



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Cities
Las Vegas (2005)**

Las Vegas (2005) Report One

January 26, 2005

Hello, this is Your on the Street Reporter, located in Las Vegas, Nevada, to report on a knife makers' show and the city itself. I will assist my brother Tom with his display booth---where we hope he will sell many custom-made knives. The Antique Arms Show is also here, sharing the same convention hall as the knife show.

Sin City and knife makers would seem to be an odd fit. Knife makers are renowned for their rustic, country nature. Most of the knife makers I've met are low-key and unaffected. In contrast, Las Vegas is renowned for its showy casinos and hotels. The city is ribald and flamboyant, the opposite of the stereotype of a knife maker. But Las Vegas has extensive conference facilities, so it attracts tradeshow for almost every trade.

The Patrons and the Venue

The shows are being held at the Mandalay Bay Hotel. The convention hall for the venue is located ½ mile from my hotel room. The distance is roughly the length of three football fields and consists mainly of halls and lobbies. The architecture is one huge building. Open space could have been part of the plan; breezeways come to mind, but open construction would have required hotel customers to walk outside and expose themselves to the Nevada air. Instead, huge corridors provide the way to and from the exhibit and conference rooms. With help from nearby Lake Mead, the Mandalay complex is cooled to the low 70s. Thousands of acres of similar buildings in Las Vegas have been built across one of the driest and hottest deserts in America. Small wonder the lake is running low on water.

These chilled habitats entice potential patrons to visit the casinos. On many occasions while I walked this city, I've left the hot streets for the sanctity of a cold saloon and iced drink. Lake Mead has enough water to last until I'm too old to walk around Las Vegas, but this impending disaster is not my problem. I'll pass it on to the next generation.

If you've never attended a knife or armament show, picture in your mind thousands of guns, knives, swords, even cannons. Imagine hundreds of people walking around with carbines over their shoulders, axes and swords in their hands, knives in their sheaves. Armed men and women are everywhere, spilling over from the exhibits into halls and elevators. They're even in the casino as they make their way to and from hotel and show rooms. This scene would not comfort the anti-weapon lobby. NRA opponents would not feel at home here. I'm comfortable enough around guns, as long as they aren't pointed in my direction.

Earlier, I mentioned the distinctive style and demeanor of knife makers. So distinctive I found my way through ½ miles of hallways to the knife show by following people dressed "country-like." I followed several people from the hotel lobby and later took their picture (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Knife show patrons.

For reporting accuracy, my brother does not dress in leather (nor do most knife makers). He dresses like a golfer; his clothing preferences are polyesters, plaids, white shoes, and anklet socks.

These “pioneers” are not knife makers or gun collectors. Besides looking funny, what do you think they do for a living? They’re tailors. They make the clothes they’re wearing in this photo. They have a profitable business making costumes for amusement parks, historical sites, and Halloween stores.

Later in the week, I saw them shopping for armaments to complete their ensemble

Mashed Potatoes

I arrived in Las Vegas a day before Tom in order to play Texas Hold’Em. I’ll have more to say about this game and Las Vegas casinos later. For now, I’ll report on the meal I had the night of my arrival. I stayed at the MGM Grand and decided to treat myself to a grand dinner. Each major Las Vegas hotel has a four star (or a three star) restaurant, and I chose this place in order to continue my research on expensive brandies as well as to pursue my quest to realize the idea, “Living well is the best revenge.”

Little did I know my studies would unearth information on mashed potatoes, also called creamed or buttered potatoes. In the part of America (southeast New Mexico) where I grew up, most people called this food mashed potatoes. We used the word “mash” for other purposes. For example, instead of saying, “Press that button,” we would say, “Mash that button.” To which a New Yorker might ask, “Why do you want to kill a button?”

I asked for creamed potatoes to accompany my meal. Shortly, the waiter brought to my table *five* different kinds of creamed potatoes. I couldn’t believe my eyes; I asked the waiter, “Why five kinds of potatoes?”

I thought I knew the answer. Something to the effect of, “You’re in Las Vegas. Our creamed potatoes are true to the city’s theme: Nothing exceeds like excess.”

His answer was, “We have five different creamed potatoes to enhance your dining pleasure: Horse Radish Creamed Potatoes, Sour Cream Creamed Potatoes, Curry Creamed Potatoes, Mushroom Creamed Potatoes, and Rosemary Creamed Potatoes.” Isn’t America great! Where else in this world, besides Biafra, could one consume five varieties of creamed potatoes in one meal?”

