

French Persistence

After 20 years in downtown's trenches, Andre's still sparkles

Long before Wolfgang Puck's Spago, Sirio Maccioni's Le Cirque and Emeril Lagasse's New Orleans Fish House defined Vegas' restaurant scene, any establishment with a headwaiter and a continental menu called itself "gourmet." The wait staff tried to pass off funny little French accents on unassuming tourists, while menu items like overdone *tournedos rossini* and *coquille saint jacques* had even the locals making a beeline to the buffet line.

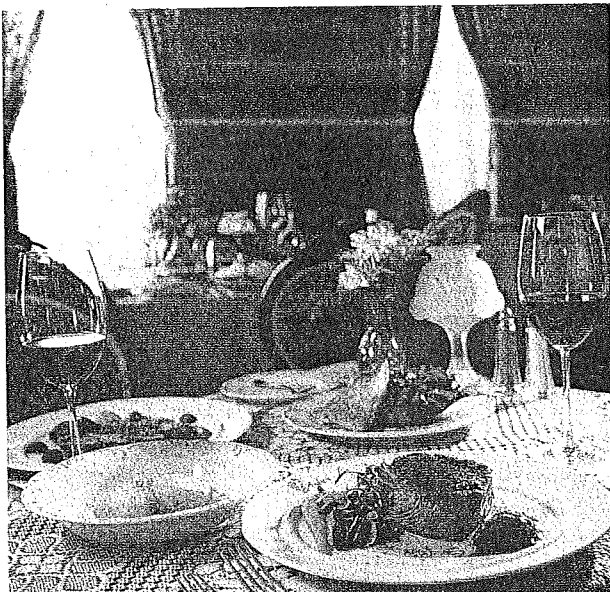
In 1980, in the midst of this restaurant wasteland, a French pastry chef by the name of Andre Rochat strode in to open the only kind of eatery he knew—gourmet. French and very, very good.

Besides the obstacle of being in a city where Muscovy duck with cranberry sauce was once a tough sell, Andre's French Restaurant has had to overcome the slings and arrows of the bad fortune that all noncasino businesses in downtown Las Vegas have had to put up with. Imagine trying to run a dress-up restaurant while a city-sponsored construction debacle takes place on your doorstep—for three years. Or trying to draw any regulars at all in the neighborhood overrun by pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers (now in check if not completely gone) for whom "crack" didn't mean opening a bottle of *grand cru* Burgundy. And contemplate a business that must struggle with the continuing entropy of downtown redevelopment, all the while whipping up first-class soufflés night after night.

So what's his secret?

Solid renditions of the world's most intense and extracted cuisine, a healthy number of loyal baby boomers who got their first taste of sophistication at Andre's tables, an ever-expanding number of visitors hungry for a grand, gourmet meal off the Strip and the ability to shut out its surroundings.

What brings downtown devotees back time and again begins with the cozy country



Andre's draws diners with all the charm of a French country inn, but keeps them coming back with a menu filled with decadent dishes.

atmosphere. Smack dab inside the entrance you're confronted with a long and suitably brassy bar, amply stocked with potent potions. What draws the most attention, though, is the glass and mirrored shelves stocking exotic brandies that can be justified only if you're spending someone else's money. Better to stick with a nice glass of Tattinger n.v. champagne, or one of the smooth domestics always perched and chilling in the great ice bucket dominating the bar's expanse.

After a few sips of bubbly and nibbles from the pretzel bowl (the only disappointing thing about the bar experience), it's off to a table in one of the three timbered rooms, each of which perfectly evokes the rustic elegance of a well-run French country inn. In years past, I've found them a bit on the side of kitsch, but keeping up with the competition has inspired new starch and polish.

