ping Pang Pong are
included.

Just one step from listing in the top but included in the Veto section: Thomas Keller’s Bouchon, David Walzog’s
Lakeside at the Wynn, Carla Pellegrino’s Bratalian, Steve Martorano’s Cafe Martorano at the Rio, Tom
Colicchio’s Craftsteak at MGM Grand, Bobby Flay’s Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace, Barry Dakake’s N9NE
Steakhouse at the Palms, Scott Conant’s Scarpetta at the Cosmopolitan and Kim Canteenwalla’s former
Society Cafe at the Wynn.

I’ll help MC the official unveiling and nationwide book launch at Rao’s on Dec. 18. Meantime, publisher Anthony
Curtis summed up: "When we green-lit this project three years ago, I wasn’t sure its realization was even a
possibility as we were dealing with three highly knowledgeable but incredibly strong-willed personalities.

“But John, Max and Al have continued to deliver on their promise to seek out and agree upon 50 essential Las
Vegas restaurants. Some of the results may be easier to swallow than others, but the authors refuse to place
celebrity above credibility.”