My reply, “I don’t mean I’m not impressed. But I wanted regular creamed potatoes.”

The waiter looked at me as I had mooned him and his potatoes, “And what might ‘regular’ creamed potatoes be, sir?”

Making certain I did not use the country term “mashed potatoes” in a room populated with gourmets, I replied, “Buttered potatoes.”

The waiter, after tossing a wounded, yet condescending look (Which is a difficult look to carry-off. Try it, you’ll see what I mean.), “We don’t serve Buttered Potatoes. However, I will bring you some butter and you can doctor them up.”

Doctor them up? Horse Radish Potatoes? Rosemary Potatoes? Who’s the doctor here?

Anyway, after a fine meal, I continued my research on brandies, “Waiter, bring me a Hennessy XO brandy.”

And he did, and I drank it, and it was good, and I was the personification of, “Living well is the best revenge.” He charged me \$25 for my living experience.

Part of my report is to bring you up to date on the prices for (Hennessy XO) brandy: (a) The pub on 12th Street in Washington, DC: \$23, (b) The Prime Rib Restaurant in Washington, DC: \$27, (c) The MGM Grand in Las Vegas: \$25. (Forgive this intrusion, but I must document these events in order to charge these research tools to my expense account.)

In upcoming reports, I’ll write more about the knife and gun show, Texas Hold’Em, quickie marriages,¹ and the water problem in Sin City.

Your on the Street Reporter

¹ With apologies to my wife, I had one too many XOs last night. But the good news is that they also have quickie divorces here. So, I’ll untie the knot before I leave Sin City. So honey, keep those home fires burning!

Las Vegas (2005) Report Two

January 28, 2005

Hello again, Your on the Street Reporter is filing the first part of Report Two on a popular past-time in Las Vegas: gambling.

For today, the knife and gun shows had not yet begun, so I decided to spend some time at the gaming tables. I played the poker game of Texas Hold'Em for many hours, eventually rendering me semi-coherent, and unable to do anything except toss poker chips into an area of the poker table called "The Texas Hold'Em Black Hole for Black."

It was actually a semi-black hole. For three days, I played roughly 24 hours of Texas Hold'Em, and my net take away was slightly better than the minimum wage. Some observations made during these hours, accompanied with a few opinions:

Observation: Texas Hold'Em in the real world is much less interesting than the games on ESPN and the Travel Channel. These programs show the relatively rare and entertaining hand. They do not show the hundreds of other deals.

Observation: Texas Hold'Em is fun if you have good cards. Otherwise, it's similar to watching Sergio Garcia addressing and eventually hitting a golf ball.

Observation: My wins at this game were few-and-far-between.

Then why did I make enough money to beat minimum wage?

Opinion: Because I discovered the way to profits is to play very early in the morning, when some of the players are drunk, tipsy enough to tip the odds in my favor.

Observation: The Las Vegas rules for Texas Hold'Em are similar to those you watch on television, except the players get free drinks while they are playing. In addition, no swearing is allowed. Violators are banned from the poker room. Nonetheless, one early morning I was playing at a table with eight gamblers, three of whom were four sheets to the wind. One player, who was nearly incoherent, couldn't control his profanity. He wasn't mean, just drunk and a bit profane. A new player came to the poker room to join the fun. As she sat down, this man warned her, "By the way, no swearing, or they'll kick you out. I've been warned ten times!"

This man refuted my approach of successfully playing poker with drunken people. He took me to the cleaners almost every time I went against him. Yet as he raked in his winnings throughout the early morning hours, he could hardly talk.

Finally, the casino cut him off; they stopped serving him drinks. Upon being informed of this situation, he replied, "Denied a drink in Las Vegas? I consider that a badge of honor!"

