



THE LAS VEGAS LGBTQ+ TRAVEL GUIDE

VEGAS

Arrivals



FROM IDOL UNDERDOG TO STRIP HEADLINER:

**MIKALAH GORDON'S
VEGAS HOMECOMING
AT FONTAINEBLEAU**



With a proud publishing legacy that dates back to 1978, QVegas has been at the heart of Las Vegas' LGBTQ+ community for over four decades. What began as a grassroots newsletter has evolved into a dynamic weekly publication that informs, celebrates, and amplifies queer voices across Southern Nevada. QVegas is available in print at over 30 LGBTQ+ establishments, community nonprofits, and partner advertiser locations, making it a vital part of the local scene.

Beyond the printed page, QVegas connects with readers through a robust digital presence—on the web, across all major social media platforms, in our dedicated iOS app, and through weekly email blasts that keep the community in the know. Our coverage spans nightlife, entertainment, politics, health, advocacy, and the everyday stories that make up the diverse LGBTQ+ experience in Las Vegas.

As an advertiser-supported publication, QVegas is the most effective way to reach LGBTQ+ locals and visitors alike—offering unparalleled access to one of the city's most loyal and engaged audiences. In an era where equality rights are under attack nationwide, QVegas stands as a strong and unwavering community partner, committed to visibility, representation, and celebrating the power of queer voices.

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Headliners, High Tech, and Hot Tickets: QVegas Arrivals Maps the Fruit Loop, Tastes Azzurra, Tracks Zoox on the Strip, and Flags Every 10k-Plus Convention You Need to Know

Welcome to QVegas Arrivals—your carry-on-sized cheat sheet to what's new, now, and next in LGBTQ+ Las Vegas. This issue spotlights homegrown star power and future-forward thrills, beginning with our cover story on Mikalah Gordon. From Idol underdog to Strip headliner, Gordon's "Good Girl" era pairs KLUC morning-show wit with late-night pop-soul fireworks at Fontainebleau, a Vegas homecoming told with humor, heart, and yes-bitch energy.

We ride into tomorrow on Zoox's purpose-built robotaxi, now giving free public rides along a tightly geofenced Strip corridor. Think concierge-guided pickup zones, face-to-face seating for four, and a crown of sensors gliding you between hotspots—an autonomy debut designed for Vegas at rush hour.

On the showbeat, WOW at the Rio celebrates its 3,000th performance, proving that water, light, and gasp-worthy acrobatics still splash hardest when the curtain rises. Our Show of the Week, Potted Potter, condenses seven books into 70 minutes of gleeful, all-ages parody—perfect pre- or post-dinner fun.

Planning around crowds? Our Convention & Entertainment Schedule flags the mega-weeks—SEMA/AAIW, AWS re:Invent, MJBizCon, ASHP Midyear, LDI, SHOT Show, World of Concrete, Sin City Classic, CES—and explains how 10k-plus attendees ripple through hotel rates, dining, and rideshare availability so you can book smarter.

We also tour Azzurra Wine Bar & Shop in Henderson's Water Street District, where

discovery-driven pours meet shareable plates (don't miss the bruschetta flight or Gnocchi Bolognese).

First-time visitors and locals alike will love our curated hotel and show boxes—from HRC-100 corporate allies like Caesars Entertainment and The Venetian to must-see productions across the Strip—plus an at-a-glance nightlife map of the Fruit Loop's landmark venues, from Gipsy and Piranha to Quadz and Bent Inn's pub.

Community remains our compass: we highlight PrEP access at The Center's Arlene Cooper Community Health Center and point you to the QVegas app for directories, tickets, and weekly updates.

Whether you're landing for the weekend or plotting your next staycation, this Arrivals issue bundles insider picks, time-saving intel, and a celebratory snapshot of a city that never stops performing—for you, with you, and right on cue. Grab a copy, scan the codes, and let Vegas lead the way.



Russ White & Garrett Pattiani
Publishers, QVegas & QLife Media



View this week's horoscopes at qvegas.com/horoscopes-are-a-drag.



