

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Downtown Las Vegas Eats: Carson Kitchen

R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, July 4th, 2023

Downtown has long represented the authentic heartbeat of the improbable town known as Las Vegas. The retro casinos, street performers, and open-air bars lend a glint of realness amid the faux facade the city revels in. And the [Fremont Street Experience](#) — a glittery five block pedestrian attraction that opened in 1995—adds a jolt of excitement.

The restaurant, scene, however, has been thin save for [Carson Kitchen](#), a [Kerry Simon](#) creation that opened in 2014.

That same year, Carson Kitchen was named Winner of Best New Restaurant in Las Vegas. Celebrity chef Simon, who died in 2015, was based in Vegas. His namesake restaurant, Palms Place's "Simon" helped cement his reputation. And in 2002, he opened "Simon Kitchen & Bar" at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino — selected as one of "America's Best New Restaurants" by Esquire. In Los Angeles, there was "Simon LA," and in Atlantic City: "Simon Prime."

In 1989, his star rose when Ivana Trump hired him as executive chef for the Plaza Hotel's Edwardian Room. Another claim to fame: his perfected dishes reigned supreme on [Iron Chef America's 2005 hamburger battle](#).



John E. Carson Hotel sign. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

## The “Rock n’ Roll Chef”

Simon was schooled at the [Culinary Institute of America](#) in Hyde Park, New York. He was known as the “Rock n’ Roll Chef” given his famous and sometimes rowdy friends: Bill Murray, George Maloof, Alice Cooper, and Rick Nielsen, among others. The moniker was bestowed on him by *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Simon, a Philadelphia native who grew up in Evanston, Illinois, was all about surprise, taking the mundane or the predictable and turning it on end. He loved massaging taste buds into experiencing novel culinary revelations. And sometimes he jolted them into WTF? exclamations. Carson Kitchen skillfully continues the tradition. His business partner and restaurateur [Cory Harwell](#) now heads the operation. Simon’s brother [Scott Simon](#) has run the kitchen since 2017.

The two-story eatery presents a nondescript facade — it’s at the back end of the renovated [John E. Carson midcentury modern Hotel](#), repurposed as the home for several businesses. Like the Freemont East District that surrounds it, there’s a decided retro factory vibe to the property.

Inside, exposed ceiling beams and lighting set a relaxed tone amid communal tables—one is a repurposed 14-foot door from Kerry Simon’s Hard Rock restaurant. Wall art proclaims: “Keep Calm And Kerry On.” There’s an open kitchen with counter seating, outdoor courtyard dining, and a rooftop and bar that also serves guests.



Carson Kitchen has an open kitchen with counter. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

## The meal

Social plates rule, and based on my research, we started with Crispy Chicken Skins, followed by Bacon Jam. We finished with Hotdog Burnt Ends. The least appetizing (in terms of its name) turned out to be the winner — those charred hotdog bites had a decided WTF? response from dining partner Theo and me.

But first, the Crispy Chicken Skins served with smoked honey. From the raves I read online, I expected more, but found the taste to be somewhat ordinary. Theo, however, loved the continual mouth crunch.

The Bacon Jam — thick slices of bacon well chopped and blended with lusciously smooth Havarti cheese — was a perfected winner. It's served with a toasted baguette. The Havarti's faint sweetness and acidic base pared well with the bacon's savory depth, and yes, we jammed that baguette into the container to scrape up every last bit.



The Crispy Chicken Skins. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

### **Burnt hotdogs — just as good cold**

What was truly addictive, however, were those burnt wiener ends. The dish is meant to evoke hotdog cookouts, and particularly, those mini wiener bite recipes; you'll find scores of them on Pillsbury.com. That nostalgic note, an oh-so-familiar flavor that can't be adequately described, hides behind something truly wonderful. The deeply rich smoky barbeque glaze they're baked in, along with jalapeno, wholly ennobled the dish, raising it to something of an art form. It's served

with pickle, to cut the taste, along with highbrow ranch for dipping.

Using restraint, we boxed up half of them to take back to Resorts World Las Vegas where we were staying. I put them in the refrigerator and ate them cold the following morning. They were just as good.

On a previous visit in 2018, Theo ordered the Jerk Turkey Burger for lunch. It's served with mango chutney and slaw. "To that point, I never had a turkey burger that I really liked, but I decided to take a chance," he told me while we ate. "It was incredibly delicious—so juicy, every other one I've had was too dry."



Hotdog Burnt Ends. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

## The chef's signature dish

Theo also enjoyed "The Devil's Eggs" during that visit: deviled eggs topped with crispy pancetta and caviar. There are also heartier dishes: chicken thighs, pork meatloaf, salmon, and a cocoa-espresso New York Strip.

We also enjoyed the nicely done Minted Snap Peas with bourbon butter and pistachios. To round out our experience, the chef bought out a signature dish: Black Rice & Oxtail Risotto with Parmesan cream. It was at once creamy, lightly flavorful, and came with a slightly chewy mouth feel. Black rice is tough to pull off, so we were impressed. Along with those Hotdog Burnt Ends, it was our favorite dish of the night.

Among the crafted cocktails (all had inventive names), we favored the "Fine, You?" The drink is

composed of rye whiskey, honey, orange blossom, fernet, amaro, and bitters. The name comes from Cory Harwell's father who would forever answer phone calls by proclaiming, "Fine, You?"



The Glazed Donut Bread Pudding was a standout. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

For dessert we indulged in the must-order [Glazed Donut Bread Pudding](#) — a traditional dish turned on end by using donut dough as the base. It's served with three rum caramel, vanilla and crème anglaise. Invented during the height of the pandemic, the dessert was moist and moreover, not too dense as found in other varieties.

Theo gets the last word on this dish as well. "This was the first bread pudding I've ever liked. It was beyond incredible."

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Carson Kitchen also has eateries in [Atlanta](#) and [Salt Lake City](#).

The restaurant also has a [brunch menu](#) and can be reserved for [private and group dining](#).

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