

February 11, 2014



Q+A: Crush executive chef Billy DeMarco talks small plates, fun vibes, scallops and Beyonce



COURTESY

The delicious date and artichoke pizza at Crush in MGM Grand.

By **Don Chareunsy** ([contact](#))

Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2014 | 2 a.m.

Executive chef Billy DeMarco, whose resume with restaurateurs Jenna and Michael Morton in Las Vegas is La Cave at the Wynn and La Comida downtown, has a goal for their latest and third venture, Crush (Eat, Drink, Love) at MGM Grand:

“I want to be the restaurant to go to pre-theater or pre-concert. Those are the times to get people in here, and there is a great vibe,” DeMarco said. “My main goal is to build that early seating.”

DeMarco said this about 1 1/2 weeks ago, and last Friday, the wait for a table at Crush [before Pink's final "The Truth About Love Tour" stop](#) was nearly three hours. *Three hours.*

In only two months of operation (it opened Dec. 4), Crush, the former home of Michael Mina's Nobhill Tavern, has become a pre-concert hotspot at MGM Grand.

Starting with the design, the 230-seat, 7,000-square-foot Crush has multiple rooms with distinct experiences that remind of San Francisco and wineries. The entrance is an atrium with a lounge, highboy seating with a bar area and two flat-screen televisions and a garden with six booths and greenhouse ceiling.

A separate dining room, the bodega, includes its own bar, a window into the kitchen, a private

Food and Cocktails at Crush



Crush Restaurant Opens at MGM



dining room and, interestingly, 17 monitors along the ceiling to set the vibe of the evening.

The chef's tasting menu was the order on two visits. Standouts: octopus ceviche (with grapefruit and pickled jalapenos), Sea Scallop Benny (scallops with quail eggs and chorizo), ricotta gnocchi with braised short rib and pea puree, and lamb sirloin steak with celery root puree and bacon Brussels sprouts.

Save room for the Nutella caramel ice cream sandwich for dessert. The surprise of the night on the first visit was an item ordered separately from the tasting menu: the date and artichoke pizza (with jalapenos and caramelized onions). Incredible flavors and perfect crust — not a burn mark in site.

Don't forget about the wonderful cocktails, among them the Fancy Tease (Seagram's sweet peach tea vodka, fresh lemon juice, mint leaves and prosecco), Spiked Cider (Hangar One spiced pear vodka, Domaine de Canton, ginger liqueur, fresh lime juice and sparkling apple cider) and Punch Drunk Love (mint-infused Hendricks gin, Lillet Rose, fresh watermelon juice and fresh lime juice).

Dining in the bodega and the garden were different and equally enjoyable experiences at Crush. Here is my recent chat with chef DeMarco:

So, chef, do you prefer William or Billy? I've seen both in stories.

I go by Billy. If someone calls me William, they must not know me or like me (laughs).

You've been closely involved with La Cave at Wynn, La Comida downtown and now Crush at MGM Grand. How long you have you worked with Michael and Jenna Morton? La Cave and Crush are small-plates menus. How is Crush different from La Cave?

For more than four years now.

La Cave focuses on appetizers that are under \$20. Wynn can be over the top and pricey, which can be difficult in a struggling economy. La Cave is appetizers and American-style small plates. I wanted to translate what worked so well with La Cave to Crush.



[L.E. BASKOW](#)

The new restaurant Crush at MGM Grand on Friday, Dec. 6, 2013. Crush opened Dec. 4.



[L.E. BASKOW](#)

The private dining room at the new restaurant Crush at MGM Grand on Friday, Dec. 6, 2013.



[L.E. BASKOW](#)

Owners Michael and Jenna Morton at their new restaurant Crush in MGM Grand on Friday, Dec. 6, 2013.

Crush has the same vibe and feeling, but with more sharing and family-style offerings. Some things are big, but you can try a couple of items, then go big if you want, from a 6-ounce portion to a 12-ounce portion, while keeping it all reasonable and affordable for the Strip.

What is your focus for the menu at Crush?

Shared plating and a fun vibe — fun, familiar and friendly. Good sauces without going over the top. MGM Grand can be very expensive for dinner. We are a work in progress, but we want to be an affordable option.

I love the date and artichoke pizza — it's one of the best things I've had in the New Year, hands down. Other recommendations at Crush?

The Sea Scallop Benny. It's fun and creative. I'm trying to be fun and not so serious. I want diners to have a good time. Also the Tuna Two Ways and the octopus ceviche.

Do you work seven days a week?

No, no, no, no, no! Crush is my new baby, and I spend the majority of my time here. Typically I'm at La Comida from 12 to 2 for lunch. There is a lunch crowd from Zappos and more. Then La Cave from 2 to 5 p.m. and Crush from 5 to close. That's my ideal schedule. I have my two days off.

Two days off? Really? What do you do on your days off?

Michael doesn't want us to overwork and burn out. And I have a 2-year old daughter. She's a character; she can walk and talk now and bounces off the wall. I hang out with her, and my mother is here to take turns and help out.

What are your goals for Crush in the New Year?

Doing 400 to 500 covers daily would be perfect. I want to be the restaurant to go to pre-theater or pre-concert. Those are the times to get people in here, and there is a great vibe. Beyonce and Andrea Bocelli were great for us for reservations. My main goal is to build that early seating.

And New Year's resolutions in 2014?

I love opening up restaurants. I'm working on a fourth Las Vegas restaurant with Michael. I find it relaxing and exciting, and each restaurant is different. There are restaurants in Dallas and Chicago, but I want to keep the focus on Las Vegas.

Crush is open Sundays through Thursdays from 5 to 10:30 p.m. and Fridays and Saturdays from 5 to 11:30 p.m.

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