



**DUE SOUTH:** Steve Aoki (left) sprays Hakkasan's crowd. Michael Jackson One (above) is Cirque du Soleil magic.

By MICHAEL KAPLAN

**C**RUISE from downtown Las Vegas to the south end of the Strip and you'll drive past Wynn, Bellagio and the Cosmopolitan. After rear-viewing those eye-grabbing spots, it's easy to consider Mandalay Bay's tropically themed frontage as the end of casino-lined Las Vegas Boulevard. Technically, in fact, that might be true. But it's also a matter of perspective.

According to Chuck Bowling, president of Mandalay Bay, the southernmost casino on the Strip. "We think of our location as the start of the Strip. It's where the Welcome to Las Vegas sign is. Mandalay Bay is the first thing you see. It's where things begin to happen."

Mandalay Bay and sister property MGM Grand, both owned by MGM Resorts Inter-

national and both situated on the south end, have indeed begun to happen again. After years in need of enhanced diversions, the two casino-resorts

skyboxes, situated above the DJ and coming complete with sound control, TVs, security and mixology supplies.

Food-wise, MGM is not miss-

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**As for restaurants, Mandalay works both ends of the spectrum. On the mass-market tip there's Citizens Kitchen & Bar, which operates as a gussied-up 24-hour coffee shop and offers gut-busting experiences built around gooey appetizers** (check out the giant mound of Velveeta cheese dip) and epitomized by a slider-eating challenge that will cost \$40 and can land your photo on the restaurant's Wall of Shame if you fail to

down 24 mini-burgers in 24 minutes (finish the entrée, though, and you're on the Wall of Fame). Keeping it classier is Kumi, an Asian-fusion eatery that comes courtesy of sushi master Akira Back, who made

get to see mind-blowing dance numbers and acrobatics set to Jackson's music, but the one-gloved wonder actually makes a show-stopping cameo via state-of-the-art hologram technology. It's a wonderful bit of magic from Cirque's effects geniuses, and it really does seem as if prime-time MJ is dancing and interacting with the cast.

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his bones at the excellent Yellowtail in Bellagio (where he is still the chef). Kumi echoes the spirit of its forbear but also offers up terrific new dishes: scrumptious crispy rice topped with blackened tuna plus Screaming O sauce, "Octopussy" rolls, bibimbap rolls (pictured, below left) and perfectly cooked filet mignon with Japanese mushrooms.

Following dinner, it's an easy hop over to Light, the new nightclub at Mandalay where DJs like Zedd and Nicky Romero perform against a backdrop of flashy video images while Cirque performers swoop over the crowds. We spend enough time there — slugging down drinks, elbowing onto the dance floor and soaking up the house-music beats — that we're more than tired as closing-time nears. Because we want to feel fit for another day of partying, we head back to MGM Grand and one of its new Stay Well rooms. A vitamin C shower, the air-purification system and a light-therapy setup all aim to leave us refreshed in the a.m.

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