

GARDEN STATE GAMBLE

WHEN IT OPENED BACK IN JULY, the Borgata—Atlantic City’s new shining gold ingot of a casino—promised an infusion of class that would transform the gaudy, frayed-at-the-edges beachfront mecca of greed and grand buffets into an elegant, celebrity-packed magnet for high rollers and cutting-edge cuisine. With its star chefs, hot clubs, and room-service pampering, it would be for New Yorkers Vegas without the air travel, a destination worthy of a three-hour trudge through Friday-night traffic.

In the first few weeks, lured by full-page ads in Manhattan newspapers, the thousands who descended on the resort found slot machines with brighter lights, restaurants with more enticing façades, cocktail waitresses in skimpier outfits. But it was a put-up job. Beyond the initial smoke-and-mirrors dazzle lay little more than a gilded convention center with long lines, sneering institutional service, and dining options—a buffet, a war bar, a pizza joint, and four pricey spots touted as “five star”—mostly in the insipid tradition of Atlantic City’s mass feeding halls.

Philadelphia’s Susanna Foo has lent her name to Suilan, an upscale Chinese restaurant that does great damage to her reputation with sallow, flavorless dishes like sippy lobster dumplings and chewy beef with chewier scallops. (Even the basic white rice was dry and overcooked.) Next door, at Specchio, Luke Palladino, the young upstart the



Borgata’s best: MXXX and, below, the Old Homestead Steakhouse.

casino has anointed its in-house star (his picture is everywhere), prepares dreary Italian creations that sound fantastic on the overwrought menu but arrive looking and tasting like Catskills catering food.

Things get much better when you sink into a plush banquette at MXXX—the combination restaurant and nightclub that features party food by former Nobu chef Edwyn Ferrari and TV personality Aaron Sanchez. The sushi is

exceptionally fresh, and the hearts of palm fries are great tropical bar food. If you come to the Borgata, this is one place to forget that losing streak. Or you might opt to drown your sorrows with a gargantuan piece of meat at the Old Homestead Steakhouse, a branch of the New York classic that is the Borgata’s only solid foray into fine dining. The steaks are expertly charred, the lobsters large enough to take on Godzilla. Even if you lose big at the tables, the Old Homestead is one place where you can still leave a winner. —Jay Cheshes

snack right

It’s hard to take issue with a company that donates its profits to fighting child abuse and educating kids.

Not to mention the fact that its products are all natural.

And these sea creatures are awfully cute. Still, we wouldn’t recommend Our

Family Farm’s cheese crackers (or its bear-shaped cookies) if they didn’t taste so good. \$2.99 per box (\$59-261-2627; ourfamilyfarm.com).