Touring the Shows

Some of my readers are not into gambling or drinking, so I will move on to reporting on the knife and gun shows. Figure 3 shows examples of the wares for sale at the show (The knives are Tom's):

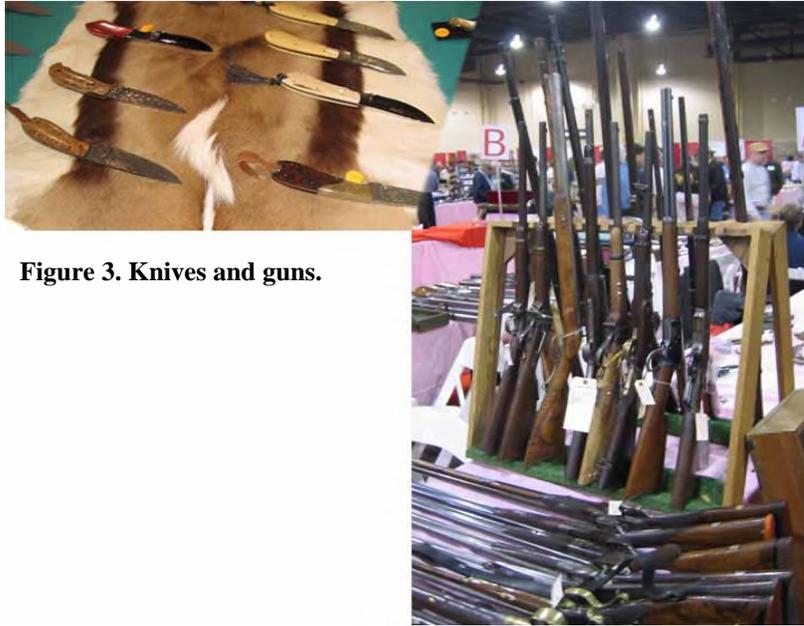


Figure 3. Knives and guns.

I wandered around both conventions, hoping to find other treasures. I was not disappointed. I discovered the gun show also exhibited antique jewelry, knights' armor, civil war uniforms, World War II helmets, spears, gold nuggets, combat medals, steering wheels for tanks, chess sets, walrus tusks, deer antlers, miniature pistols, rifles, and Gattling machine guns. One of my favorites was a 1920s-30s Wright Whirlwind aircraft cylinder. It sold for \$60.00.

The cylinder salesman said the cylinder was in good working order. I asked him, "Why is it important that it be in good working order?"

He replied, "You must be new to antique armaments. All pieces in good working order sell for more money than their counterparts that don't work." I was puzzled. The cylinder was not accompanied with the airplane; it could not be tested. So who could dispute him?

The theme of being in "good working order" was prevalent throughout the gun show. For example, the people selling miniature guns and pistols. Their products were as small as the palm of my hand. One exhibitor offered, "My guns are in perfect working order. All parts are exact, scaled down replicas of the originals. Here's a Colt six-cylinder pistol. Here's a Winchester hexagonal barrel rifle. They all work."

I asked, "So, not only do you sell miniature pistols, you also sell miniature bullets?"

He replied, "Of course not. Even if you had bullets small enough to put in, say, this Colt revolver, you couldn't get your finger around the tiny trigger to fire the gun."

I issued an investigative reporter-type challenge, “Then how do you know the gun is---as they say a lot around here---‘in good working order’?”

He paused and glanced over to his display cabinet containing life-size Colt revolvers, with real bullets. I decided I didn’t need a reply and bid him goodbye. I went away from this part of the show thinking a sizeable population of the Antique Armament Show were grownups who as children who played with rubber knives and cap pistols. Old habits die hard.

I asked one of the exhibitors who had several display cases of antique jewelry on display, “Why are you allowed to show non-armament stuff at an armament show?”

“Because we also sell armaments. Look over this counter,” as she pointed to several rows of armaments. “In order to display non-armaments, an exhibitor must display a certain ratio of armaments to non-armaments. I can’t remember the ratio; no one really asks, as long as we pay for the booth.”

I spotted two large cannons as part of her display, and pointing to them, I asked, “Is the ratio in throw weight, or number of pieces?” She sort of laughed, and I sort of walked away from her exhibit.



Figure 4. Tom Mix’s hat.

The good news for the final part of this report is that I found exhibits that were in good working order: old cowboy movie star hats. It’s easy to determine if a hat is in good working order: the brim and crown must be part of the hat. And what famous heads these hats sat on: Roy Rogers, Rex Allen, Gene Autry including the crème-de-la-hats: Tom Mix! Here is a photo of Tom Mix’s hat. (Figure 4). (Sorry about the glare from the display case.)

The prices were high: \$10,000.00 for the combined hat collection of Roy, Rex, and Gene with \$7,000.00 for Tom’s hat. I asked the hat seller, “Just curious, but how can a buyer be sure that the hats actually belonged to those movie stars?”

