



Seeing double: Sensi pastry chefs bask in their own reflected glory in full view of diners.

OVER THE BIG TOP

KITCHEN SPY FOUR KITCHENS IN ONE LAS VEGAS EXTRAVAGANZA KEEP CUSTOMERS DAZZLED.
MERRILL SHINDLER REPORTS. PHOTOS BY BILL MILNE.

At the several versions of Cirque du Soleil in the grandest of the Las Vegas hotels, highly trained athletes perform acts of seemingly impossible coordination and derring-do. They resist gravity as they fly through the air. They flex muscles and bend joints in ways that violate the most basic laws of God and man. They do everything but dance on the head of a pin—and they're probably working on that one.

But what they do pales compared to the nightly show put on by the expeditor at **Sensi** in the new **Spa Tower** at the **Bellagio**.

There are four kitchens at Sensi, each with numerous substations. And every dish created in those kitchens passes through the "community table" overseen by the expeditor. This would be simple enough if the dishes arrived in a finished form. But in numerous cases, they arrive in bits and pieces—a culinary jigsaw puzzle that has to be assembled in a matter of seconds by the team of finishers who hover around the table. Finishers who would have nothing to do if the expeditor had not ordered the various ingredients from different parts of the kitchen—a sprawling glass maze that's more a kinetic sculpture than a space in which food is prepared.

When a dish is ordered, the expeditor divides it into its requisite parts and, working with the chef de cuisine, places the order and puts a delivery time on each component. He then coordinates

the arrivals for final plating. From beginning to end. All night long. He's like an air traffic controller who monitors every flight in and out of a busy airport. It's something to behold. And it's something you can't help but behold, for the kitchen at Sensi is a massive glass box in the center of the restaurant, where every table has a front row seat. Several tables are actually within the glass box itself.

"It was definitely a learning curve for the first few days," says executive chef **Martin Heierling**. "We debriefed for hours at the end of each meal service. And we figured it out. It's working. It's working almost perfectly."

Perfection is a notion that Heierling knows well. After spending his early years cooking at acclaimed restaurants like **Hummer & Austerbar** in Zurich, Switzerland, he was hired by **Gray Kunz** to cook at **Lespinasse** in New York City, a restaurant he speaks of with reverence and awe. "There was a commitment to perfection. Gray Kunz is a genius. He's my most influential mentor."

But Kunz, by comparison, ran a single kitchen. Heierling is in charge of a conundrum—a kitchen where multitasking is essential. It reminds me of those jugglers on the Ed Sullivan Show who used to keep plates spinning on top of spindly poles; it always seems on the edge of collapse but never quite does. ➤



Clockwise from left: Sensi's saucier juggles 24 tiny pots of sauces for all four kitchens. Looking into the Italian and Asian sections. A Wood Stone bread oven turns out crusty loaves and rolls. Though every diner at Sensi has a ringside view of the kitchen action, guests at the chef's table dine within the vortex of it all.

"It's all based on communication," explains Heierling. "There are corners of the kitchen impossible to see from other parts of the kitchen. We communicate on a wireless system that all the chefs and all the cooks have. The expeditor and the chef de cuisine are like symphony conductors. The chef gives firing instructions—three minutes on this table, five minutes on that table—and everybody has to make sure that everything comes to the community table at the same moment. If the timing is off, we refire the dish. Everyone has to be at the top of his game—all the time."

"I've had other chefs come here, like **Daniel Boulud**. He couldn't understand how we did it. But once we showed him, it made sense. What's most important is that we need our electronics to keep it moving. In an old-fashioned kitchen, without state-of-the-art equipment, we could never do this."

The concept behind Sensi (the name comes from the Italian word for senses) is, according to Heierling, "to bring a global market-style cuisine into one setting. We have a kitchen with lots of woks and several tandoor ovens that specializes in Southeast Asian and Indian dishes. In the Italian kitchen we make our own pastas and gnocchi, and we make flatbreads in the wood-fired pizza oven. Then, we have a traditional American kitchen with a broiler for grilled meats, all of which are served on the bone. And in the fourth corner we have live seafood tanks, so we can take raw seafood and cook it to order. In the adjacent dining room we have a bakery that's open to view and a dessert kitchen behind glass."

The concept of a restaurant built around a fully visible kitchen-

under-glass began with a restaurant called **Mezza 9**, created at the **Grand Hyatt** in Singapore by the Tokyo-based design company, SuperPotato (the kitchen design itself at Sensi is by CKP Malaysia). According to Heierling, "The kitchen there is behind the walls that surround the restaurant, and it prepares nine different cuisines. I studied it and found there was a problem with coordination—dishes arrived at different times from the different stations. Our idea was that if the kitchen was in the center of the restaurant, diners could walk around it, seeing the process of making a meal in action. In fact, that's why we lowered the floor in the kitchen. It gives a better angle—you can watch the whole operation from wherever you sit."

