



Over-the-top dining adventures

It's not just about the food or the price anymore — it's a journey

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Behold conspicuous consumption at its most literal: King Richard's Pride. Brought to you by BOA Steakhouse's Vegas outpost (part of the same restaurant group that devised the 24-karat-gold-flecked sushi roll), this drink calls for Hennessy Richard, Dom Perignon Rosé 1996, Chambord Liqueur Royale De France, the juice of half a lime, a muddled orange slice, a splash of cranberry juice, oh—and \$1,000, please. Of course, the empties—in this case, Baccarat Equinoxe glasses—are yours to keep.

Not that they need to be: Diners whose only souvenir is a little piece of paper that says "Bottom copy, customer" are apparently happy to spend ever greater sums at the world's hautest restaurants, where food and drink are merely a fraction of the equation.

"You can't get away with just a stellar menu anymore," says James Beard Foundation Vice President Mitchell Davis, who recalls the radically different zeitgeist of another era: "Lutèce was the country's greatest restaurant for 20 years, and it was in an ugly little house on the East Side of Manhattan, with weird lattice work and an actual hole in the wall that led to the kitchen." But now, Davis contends, you need a minimum of a big-name architect—if not an entire special effects team—to be taken seriously in the high-end restaurant arena.

Yes, the pyrotechnics are increasingly important, and not always the metaphorical kind. The Wynn Macau's Il Teatro, for example, is designed as theater in the semi-circle so that when the fireballs and fountains of Performance Lake periodically rise outside the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling window anyone who's having dinner can take them in, booming soundtrack and all. (Steve Wynn personally selected each song.) The open kitchen is another show all its own, directed by the Sicilian boy wonder, Chef Aldo Volpi. But the truth is that when those outdoor water jets and light beams go ballistic every quarter hour, all eyes are on them, no matter how exquisite the truffle reduction in progress.

Speaking of truffles, Davis notes that this is their most expensive year to date. They're going for \$3,200 per pound, one reason swanky restaurants charge through the roof ... "and still don't make a penny on them," he says. "People tend to think that the more expensive the food and fancier the restaurant, the more money is being made, but the reverse is actually true." High-end restaurants actually operate on surprisingly low margins, he explains, because the cost of the raw ingredients and labor are astronomical.

And we're not always talking about standard labor, either: With the advent of molecular gastronomy—the French- and Spanish-born trend of applying serious science to cooking—comes the exceedingly high price of turning certain liquids into frozen matter, solids into liquids, and so on. "The labor and technology here are just as important as the ingredients," says Mitchell. But given that American practitioners (Chicago's Alinea, most notably) are winning raves among foodies, the price tag seems to matter little.

Of course, true gourmards represent only a fraction of the super-high-end dining public. Hence all the bells and whistles accompanying the food. "Now that so many people around the world have made so much money, everyone wants to have—and be seen with—something unique," says Lee Maen, a founding member and general partner of Innovative Dining Group (IDG operates the aforementioned BOA Steakhouse, as well as Sushi Roku). And his point is well taken: We're living in the era of the upped ante, when billionaires are the new millionaires, and admission to this year's Forbes 400 list cost a minimum of \$1.3 billion—\$300 million more than last year. "It's with this new economic climate in mind that we've come up with the likes of King Richard's Pride—we're catering to the billionaire who just flew in from Russia and wants everyone in the restaurant to see him with the drink no one else has." Maen does note that he has yet to serve the infamous Bling H2O. On the other hand, "when people no longer blink at a \$30,000 hotel suite in New York, what's a \$40 bottle of water?"

At least one industry titan balks at the excess: Drew Nieporent, creator of the Myriad Restaurant Group (Nobu, Montrachet, Tribeca Grill et al.), believes there's a difference between providing something that's luxurious and rare, and something that's simply unreasonable. "One time at Nobu, my sushi guys were going to charge \$400 for a crab that was coming from Japan—and the price offended even me." On the other hand, he notes that "[New York's] Masa stands out in the value equation."

And Davis agrees: "People often point to the \$400 dinner at Masa as outrageous, but the experience of eating there, where the master [Masa] literally feeds you, is amazing; you take the food out of his hand and into yours; and the resulting intimacy is well worth the money."

We've rounded up some truly over-the-top dining experiences from Manhattan to Macau to Paris and beyond. Some of these meals—and some of the settings for them—alone merit the journey. So indulge at will ... just don't forget to make a reservation first.

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