

Journey of a thousand foods ends in Vegas

How snails, seafood and more get from point "A" to point "V"— Vegas

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You name it and it's served with a parsley garnish in Las Vegas.

From fresh Italian fish to Spanish Ibérico ham, Vegas cuisine is full of exotic ingredients that could have more passport stamps than you do.

Have you ever wondered how those specialty foods get on your plate? And, why is it important they come from particular places? After all, Ibérico ham (Spain) is fun to say, but we have pigs in the United States.

You say "tomato," I say "tom-ahto"

Believe it or not, food tastes different depending upon where it's from. I know what you're thinking, a tomato is a tomato and they come in three kinds, small, medium and large.

But not so, say Kristin Sande and Bob Howald, owners of Valley Cheese & Wine in Henderson, Nev. With more than 17 years of experience each, Sande and Howald bring in fine food and beverages from around the world, with good reason.

"There are certain food products that are so unique. In wine, they talk about 'terroir' [when] it tastes like the land that it's grown in. It's very much apparent in food," says Sande.

Take for example the tomato. Valley Cheese & Wine carries San Marzano tomatoes, grown in volcanic soil in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius in San Marzano, Italy. With thicker flesh and fewer seeds, the San Marzano tomato is lower in acidity, a bit sweeter than regular tomatoes and great for making sauces or thrown on top of a pizza.

Differences in region and fodder can also make a difference in meats. Ibérico ham is from an ancient breed of pigs called Pata Negra or "black hoof," which is a special boar in Spain, and is fed only wild plants and acorns. Sande explains that the pig who supplied the front shoulder meat sitting in her deli case was fed acorns during the last few days of its life to imbue its meat with a nuttier, earthy flavor. The ham has only been allowed into the United States since December, 2007. At \$139.99 per pound at Valley Cheese & Wine, Pata Negra's price point might be a little hard to swallow, but the flavor is well worth it.

When asked why it's important he get his fish from Italy, Paul Bartolotta, executive chef of Bartolotta, Ristorante di Mare at Wynn Las Vegas, is quick to reply:

"We stereotypically, in this country, associate Italian food with the Tuscan farmhouse and the wheat fields and the cypress trees and the vineyards, when in reality, there is an incredible maritime culture in Italy."

Bartolotta has scoured different parts of Italy to find only the freshest quality fish and the best tasting from different parts of Italy. His quest to find where a certain kind of fish tastes the best leads him to do tastings with fish guys in Italy and in the markets.

"Certain ones are happier from a certain zip code, even though the fish usually swim all over the Mediterranean," explains Bartolotta.

Much of what Sande and Bartolotta are ensuring is the quality of the products they give to clients. At



Illustration by John Coulter

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— Executive Chef Paul Bartolotta



Courtesy of Wynn Las Vegas

Chef Paul Bartolotta examines fish at a market in Italy. After cooking for years in Italy and France, Bartolotta knows quality.

MGM Grand, Vice President of Food & Beverage, David McIntyre, insists on high quality ingredients for the 20 restaurants he oversees.

"The demand for quality ingredients is driven by the demand for exceptional quality in the highest caliber restaurants, such as Joël Robuchon or Craftsteak," says McIntyre.

Because Vegas clientele are demanding better quality foods, new and exotic delicacies, the supply must keep up with the ever-evolving culinary market.

Faster than a speeding—snail?

Because Las Vegas has few edible resources to meet the demand of its many restaurants, getting food to Vegas from other parts of the world is essential. Sometimes, food can take three to six weeks to come to Las Vegas, especially

if it's an international shipment.

There are trucks, veterinarians to check the quality and the species of imported food, airplanes, more trucks, maybe a train ... It's almost certain that before your food gets to you, it visits with several other host families on these carriers.

Fortunately, Bartolotta has found a way to expedite shipping methods.

The process is quite extraordinary. Bartolotta sees to it that the fish get to his restaurant in the quickest way possible. He bypasses fish auctions and has almost zero waiting time loading and unloading on the docks. He's got it down to such a science that he's guarded in his answers and dodges questions regarding specifics.

While other chefs are ordering steaks, pounds of boxed pasta and garnishing their all-you-can-eat-buffets, Bartolotta is picking out fish from the Mediterranean

via text messaged snapshots, choosing available veterinarians to expedite the shipping process, and making sure these Italian-caught beauties have less of a wait at the customs counter than you would.

Bartolotta recalls one night when an Italian fisherman text messaged him to tell him to check his e-mail. He checked his e-mail to find a photo of a beautiful Mediterranean fish, fresh caught on a fishing boat.

"I went to my e-mail and opened it up and there's a picture of my fish guy holding this beautiful Ombrina. He said, 'do you want it?' And I texted him back, 'how much?' And he said 'if you have to ask you can't afford it.' And I said, 'I trust you, I'll take it, be nice.'"

After cooking for years in Italy, among other places, Bartolotta knows quality. That's why he insists on only the freshest and the best fish. The chef travels to Italy, tastes the same fish from different regions, and researches where the fish tastes the best.

Chef Andre Rochat of Andre's in the Monte Carlo makes a mean escargot, but these snails don't come from just any garden.

The journey starts in Burgundy, France, where the large brown Burgundy snails thrive. Though the large brown snails are found in other parts of Europe, they are most popular in Burgundy, hence their name.

Along their journey, these slimy slugs get quite the spa treatment. They take a good shower in running water and are then disgorged with rock salt, vinegar and flour. After a quick boil in water, they are cooled and put in a court-bouillon, a broth ransed of various vegetables, herbs and wine. Once cooked, the snails are pulled out of the shell, the

black intestines are cut off and voilà! They're ready to be packaged in a can and shipped to various restaurants, like Andre's, all around the world.

But the process doesn't always sail along smoothly. The complex process that gets specialty foods to restaurants and stores in Las Vegas is not without its challenges.

Bartolotta's shipping system is like clockwork now, but in the beginning, he recalls having difficulty.

"None of [the fishermen] really wanted the responsibility of getting it to an airport, getting all the paper work done, packaging it all up and shipping it," says Bartolotta. "So initially, I wanted to make sure that my product didn't get skipped at the dock and get stuck."

Sande and Howald were recently waiting for a shipment of pickles from Michigan because their small supplier ran out of boxes.

"It can be challenging but it's really worthwhile," says Sande.

A delectable result

Las Vegas gets the best world-class ingredients so that you can have a world-class meal. Though it might take a few extra steps to get your food here, we're willing to go the extra mile to bring you exotic flavors, rich ingredients, and an incredible experience. Hey, this is Vegas, we wouldn't have it any other way! The food reaches its final destination when a host of amazing chefs bringing delicious and artful plates right to your table.

"I am proud to say this is the least amount of cooking I've ever done in my life because this restaurant is product driven. The star of this restaurant isn't me, the chef, the star of this restaurant is my little fish," says Bartolotta.

Among all those fish, perhaps there's room on that star for Bartolotta too.

It's an amazing journey food takes before it gets to you, the consumer.

"It's fascinating to me to see how many people are involved in your food products," says Sande.

The next time you eat a beautiful Imperial snapper, it might be from Sardinia, Italy. The next time you eat a tomato, it could be from San Marzano, Italy. And the next time you go to eat a hamburger—well, that's probably still from the good old United States.



Photos by Nikki Neu

Kristin Sande and Bob Howald, owners of Valley Cheese & Wine in Henderson, are specialty food experts, with over 17 years of experience apiece.