Once comfortably ensconced in one of the comfortable armchairs or banquettes, an *amuse gueule*—a "small bite" or "chef's treat," or whatever your well-meaning

waiter calls it in fractured French—is quickly (sometimes too quickly) brought to the table. A recent offering included a puff pastry stick wrapped with cured salmon atop a dollop of *crème fraîche*. Solid and only slightly salty, this appetite provoker underscores both the strengths and weaknesses of the kitchen. For although it turns out fine versions of classic dishes, the kitchen falters when venturing into haute cuisine. Same goes for another "amuse," a fine hash of pancetta with lentils and sweet vinegar that is by no means a disaster, but a palette deadener as one-dimensional as it is cloying.

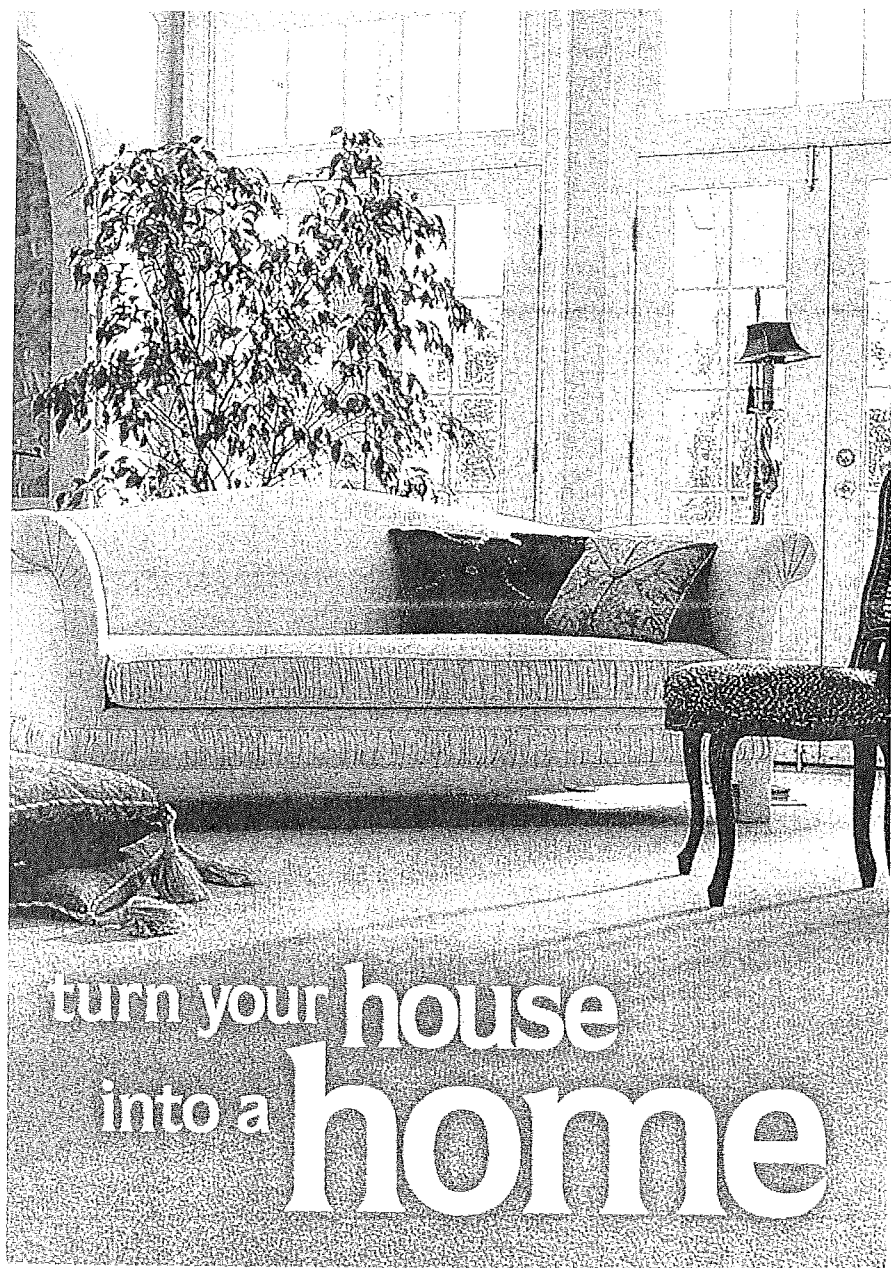
Reach can exceed grasp when it comes to menu items as well. Simpler is invariably better, whether from the oddly named "hors d'oeuvres" side of the dining card or the main courses. No one in town turns out a better *escargots de bourgogne*, and the classic onion soup au gratin

