

The Steel Pier
Ferris wheel at night.



Back to the Boardwalk

Nearly a century after its Prohibition-era heyday, Atlantic City rises again

BY AUSTIN KELLEY

THERE'S MORE TO ATLANTIC CITY'S

old nickname, "America's Playground," than raucous speakeasies and glittering nightclubs. This New Jersey beach retreat was also once known for a more wholesome brand of fun—namely, great food and spectacular shows. Now, after decades of decline followed by casino-focused development, a new playground is emerging that mixes some of the old, Prohibition-era delights with more modern pleasures. Visitors can just as easily dine at a classic restaurant from Atlantic City's heyday as they can shop at Louis Vuitton or catch a Lady Gaga concert. It's not exactly the vintage A.C. of Martin Scorsese's HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, which started this fall, but as you'll see, history still lives strong.

FRESH TRACKS

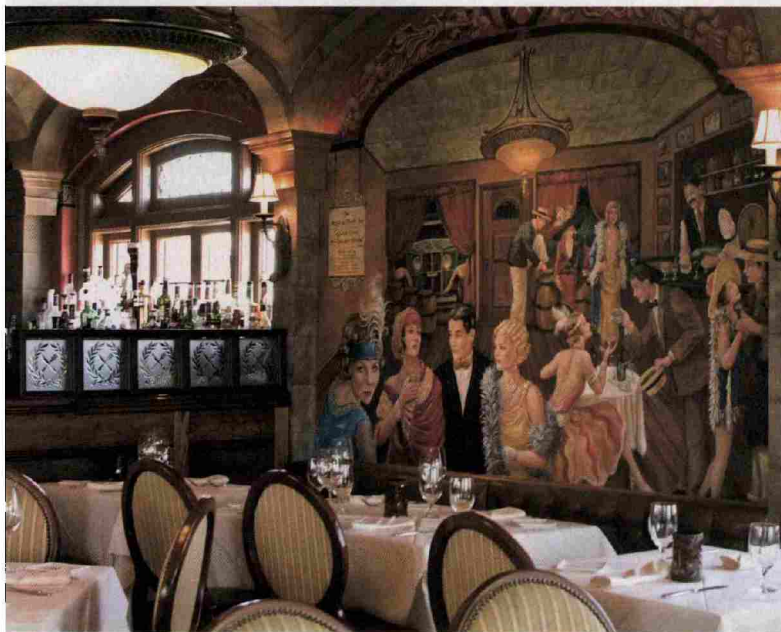
In his book *Boardwalk Empire*, on which the HBO series is based, historian Nelson Johnson writes that Atlantic City blossomed in the 1920s because of its accessibility. Ninety-nine trains, including 11 of the 16 fastest in the world, cruised in and out of A.C. each summer day. The city eventually evolved into a car-centric town, but rail travel returned in 2009 with the launch of the double-decker ACES train, which runs from New York City on weekends and is a far cry from the dreary casino buses (think leather seats and drink specials).

HISTORY SAMPLER

If you arrive in time for lunch, pop over to the **White House Sub Shop**, a favorite for its overstuffed sandwiches. The walls

of this workingman's deli, which opened in 1946, are plastered with photographs and memorabilia from A.C.'s past, including glossies signed by a zillion Miss Americas and a towel used by Frank Sinatra during his last show at the Sands. Dozens of friendly cooks whip up cheesesteaks and hoagies, using fresh bread supplied by the folks at Formica Bros. Bakery across the street.

When you've reached your caloric capacity, take a stroll down the boardwalk to Garden Pier, just north of the Trump Taj Mahal. Here the **Atlantic City Museum** awaits, with exhibits about the Steel Pier's diving horses and the very first Ferris wheel. The boardwalk itself has few of the legendary hotels from Prohibition days, but near the Tropicana you can peek into



Atlantic City scenes: (clockwise from above) Knife & Fork restaurant, with its Roaring Twenties-themed mural; cranberry biscotti at Formica Bros. Bakery; the White House Sub Shop.

the old Ritz-Carlton (now the Ritz Condominiums). It was from the Ritz's ninth floor that crooked political boss Enoch "Nucky" Johnson ran the city in the 1920s. "Nucky had leased the entire floor from where he reigned as the 'Czar,'" writes Nelson Johnson. With his silk robes and hedonistic lifestyle, Nucky turned the Ritz into a "lavish temple of pleasure." Just to the north, the 19th-century Dennis Hotel was recently restored to its Victorian charm.

To get a real taste of old Atlantic City, leave the boardwalk and hit the traditional eateries. Several celebrity-chef restaurants have recently come to town—including the Borgata's Bobby Flay and Wolfgang Puck establishments—but locals will still point you to **Dock's Oyster House**. Dock's has been run by the same Dougherty family since it first opened in 1897, and they often greet you at the door. Despite recent updates, the dining room retains its old-world feel, with a pianist playing standards from behind the bar and a menu that still lists the same century-old hits: fried oysters and crab cakes.