He replied, “Each hat has the movie star’s signature on the brim of the hat. Here, just look at Roy Rogers’ hat. See his signature?” The hat did have a signature on the brim.

Who was I to question if it were Roy’s handwriting? It looked OK to me, but I had never seen Roy Rogers’ signature. I’m sure Roy was smart and able to write. After all, he taught Trigger advanced tricks like counting, and he sang songs without looking at sheet music. Nonetheless,

for \$10,000.00, that's \$3,333.33 per hat. I think a prospective buyer would want proof of the authenticity of these hats.

I was growing tired. It had been a long day: playing cards early in the morning and attending knife and gun shows during the day. Truth be told, I'd rather play poker with sober people because they don't slobber on the chips or spill beer on the cards. Playing Texas Hold'Em with drunks might be profitable, but I concluded there must be a better way to earn minimum wage, such as learning to actually play Texas Hold'Em. It was time to file this report.

My next report will highlight my walk on Las Vegas Boulevard, commonly known as The Strip.

Your on the Street Reporter

Las Vegas (2005) Report Three

January 29, 2005

I'm your on the street reporter in Las Vegas, Nevada. Today, I report on Las Vegas Boulevard, also known as The Strip. It's the main street running from the airport to downtown. Most of the popular hotels and casinos are located on or near The Strip. My six-mile walk, from the Mandalay Bay Hotel to downtown, took a few hours. I strolled at a leisurely pace, often stopping to view the sights, as well as to escape the heat with detours into the casinos.

Uptown Las Vegas is a popular area for tourists. It is where I have spent most of my time the past five days. Downtown used to be the place to go, but its popularity waned as new upscale hotels were built uptown. Midtown, around the 2400 block of Las Vegas Boulevard and about a mile or so from downtown, has gone to seed.

The walk on The Strip was entertaining. If you are in the vicinity, make it a point to take this stroll. I could have visited each of the hotel's lobbies, casinos, and their ancillary sights---which are attractions unto themselves. But I confined myself principally to The Strip, with an occasional detour into a building.



The hotels' designers often use water in their landscaping. My abbreviated reports preclude a hotel-by-hotel description, so I've chosen the Mirage Hotel as an example of this practice. Here it is, in Figure 5. Pretty cool, and the pink rocks match the pink building.

Several other hotels have equally stunning exterior panoramas. For example, if you visit Las Vegas, don't miss the Bellagio Hotel's light and water presentation. The Bellagio has a lake in front of its buildings, bedecked with underwater sprinklers, water cannons, and a beautiful light show.

Take a look at Figure 6. This shot is of the Hoover Dam and Lake Mead, just outside of Las Vegas and a principal source of water for the city. I took this picture a couple years ago during a cross-country drive. Notice the low water level. Also, on the right side of the picture, take a look at the white and brown areas on the cliff (layers of rock and sediment). I'm told the white area had been the water level of Lake Mead for many years. I'm not a water expert---I like to drink it, shower in it, and swim in it, and that's about it. Nonetheless, if this statement is true, then it may turn out the Hoover Dam can eventually be dismantled as there will be nothing for the dam to do.



Figure 6. Where did all the water go?

The continued growth of Las Vegas does not appear to be sustainable, but the experts tell us global warming will lead to parts of the earth becoming wetter. I'd wager Las Vegas bookies are taking odds about southeast Nevada's future water supply.

Let's fast forward to another part of my walk on The Strip: the seedy part. As I approached the midtown area, the tourists disappeared. Instead, I walked several blocks in which the following businesses held sway: loan sharks, tattoo shops, body piercing stores, check cashing establishments, X-rated video stores, palm readers, and mystics (sometimes co-located with the palm readers).

My favorites were the marriage chapels. Scores of them:

- (a) One marriage chapel is located in the popular Stratosphere, the tallest building in Las Vegas. The Stratosphere boasts its Chapel in the Clouds allows the bride and groom to "Say 'I do' 800 feet above The Strip."
- (b) The Hollywood Chapel charges \$99 for the marriage ceremony, including the marriage license.
- (c) The Chapel of Love provides a convenient, "'Say I do' Wedding Drive-Thru."
- (d) The Oasis Motel charges \$26 for a bridal suite (its "fantasy room"), with use of the wedding chapel thrown in, as well as *exclusive* use of a *community* Jacuzzi. That's not all. The fantasy room also offers adult movies on a wide screen.
- (e) The Little Chapel of the Flowers provides this service: The marriage couple's wedding can be shown live on the Internet. And it offers hourly rates.
- (f) One chapel proclaims, "Married Joan Collins and Michael Jordan." Another boasts that Bon Jovi was married in its chapel.
- (g) A billboard paid by lawyers proclaims, "Losing a marriage is bad enough; don't lose your divorce, too."
- (h) Las Vegas has hostels, but not like those in Europe. One is shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. A hostel by any other name.