tastes the way a classic is supposed to. Unfortunately, the vichyssoise lacks both its potato and truffle essence, and the "salad" of baked pear and Roquefort in phyllo turns out to be a gooey mess once fork is set to creation.

Things improve remarkably where the main dishes are considered. As with the starter courses, the best bets are to be found from such standard menu items as the capon breast (perfectly cooked and oh-so-slightly gamy) in an intense broccoli cream sauce, and medallions of prime filet sitting atop a sharp green-peppercorn-and-cognac-cream sauce. You can't go wrong, either, with the nicely turned-out vegetable chartreuse served with *roma tomato coulis* and maxim potatoes—a fresh vegetable terrine that will easily please the vegans in your crowd.

Lovers of quantity and quality swoon over the combination of venison tenderloin in a Madeira sauce, a mustard-and-garlic rack of lamb, and huge, grilled freshwater shrimp—truly the ultimate surf-and-turf.

Sad to say, these qualities are not



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shared by two of the most expensive items: an imported Dover sole (\$47) that's hardly worth the bother, or the two-pound lobster (\$48) served out of its shell with scallops and shrimp, but smothered by a dense and creamy "au gratin" sauce that the otherwise fine ingredients are left swimming in.

And whenever Rochat and staff feel the need to Puck-it up a bit, the result is usually disappointing and too expensive—such as when turbot gets wrapped in banana leaves (to no great effect) and a Merlot sauce that barely complements a perfectly cooked piece of Atlantic salmon.

But the "more-is-less" phenomenon is most prevalent at Andre's second location, inside the Monte Carlo hotel-casino. The menus are almost identical, but that's where the similarity ends. Splashy décor and good service can't compensate for the long stroll through the casino, as well as food that tries too hard and always seems to be a notch or two below that of the downtown location.

Maybe it's the intimacy, the pressure of pleasing a steady stream of repeat customers, or simply being at it longer, but everything seems to gel—as well as taste better—downtown. Inside the Monte Carlo, you (and they) definitely get away with less. Prices, however, are slightly higher.

Of course, all this high-end food comes with an equally high-roller-oriented wine list that is not for the timid. Be prepared to be impressed by the depth of the selections—more than a thousand—including verticals of all the *premier grand cru* (first-growth) Bordeaux, as well as many big-hitters from California. But also be prepared for some serious sticker shock. Joseph Phelps Insignia is a first-class wine by any standard, but here you'll pay \$195 for a bottle that'll only set you back \$145 at The Palm. And I don't know anyone who has the money and lack of brains to pay \$150 for a 1.5-liter bottle of Chateau Font Villac, which is a \$25 bottle of mediocre merlot at the Rio Wine Cellar. To be safe, stick with what few bottles are priced under \$50, which sommelier Hank Maglia will gladly steer you toward.

Desserts are typical flights of French fancy. Waiters push the soufflés from the get-go, with good reason. At \$9.75, they're well worth the wait and price. Both the chocolate and Grand Marnier are suitably eggy, dense and light—a trick that only a first-class pastry chef can pull off. Some don't work quite as well (like the phyllo-wrapped warm chocolate cake that crumbles), but on the whole, everything on the cart is wholly satisfying.

And through thick and thin, that's always been Andre's bottom line.



Executive chef and proprietor Andre Rochat proffers the largest wine list, as well as more ports and cognacs, than any other restaurant in town.