SCORPIO NOVEMBER 2025

Darling, let me spill the tea in a fabulous, glittery style for you! Picture this: your November horoscope for Scorpio is like the perfect blend of drama and fierce fabulousness. You're strutting down the runway of life, baby, with the spotlight shining bright on your scintillating charisma and enigmatic charm. Relationships? Honey, they're gonna be as spicy as your favorite cocktail. So, buckle up, Scorpio, and slay the month with your allure and magnetic aura!

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The Future Hails You: Zoox Opens Public Rides on the Strip

Las Vegas loves a spectacle, and Zoox just rolled out a new one: a purpose-built, fully autonomous robotaxi now offering public rides up and down the resort corridor. After years of testing in the city and limited access for employees, friends, and family, the Amazon-owned company flipped the switch for everyone in September 2025—inviting locals and visitors to summon a driverless ride with the Zoox app. At launch, trips are free, tightly geofenced, and focused on a handful of marquee destinations—including Resorts World, AREA15, Topgolf, New York-New York, and Luxor—so people can sample the tech where the action is densest.

What makes Zoox's debut different from other autonomous pilots you may have seen creeping around the valley is the vehicle itself. This isn't a converted sedan with the steering wheel yanked out; it's a symmetrical, toaster-shaped shuttle designed from the ground up for autonomy. There's no driver's seat, no pedals, and no wheel. Passengers sit face-to-face on bench seating for up to four, while a crown of cameras, lidar, and radar scan the environment. The layout is equal parts futuristic and pragmatic—optimized for tight urban maneuvers and quick curbside boarding rather than highway sprints.

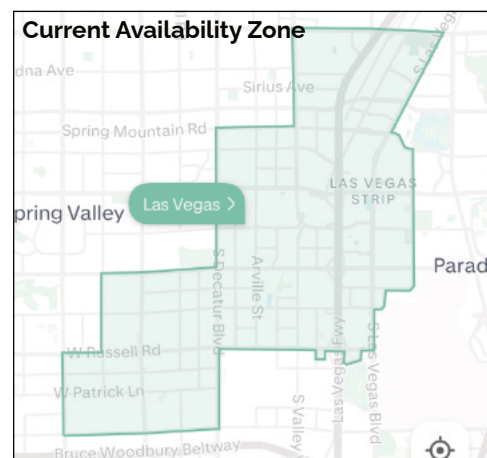
The service model is equally intentional. Zoox established designated pick-up and drop-off zones with on-site concierges—an important early-days touch that helps wrangle crowds, educate first-timers, and ensure the vehicles aren't stopping in loading lanes where they'll snarl traffic. Inside the app, riders see wait times and

vehicle details and can hit a help button in the car or the app to reach remote support. These operational choices, while conservative, are a savvy way to build trust on the Strip, where foot traffic is chaotic and curb real estate is fiercely contested.

For now, the rides are short and sweet—roughly three miles or less—perfect for hopping between resort properties, attractions, and nightlife while skipping rideshare surge pricing. Offering those rides for free during the shakedown phase is part product trial, part public outreach. Zoox says it plans to transition to paid service after the necessary regulatory steps, with pricing that competes with taxis and app-based ride-hailing. In a city where the distance between venues can be deceiving (and the desert heat is real), an all-electric, autonomous shuttle that just shows up could quickly become a nightlife staple.

The Vegas launch is also a strategic statement in the autonomy race. Waymo has earned headlines in Phoenix, San Francisco, and beyond, but Zoox is staking out a different lane: a fleet of vehicles manufactured to be driverless from day one, assembled at a new facility in Hayward, California that's targeting up to 10,000 units annually at full tilt. That vertical integration—designing the vehicle, building it, and operating the service—may help Zoox iterate quickly on hardware and software as it scales beyond Las Vegas, with Austin and Miami already teased as “coming soon.”

Of course, the big question is performance. Early rider accounts describe smooth, cautious driving and predictable routing—exactly what you'd want from a machine



piloting itself through the tangle of pedestrians, tour buses, and rideshares near the Strip. Some have noted the bench seating isn't as plush as a limo, but this is a shuttle, not a rolling nightclub. In short hops between must-see stops, comfort is good enough; reliability and safety are the headliners. By keeping launch operations focused and staffed, Zoox can collect data, refine pick-up behavior, and prove it can play nicely with Vegas traffic before widening the map.

