Greetings from

ATLANTIC CITY

IN COLD MONTHS,
ATLANTIC CITY
REALLY HEATS UP

STAR CHEFS WHIP
UP A.C. OUTPOSTS

LAUGHTER &
BEDAZZLEMENT:
COMICS & CIRQUE

MADONNA, THE WHO,
DAVID BYRNE MAKE
MUSIC IN A.C.
STAR CHEFS WHIP UP A.C. OUTPOSTS

New Yorkers who travel to Atlantic City can be forgiven if they rub their eyes and feel like they never left home. While it may be far south of the city on the Jersey Shore, more and more of New York's top restaurants are establishing Atlantic City beachheads. They join several top chefs who have already transformed the resort into a culinary destination.

The latest entry has been ranked the number one Italian restaurant in New York, for over two decades by Zagat—Il Mulino, opening at the Trump Taj Mahal. This is actually the Greenwich Village location's 11th restaurant (there are two under construction in Atlanta and Aspen). But significantly, this marks the first time Il Mulino will operate two separate dining rooms in the same location. Il Mulino New York will offer the traditional white tablecloth experience, with tattooed-waiters and an extensive list of daily specials and wine recommendations. The Trattoria will offer a more casual dining experience, featuring pizzas, pastas, and lighter fare.

The concept points up the way Atlantic City is coming along with a relaxed feel. "We've tried to offer something family-friendly with the same food Il Mulino is famous for," says Jerry Katroff, who operates the midtown out of New York. "It gives us an opportunity to do both concepts in the same location. The uniqueness is that they are right next to each other. Of course, there is one fine-dining Trattoria open in Orlando. Il Mulino not only joins staples like the Palm, Cipriani's, Pappy's, Bobby Flay Steak, and Buddah. Some restaurants with their own branches in New York are finding a permanent presence in Atlantic City. Helping bring them is more attention to food from New York. A case in point is McCormick & Schmick's, which opened last summer in Harrah's and has a successful restaurant on Sixth Avenue. A spacious respite just off the casino floor, this Oregon-based seafood house claims all of its catch is fresh that day. Having tasted there recently, this reporter can testify that everything tastes as though it comes directly from the fishing boat.

These restaurants join several top-end establishments run by famous chefs who have bypassed New York entirely. Martin Raye might be a brand name in Boston, but if you want to sample his seafood fare, it's either north to Boston or the Tampico south. Similarly, Michael Symon opened Zakaya in June. Clearly, this is an area you've heard the name, more than likely, you've seen him on "Pantry Raid" on TV. He also appears regularly on "Martha Stewart" and "The Today Show." Schultzen got his start under David Berkie at the Park Avenue Café. Led by his fascination with Asian cuisine, he did stints in top restaurants on the Pacific Rim before returning Stateside to launch Shankara. That experience culminated in Zakaya at the Borgata, where he joins Wolfgang Puck, Michael Mina and Bobby Huy. Schultzen, who The Times raves "creates intelligence and creativity into his food," means for Zakaya to be nothing less than revolutionary—an entirely new approach to fusion cuisine. The menu has many of the items expected from a Japanese restaurant, but with a unique combination of flavors and ingredients, all served in a breathtakingly beautiful setting of Zen-like calm and comfort designed by New Yorkers of Alice, and Brian Brown. Schultzen admits that at first, he felt some trepidation about coming to Atlantic City. Many people still associate fusion food with the traditional surf-and-turf or all-you-can-eat buffets—saying that there's nothing wrong with that. They're fun and frequency delicious. But to some extent, it's hard to know whether there would be enough food to take innovative items like the teriyaki pork belly with spicy sauce and steamed fish, spanner crab salad and jalapeños, and roast duck and charred grilled meats and seaweed. So he's been pleasantly surprised to find his adventurous diners packed right. "It's impressive how well it's taken off," says the Philadelphia-based chef. "I'm happy to see how many people brave the 70-degree weather just to have what is a lot of delicious food. You won't find a better selection of food in this area. A lot of people come here just for the food and the atmosphere. I think we've created a unique experience that sets us apart from other restaurants in Atlantic City. It's definitely a destination for food lovers."