Who said romance was dead? Not in Las Vegas.

That's it for now. I'll send in my final report on Las Vegas, knives, and guns shortly.

Your on the Street Reporter

Las Vegas (2005) Report Four

January 30, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, still reporting from Las Vegas. The knife and gun shows are over. Tom made his way to his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I made my way to another Las Vegas hotel, the Bellagio, to stay for a couple days before I returned to my home in Virginia.

I left Mandalay Bay as a pleased customer. It was a fine place to hold a knife and gun show, and it showed remarkable tolerance for drunken Texas Hold'Em poker players. I decided to stick around for a couple more nights. One more hotel would do it.

The Bellagio is one of the upscale hotels on the Strip. But the room rates are reasonable if booked during a slow time of the year, or if a large convention is not in town. My room fee was about the same as the MGM Grand and the Mandalay Bay.

Five Star Room Service

While checking-in at the Bellagio, I had this discussion with the front desk clerk.

- Clerk, "The mini-bar in your room is activated by motion. If you open it, and move any item, even if you do not consume the food or beverage, you will be charged for the item."
- Reporter, "I usually keep milk in the mini-bar and place the bar's stuff on the floor. But that's OK. I'll put my milk in the ice bucket."
- "We can send up a refrigerator to your room. And what would be your choice of milk? We can bring that up, too." (*Knock, knock. This is room service. I'm here with your refrigerator.*)
- "That's exceptional service! Could you do the same for my ice cream?"
- "Sir?"
- "I mix ice cream with the milk; my own personal milk-shake. I usually keep ice cream in the mini-bar."
- "I see. I'm sure we can provide you with a freezer as well. Let me check with our staff."
- "No, I'm teasing you."

I suspect I could have asked for a BBQ grill, and Bellagio would have accommodated me.

The Chocolate Fountain

On the way to my room, I passed by a confectionery shop. The most striking aspect of this store is its chocolate fountain, an extraordinary example of the theme for Las Vegas: *Nothing exceeds like excess*. Here is a photo of this fountain (Figure 8), and some facts about its operations:

Six pumps circulate almost two tons of white, medium, and dark chocolate. Twenty-four bowls help relay the chocolate down twenty-seven feet, from top to bottom. Throughout the journey, the chocolate remains heated at 120° F.

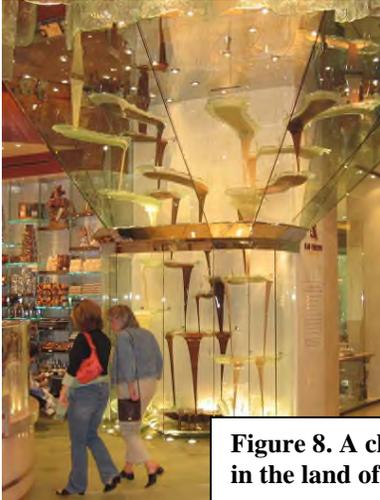


Figure 8. A chocolate fountain in the land of plenty.

Amazing. Only in America---perhaps in Switzerland---could a person encounter such an example of conspicuous non-consumption: We have so much to eat that we build larder monuments to display our excess victuals.

Don't get me wrong about my comments on "excess." I admired the chocolate fountain, and I love chocolate. For a few fanciful moments, I imagined placing my mouth under one of those lovely chocolate flows. That's the joy of fantasy. Can you picture it, too? I hope so.

The Bellagio has its downsides. First, and a thorn under my saddle, the hotel charges for local calls on a metered basis: 10 cents per minute for each minute over 30 minutes. It's an insulting practice, which I characterize as "Bottom Line Myopia." Until the local Bells start metering local calls, hotels should not exploit their guests.