The cost of creating this show has been anything but cheap. Heierling estimates the cost at between \$7 and \$8 million for the restaurant and kitchen, "though I've heard higher numbers as well."

So far, the broiler and the grill are the busiest part of the kitchen. "Steak in Las Vegas—there's no way around it. But we're introducing people to the other cuisines, and they're curious." Plus, he whets their appetites for the unusual with the condiments on each table: a small open bowl of kosher salt ("We started with sea salt, but it was too rocky and coarse for most diners"), along with covered crocks of a spiced soy dip (made in-house, as are all the condiments, with fish sauce, lime juice, and chiles), a mustard (made with Champagne and white wine vinegars, and yellow, brown, and black mustard seeds), and a *kasundi* (a tomato chutney with vinegar, sugar, mustard seeds, and ginger—"We call it Sensi Ketchup...everyone wants to buy a jar").

"We have many mortars and pestles in the kitchen," says



Clockwise from top: Front and center, executive chef Martin Heierling with his crew (from left): Robert Moore (sous chef), Christoph Schoettle (chef de cuisine), Nate Henssler (sous chef), and Kenny Magana (pastry chef). The seafood bar. Crisp fried shrimp with rice flakes.

Heierling, "and they're busy all day long." What he also has is a batterie of equipment not ordinarily found together in one kitchen, ranging from a pair of Doughpro USA tandoor ovens to a duo of Molteni wok stations and from Sea Water Vision fish tanks to Moschetti pasta machines ("They're real workhorses—you can't believe how much pasta they can turn out!"). There's a certain amount of overlap between the kitchens. But for the most part, each is an island unto itself, ready to supply its assigned part of any given dish.

Some are easier to assemble than others. In the case of the rice flake-crusted shrimp, for instance, "We use U-10 shrimp, which we crumb in rolled rice flakes. When you deep fry them, they become beautifully puffy. The Asian station cooks them, but the cold station does all the dressings—kaffir lime oil, tamarind, and a ginger mayonnaise. When they show up at the community table, a drop of the ginger mayonnaise and a drizzle of kaffir lime oil go into the bowl, then some ginger confit. When the shrimp arrive, we pour on the tamarind dressing and arrange them next to the confit on the mayonnaise. The plate is finished with sliced jalapeños, cilantro leaves, micro greens, and diced mango. It's not a big issue."

But other dishes involve much more coordination, like the red

chicken curry. "Instead of serving it with rice, we serve it with *idli* (fermented white rice that is ground into a batter, and, when steamed, becomes rich fluffy rice puffs) from the Indian station, while the Asian station makes the curry. The two parts have to come together at the front table at the same moment or it doesn't work. It can be very tricky."

There are culinary dances going on all night long. "The braised short ribs come from the grill station, the saucier brings the horse-radish foam, the garnish guy brings me the yellow corn grits with onion seeds and Swiss chard." Then, there's the tandoori lamb—"It's cooked in the tandoor, which is also making the tandoori spiced tomatoes, while the roasted eggplant tartine comes from the opposite side of the kitchen, and the *saucier* has to be ready with the curry/carrot emulsion. The lamb bones are also braised in tamarind, which is from yet another table."

One trick that Heierling figured out early on was that he needed to centralize the sauce production. "Only one person makes the sauces. So the Italian station makes the risotto and brings it to the front. We plate it, and my *saucier* brings us the truffle foam. He makes 24 different sauces, fresh-to-order all night long. He's surrounded by tiny pots, next to the front table, so he hears what we're asking for. He has a stove and two induction units that are super fast. His timing is essential. If he falls behind, we're in trouble."

But so far he hasn't. And so far, they aren't. In fact, the Sensi crew is doing very well. And thanks to their hypertrophic kitchen, they're having a good time doing it. "This was never designed to be a fine dining restaurant," says Heierling, as the orders start flooding in. "The concept is hip, fun, vibrant. At night it turns into a loud space. Everybody watches the kitchen. You don't get bored when you eat here. And when we do 400 covers a night, it's a kinetic sculpture. You can see people picking up speed. The place rocks." ■

Equipment

Bread oven & pizza oven Wood Stone
Char-broiler Bakers Pride
Fish tanks Sea Water Visions
Fryers Cecilware, Molteni
Hand mixer Bamix
Ice cream/sorbet machines PacoJet, Taylor
Induction units Magna Wave, Sunpentown
Panini grill Eurodib
Pasta & ravioli machines Moschetti
Pastry oven Eurofours
POS system InfoGenesis
Refrigeration OmniTemp, Silver King, Traulsen
Salamander Equipex
Sanitation systems Ecolab, Hobart
Slicer Berkel
Stoves, ovens, pasta cooker & wok station Molteni
Tandoor ovens Doughpro USA
Vapor exhaust hoods Gaylord