Zoom out, and the symbolism is hard to miss. Las Vegas has always been a proving ground for next-gen entertainment and hospitality tech—from cashless gaming to immersive venues—and autonomous mobility slots right in. If Zoox can make a compelling case here, with demanding crowds and a 24/7 rhythm, it bodes well for broader adoption in downtown districts and entertainment zones elsewhere. For now, the pitch is simple: open the app, step into a driverless pod, glide to your next stop, and tell your friends you rode the future on the Strip—on the house.

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Las Vegas Convention & Entertainment Schedule

Las Vegas isn't just where business gets done—it's where entire industries roll into town, light up the marquees, and turn meetings into movements. As the undisputed convention capital of the world, the city's scale is unmatched: cavernous halls, purpose-built expo floors, and an ecosystem of hotels, restaurants, and entertainment designed to absorb waves of attendees without missing a beat.

This schedule highlights the largest gatherings—those expecting 10,000 or more participants—so you can plan around the surges that shape room rates, dinner reservations, rideshares, and even show ticket availability. You'll see how a single week can stretch across multiple venues, with sessions at the Las Vegas Convention Center by day and receptions flowing to flagship resorts and adjacent conference centers by night. The lineup spans a remarkable spectrum: high-octane automotive culture and aftermarket innovation; global cloud computing and developer

communities; healthcare professionals convening for midyear milestones; the pros who build, clean, and power our physical world; live events, lighting, and production creators who stage what the world sees; lifestyle and specialty showcases that spark headlines; and the athletics and community festivals that bring teams—and their fans—together. In short, the world arrives here to launch products, make deals, hire talent, and celebrate what's next. If you're traveling during these dates, book early, consider flexible check-in/check-out windows, and secure dining plans—especially near the Strip corridors that sit between major expo sites. If you're a local, expect busier commutes near resort convention hubs and plan evening outings with extra lead time. Whether you're exhibiting, attending, or simply navigating the city you love, use this guide to anticipate peaks, avoid bottlenecks, and make the most of Las Vegas at its most electric—when the badges flash, the escalators hum, and a global cross-section of industries turns the desert into the world's most connected meeting place.

November 4-7

Automotive Aftermarket Industry Week (AAIW) 2025

CAESARS FORUM Conference Center
Las Vegas Convention Center
The Venetian Expo
Est. Attendees: 160,000

SEMA Show 2025

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 160,000

November 11-13

ISSA Show North America - 2025

Mandalay Bay Convention Center, Resort and Casino
Est. Attendees: 16,500

November 13-15

Mecum Collector Car Auctions 2025

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 15,000

December 1-5

Amazon Web Services - re:Invent 2025

The Venetian Resort Las Vegas
Est. Attendees: 55,000



December 3-5

MJBizCon 2025

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 15,000



December 7-11

American Society of Health-System Pharmacists Midyear Clinical Meeting & Exhibition 2025

Mandalay Bay Convention Center, Resort and Casino
Est. Attendees: 21,000

December 7-9

Live Design International - LDI Show 2025

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 14,000

January 6-9

CES

Jan 12-15

The PPAI Expo 2026

Mandalay Bay Convention Center, Resort and Casino
Est. Attendees: 20,000

January 15-19

Sin City Classic 2026

Flamingo Las Vegas
Est. Attendees: 10,000



January 20-22

International Roofing Expo 2026

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 15,000

January 20-23

Shooting, Hunting & Outdoor Trade Show (SHOT Show) - 2026

The Venetian Resort Las Vegas
CAESARS FORUM Conference Center
Est. Attendees: 61,000

January 20-22

World of Concrete Expo 2026

Las Vegas Convention Center
Est. Attendees: 58,000

January 21-24

AVN Adult Expo 2026

Virgin Hotels Las Vegas
Est. Attendees: 15,000



F1 Las Vegas Advisory

Expect significant traffic impacts on and around the Las Vegas Strip in the weeks before and after November's Formula 1 Grand Prix. Crews will install barriers, lighting, and grandstands, causing lane reductions, shifting traffic patterns, and occasional sidewalk detours. During "hot track" sessions on event days, the Strip will close to regular vehicle traffic; only permitted and emergency vehicles may pass. Plan extra time—30 to 60 minutes—for airport trips, dinner reservations, and show arrivals. Use

alternate routes when possible. Expect intermittent road closures serving the resort corridor. Rideshare and taxi pickups may be limited to designated zones; check your app for exact locations. Consider the Las Vegas Monorail or walking via pedestrian bridges when possible. Hotel guest access and valet routes may change day to day; follow posted signage and property advisories to minimize delays.