Second, the gym (sorry, Spa) was larger than a Dodge pickup show room and had more equipment than an Olympic training facility. But Bellagio charges \$25.00 per visit---on top of the room charge. I can stay at Econo Lodge and use its exercise room free of charge. Of course, I am not handed a towel by a cheerful Econo Lodge attendant at the Econo's workout room (which contains one piece of equipment---a barbell). I'm not given bottled water and fruit, or provided a private TV screen at each machine. I suppose the Bellagio's niceties add-up, and expenses must be covered.

Flower Children

If you're in Las Vegas, be sure to visit Bellagio's Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, located adjacent to the lobby. The exhibits vary. The current display contains more than 10,000 live flowers, hundreds of trees and bushes, a giant animated rooster mannequin, a four-story Chinese Pagoda, a waterfall, a four-story Chinaman statue, clouds of mist that slowly descend from the ceiling, water fountains that shoot water into Bamboo reed reservoirs. Econo Lodge was never like this.

My favorite display was a group of Chinese mannequin children whose clothes were made of real flowers. Take a look at Figure 9. The left photo is a shot of part of the overall display; the right photo shows one mannequin in more detail. And take a look at all those yellow and red flowers.



Figure 9. Flower children.



I asked one of the Bellagio Conservatory attendants about the challenge of keeping the clothing looking clean and fresh with freshly cut flowers. He replied, “Yes, each flower is removed every few days, and replaced with a freshly cut flower.” (Maybe the \$25 Spa fee helps cover the costs of the flowers.)

I watched the attendants taking off the old flowers and replacing them with new flowers, “Whew! Doesn’t that get a little old?”

Day-after-day, the same routine: Flowers off, flowers on. For myself, I’d be looking for a new line of work.”

Attendant, “Oh no, not at all. The costume designs for the children change frequently. So, the placement of the flowers varies with time.”

Sure, but a rose by any other name is still a rose, and flower stuffing by any other name is still flower stuffing. I have a short attention span. I suspect I would be good for stuffing a shirt sleeve, maybe a collar. After that, I would have to move on to something more interesting, say, the daily watering of 10,000 live flowers.

Speaking of water, my take on the Las Vegas water problem is to require strict usage for private lawns, or perhaps permitting no grass lawns at all. Create lawns consisting of pebbles and rocks because these indigenous stones are amazingly tolerant to drought. If Las Vegas citizens insist on lawns, they can move to Seattle. On the other hand, allow generous water usage for exhibits designed to be public displays, such as the Bellagio Conservatory and the Mirage Hotel’s waterfall.

XO Surprise

Before concluding this report, we take a brief flashback to the Mandalay Bay Hotel. On our last night there, Tom and I celebrated his successful knife show by dining at a noodles café and playing five-cent video poker. We’re pretty low-maintenance social animals. Anyway, during our battles with the slot machines, a waitress---with whom we had been trading jokes---asked if we would like a drink. I said, “Sure, a Hennessy XO brandy.”

Without further comment, she returned with a snifter of brandy. I asked her, “How much?” expecting an answer of something around \$25.

She answered, "\$100."

What had happened to Hennessy XO prices in the last twenty-four hours? But having been recently inured to the high cost of brandy, I was actually reaching for my wallet, when she said, "Just kidding. It's free as long as you're playing the games."

She was a cool one and I felt a bit foolish, until it occurred to me that I was soaking up free Hennessy XO while Tom and I were spending maybe a dollar every five to ten minutes on the five-cent slot machine. But the waitress brought me back to earth, "Sir, I'm joking. This is our house brandy. I didn't bring you Hennessy XO. The casino bar doesn't stock it. If you like, I can get it at..."

I replied, "No, I'm happy, thanks," as Tom and I toiled away, unsuccessfully combating the insurmountable odds of Las Vegas' slots---if only a nickel at a time.

A Fitting Finish

My last dinner for this trip was at a Bellagio restaurant. To my surprise, the restaurant offered mashed potatoes---not creamed, not buttered, but *mashed*. Furthermore, my one luxury for the evening (other than the fact that I was eating at this café) was the Hennessy XO. It cost \$25. I informed the waiter I was conducting a nation-wide survey on restaurant charges for this brandy. He replied, "I'll bet the Bellagio is the highest."

I said, "Nope, you're about average."

He said, "Just average?" He was not happy. Such is the nature of up-scale establishments: Charge too little, and you'll lose your customers.

That's it from Sin City. Las Vegas no longer lives up to this nickname, but it offers ample fun and plenty of excess. It's a city that does not take itself seriously.

Your on the Street Reporter