Farther down Atlantic Avenue, you'll find an even greater culinary landmark. The **Knife & Fork**, founded in 1912, "has been a very popular spot for nearly a hundred years," writes Johnson. It's housed in an idiosyncratic, Flemish-style building that was first a private club and then a speakeasy until federal authorities raided it. Later, the restaurant became a hangout of the Rat Pack (Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis first performed together at the bygone 500 Club nearby) and of Burt Lancaster—it appears in the 1980 film *Atlantic City* as the site of his character's celebratory lunch with Susan Sarandon.

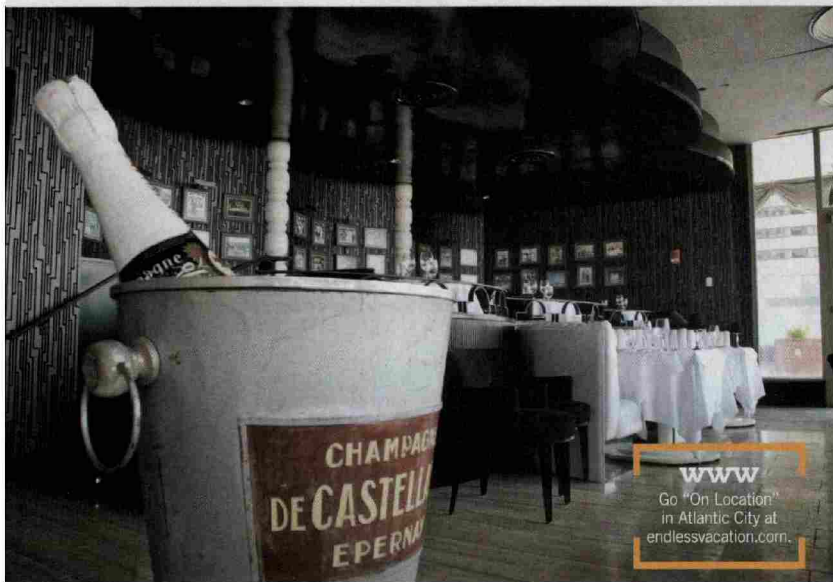
In 2005 the Knife & Fork was purchased by the Dougherty family, of Dock's fame, and given a makeover. It still serves traditional beef and reef fare, but the revamped menu also offers modern twists like Kobe sliders and Asian slaw. Whatever you choose, you won't be disappointed. The wood-fire grill, extensive wine list and expanded bar make this a must stop.

MODERN THROWBACKS

Not all of the "vintage" establishments in the city are old. **The Chelsea**, a 1950s-style boutique hotel, opened in 2008 as the first non-gaming resort on the boardwalk in the casino area. Retro lamps and art deco mirrors accent the rooms; the two restaurants were developed in part by Philadelphia restaurateur Stephen Starr. **Teplitzky's** is a chic diner and bar straight out of *The Jetsons*, while **Chelsea Prime** resembles an old-school steak house with its leather booths and black-and-white photos of 1940s A.C. The tall windows with sweeping ocean views make a perfect backdrop for a succulent T-bone.

Old-school revelry is also making a comeback. Check out the free parade put on three times a day Wednesday–Sunday by the Showboat casino, with dancers, acrobats and singers wearing feather boas and colorful costumes. Showboat may not be the spiffiest casino on the boardwalk, but you won't find a more entertaining tribute to the glory days of the Steel Pier.

ATLANTIC CITY



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Eclectic mix: (clockwise from left) Chilling at Chelsea Prime; a special at White House Subs; the Pier Shops at Caesars; the Kristef Brothers performing at the Showboat.



NEW TOUCHES

Had enough history? Head to the **Pier Shops at Caesars**, where you can browse the latest fashions at high-end boutiques (Gucci, Ferragamo) and marvel at the Water Show, a dramatic display of fountains, lights and music. Take a break in the Adirondack chairs on the mall's third floor (which has great sunset views, by the way), then wander over to the outlet stores on **The Walk**.

As with shopping, Atlantic City's entertainment scene has also gotten a serious update. With new casinos popping up across the country, the gaming industry is growing more competitive, and Atlantic City is trying to keep up with the changes by improving its other attractions. So far, the work has paid off. The city is now drawing big-name performers like Bruce Springsteen, Shakira and Lady Gaga, who's slated for Boardwalk Hall in February.

If you don't have tickets to a show, you'll find plenty of action at one of the many new nightclubs and lounges. Exhibit A: **Harrah's Pool**. By day, it's a huge, watery oasis of hot tubs and palm trees. Come evening, DJs are unleashed and it

transforms into an aquatic dance club with mini-cabanas and an MTV *Jersey Shore* vibe. The nearby Borgata also has several popular clubs and lounges with nightly DJs and live bands.

And to help you recover from your big night out, Atlantic City has tons of spas. Opt for the seashell massage (\$125) at Showboat's **Vive Day Spa**, which is like a hot stone treatment, but with a shore twist. The South Jersey shore, that is.

