



Settebello's certified Italian pizza.

Great Food for Less

Don't let the economy get your dining spirits down. Just follow our food critic along the more adventurous, less expensive ethnic route.

You may have noticed lately that your dining dollars aren't stretching quite as far as they used to. That goes doubly if you already had expensive taste. Along with the explosion of top chefs, high-end design, Michelin-starred fabulousness and world-class food have come prices that will curdle your cream. But you can survive these times of inflation without indigestion by exploring the vast array of serious ethnic eats in the Las Vegas Valley that deliver a serious bang for the buck and offer a culinary education to boot. Here's my list of favorites, geographically spread out so you can get to one easily—you may have noticed that your gas dollars aren't going as far as they used to, either.

Settebello (1776 W. Horizon Ridge Pkwy., Suite. 202, Henderson, 222-3556, settebello.net). There's no better place to start that education than in this obscure strip mall at Horizon Ridge and Valle Verde (although, by October, Settebello will have moved into The District II). This sole bastion of Vera Pizza Napoletana (pizza certified as authentic by Italian authorities) has deliciously raised Las Vegas' pizza IQ and created a standard for excellence that makes it difficult to retreat to lesser pizza. True Italian wood-fired pizza is about the smoky, chewy-yet-crispy dough, and one bite of *pizzaiolo* Carmine D'Amato's Margherita

(\$9) or the cheese-less Marinara (\$7) will have you swearing off franchised pies forever.

Cajun BBQ Shack (9620 Las Vegas Blvd. South, Suite N-8, 737-7427, cajunbbqshack.com). Another hidden treasure, the Shack—perhaps the best hole-in-the-wall barbecue joint in town—is tucked into a corner of an overstuffed strip mall in the shadow of the South Pointe hotel-casino. This is a one-man operation, and that man—gentle giant Paul Nwuli—knows a thing or two about succulent brisket, chopped pork and ribs. He also makes his own thick, rich, sweet and hot barbecue sauces. Order a sandwich (\$6) or a platter (\$10-\$13), and Nwuli (who hails from West Africa by way of New Orleans) goes to the smoker, chops some meat and plates it right in front of you. The atmosphere isn't much, but that is a recommendation unto itself, since the faux Southern digs that seem to be the default décor of choice in more expensive places don't improve their corporate 'cue one bit.

Raku (5030 W. Spring Mountain Rd., Suite 2, 374-9572). If Southern comfort is too rib-sticking for you, there is an antidote some miles to the north and west. Raku may be the most revolutionary restaurant to open in Vegas in years. Just ask every chef and foodie

Dining



Raku's tofu salad.

in town—they've all made a pilgrimage to feast on the small-plate perfections of chef/owner Mitsuo Endo. *Robatayaki* (grilling) is the rule here, done over expensive Japanese charcoal that subtly perfumes the impeccable ingredients in dishes that range from Kobe beef liver to Japanese *hokke* fish. Those small plates sometime contain only a few bites, but they are at 1977 prices (\$1.50-\$8), making this the perfect place to expand your repertoire of one of the world's most healthful cuisines.

Hedary's (7365 W. Sahara Ave., 873-9041, hedarys.com). Healthful food is also the watchword at this Lebanese restaurant, which blows away the Middle Eastern food competition in the Valley. The beneficial effects of tabbouleh, hummus, baba ghanoush, falafel and *labni* are well-documented, and you won't find any better examples than those behind this modest storefront. The warm, puffy and complementary pita bread is addictive and constantly replenished throughout your meal. A small Middle Eastern wine list, featuring a number of Lebanese bottles in the \$15-30 range, is also a plus, as are house-made sausages (pork or spicy beef) and a *mehshe* platter (veggies or sirloin wrapped in grape or cabbage leaves) that is more than two people can eat. Either would be a steal at twice the price (\$13).

Samosa Factory (4604 W. Sahara Ave., Suite 6, 258-9196, samosafactory.com). All of the Indian standards—fire-engine-red tandooris, fluffy naan, onion *kulcha*, biry-

anis, curries and *kormas*—are done here as well or better than any Indian restaurant in town. But what sets it apart from the generally generic food of the subcontinent (at least as interpreted by most Indian restaurants here) are the superb vegetarian recipes of Rita and Anand Sirivastava's kitchen. Their *koftas* (grated vegetable dumplings, \$8), stewed okra with onion, turnips with ginger and mustard greens (when available, \$8) will make you question what you ever saw in chicken vindaloo. Best of all, the deeply spiced flavors in all of their dishes tell you they are not making flavor compromises just to please the Western palate. And no one leaves here without taking home at least one jar of Rita's house-made chutneys.

The Lao Thai Kitchen/Lan Xang II (1000 N. Nellis Blvd., Suite 1, 453-9188). For those on the northeast side of town, there is but one ethnic gem among all of the low-rent chains and burger zircons. Lao Thai is easy to miss, situated in the middle of a nondescript strip mall, but just look for the sign advertising the \$5.99 Thai buffet lunch special. And once seated, ignore the sign, grab a menu and order pad thai, red curry catfish, green papaya salad and some sour Issan Thai sausages—dishes that are just a couple dollars more than the buffet bargain. The kindly waitress will smile at you when she sees your eyeballs sweating, and you will smile back, because both of you know you're eating the real thing.

El Sombrero (807 S. Main St., 382-9234). No tour of cheap ethnic eats would be complete without a stop at Las Vegas' oldest restaurant. It opened in 1950, and has had Jose Aragon at the stoves downtown since 1955. He will tell you that his cuisine is *New Mexican*, not Mexican, and his chile verde and chile Colorado, with their deep, fiery flavors, are as reminiscent of Albuquerque as anything you will find in this neck of the woods. Culinary distinctions aside, Aragon's salsas, burritos, enchiladas and *huevos con machaca* are made from scratch—not from a Sysco can—at prices (\$10-\$13) that seem to have been frozen in the “We Like Ike” era. If you're looking for authenticity, this is as cheap as it comes. **DC**

John Curtas' Food for Thought commentaries air weekly on News 88.9 KNPR, and his website is eatinglv.com.