EAT

White House Sub Shop

Locals flock to this old-fashioned lunch counter where the waitresses call you "hon" and the sandwiches are as big as your arm—and those are the "half" sandwiches. We dare you to eat a whole one. *2301 Arctic Ave.; 609-345-1564; lunch for two, \$16**

Dock's Oyster House

Since 1897, the Dougherty family has served some of the finest seafood on the shore. Expect items like crabmeat au gratin and a massive seafood fry. The raw bar, a recent addition, offers East Coast oysters and clams. *2405 Atlantic Ave.; 609-345-0092; dinner for two, \$80*

Knife & Fork

Recent refurbishments have brought the buzz back to this historic meat and seafood stand-by, which once attracted the likes of Frank, Dean and Sammy. *3600 Atlantic Ave.; 609-344-1133; dinner for two, \$95*

Chelsea Prime

Located on the fifth floor of the Chelsea Hotel, this new steakhouse recalls a classic downtown supper club. You can't go wrong with the dry-aged porterhouse and a bottle of Bordeaux. *111 S. Chelsea Ave.; 609-428-4545; dinner for two, \$110*

Il Mulino

In 2008, Fernando and Gino Masci's empire of luxurious Italian restaurants expanded to the Trump Taj Mahal. The room is split in two, allowing you to choose the white-tablecloth experience or less expensive, trattoria-style dining. The latter also serves up simple lunches of pizza or pasta with, say, sausage and broccoli rabe. Bene. *1000 Boardwalk and Virginia; 609-449-6006; dinner for two, \$56 (trattoria) or \$140 (restaurant)*

**Prices cover a meal for two without drinks, tax or tip.*



STAY

RCI-affiliated resorts in or near

Atlantic City include:

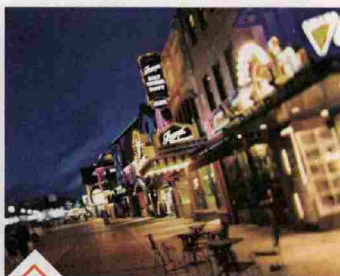


WYNDHAM SKYLINE TOWER

Just a block from the ocean, the boardwalk, restaurants and casino action. The resort has a full gym, indoor pool and two Jacuzzis, plus Wi-Fi in all units. *100 S. North Carolina Ave., Atlantic City*

Member Reviews:

"Within walking distance of the casinos, restaurants, shopping and clubs."
 "We had a one-bedroom, which was spacious, clean and comfortable."
 "Great hot tub in the room."
 "The views from higher floors are nice."



BLUEGREEN AT ATLANTIC PALACE

A 31-story resort on the boardwalk, with an indoor hot tub, sauna and exercise room. *1507 Boardwalk, Atlantic City*

Member Reviews:

"The Atlantic City Historical Museum and Art Center is within walking distance."
 "The view was fabulous."
 "Even though it was December, we had several people surfing."
 "Go to Bally's Blue Martini to drink, dance and listen to a live band."

FANTASEA RESORTS LA SAMMANA

Five miles north of Atlantic City on Brigantine Island. The resort is a short walk to the beach and a 10-minute ride to Atlantic City via the hotel's complimentary casino shuttle. *1400 W. Brigantine Ave., Brigantine*

Member Reviews:

"La Sammana is a hidden gem."
 "The beach was clean and beautiful."
 "We enjoyed lunch at the Laguna Grill Martini Bar, right on the beach in Brigantine."
 "Check out Pirate's Den for a phenomenal breakfast."

RHC/BRIGANTINE BEACH CLUB

Just five miles across the inlet from Atlantic City. All the studios and suites are equipped with full kitchens, cable TV and washers and dryers. *4500 W. Brigantine Ave., Brigantine*

Member Reviews:

"The cost of these spacious rooms with the well-appointed kitchen, washer, dryer, 3 TVs and Jacuzzi was less than a cramped hotel room in A.C."
 "Out of the noise and bustle."
 "Our room was totally remodeled and decorated with a seaside theme."

For more information, including complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed), visit RCI.com or call

Weeks: 800-338-7777

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NON-RCI-AFFILIATED RESORTS:



The Chelsea

This retro-chic hotel has a saltwater pool, art-deco fixtures, hip restaurants—and no casino. Try to book an ocean-view room in the beachfront tower, not the annex. *111 S. Chelsea Ave.; 800-548-3030; thechelsea-ac.com; doubles from \$130 per night*

Trump Taj Mahal

A casino-resort with 3,000 slot machines, 210 game tables, 18 dining options, seven bars and clubs and two event spaces. The spa and elegant rooms and suites provide a luxurious escape from the action. *1000 Boardwalk; 609-449-1000; trumptaj.com; doubles from \$89 per night*

The Water Club

This swank new hotel tower has a two-story spa, a sunroom and five indoor pools. Part of the Borgata complex, it's connected to some of the best dining, gaming and dance clubs in the city. *1 Renaissance Way; 800-800-8817; thewaterclubhotel.com; doubles from \$119 per night*

Harrah's

Stay in the brand new 47-story Waterfront Tower, with nicer rooms and amenities than the old tower. It's also right by the pool, where you can spend an afternoon relaxing with a cocktail. *777 Harrah's Blvd.; 800-427-7247; harrahs.com; doubles from \$77 per night*