WOW Hits 3,000: Splash, Spectacle, and Staying Power at the Rio

Las Vegas loves a milestone, and “WOW – The Vegas Spectacular” just made a big one look effortless. On July 31, 2025, the internationally acclaimed water-and-wonder production celebrated its 3,000th performance inside the Rio Showroom at Rio Hotel & Casino—a remarkable run for a show that first made a splash in 2017 and has been drenching audiences in delight ever since. In a city where reinvention is practically a sport, “WOW” has managed the trick of feeling both timeless and freshly fizzy, a family-forward spectacle with enough athleticism, humor, and heart to keep locals and visitors coming back for more.

Created and directed by Hanoach Rosénn, “WOW” speaks a language that needs no translation: shimmering visuals, high-flying acrobatics, and music that moves the room. Over more than 2.5 million guests have experienced the production’s signature blend of imagination and illusion, guided by a 30-plus-member international cast that flips, flies, and free-falls across a 180-degree theatrical playground. Water isn’t just a theme here—it’s a co-star. Pools appear and vanish, fountains arc like choreography, and performers skim, splash, and soar through sequences that are equal parts athletic and dreamlike.

The 3,000th performance arrived with the kind of joyfully theatrical flourish Las Vegas does best: onstage cake, heartfelt speeches, a post-show toast with the cast, and a few jaw-dropping surprises tailored for the occasion. Rosénn, who has guided

the show’s evolution from the start, credited the cast, crew, and the Rio’s team for sustaining the production’s momentum, especially as the property itself continues its revitalization. It’s a synergistic fit. The Rio’s entertainment slate leans bold and eclectic—think Penn & Teller’s long-running wizardry, the culty sci-fi tease of *The Empire Strips Back*, and the West Coast outpost of Comedy Cellar—while “WOW” supplies nightly spectacle that plays just as well to multi-generational families as to birthday-weekend friend groups.

Part of the secret sauce is pacing. “WOW” moves like a mixtape: a tender aerial pas de deux dissolves into a comic bit; a precision hand-to-hand balance melts into a laser-slick water illusion; then—because this is Vegas—another gasp-worthy dive lands like a cymbal crash. The production layers in 3D multimedia projections, water walls, holograms, and theatrical sound and lighting not as gimmicks but as extensions of the show’s pulse. At its best, “WOW” feels like stepping inside a music video directed by a circus romantic: all momentum and mood, with sequences built to spark wonder rather than explain it.

For a city that often chases the next shiny thing, the longevity here is the headline. Variety shows live and die by freshness, and “WOW” keeps the experience vibrant by rotating specialty acts—several with “America’s Got Talent” credentials—while preserving the core rhythm that fans expect. It’s a smart balance that rewards repeat visits without confusing first-timers. If you’ve got out-of-town family in tow or



you’re curating a pre-dinner, post-pool itinerary that’s big on vibe and light on exposition, this is an easy yes.

Behind the scenes, the production’s pedigree is equally sturdy. R\&R Entertainment joins Yacov Neeman and Doron Etzioni of Tevet Productions (whose international circus and touring chops are written into the show’s DNA), Corey Ross of Starvox Entertainment (responsible for importing cult-favorite stage fare like *Potted Potter*), and marketing veterans Jordan Fiksenbaum and Brad Goldberg of Informed Marketing, who bring deep Cirque du Soleil and MGM Resorts experience to the brand. It’s a seasoned, global team steering a very Vegas mission: deliver a “wow” that lands night after night.

For QVegas readers, the show’s accessibility is part of its charm. You don’t need to be a superfan of any particular genre to plug into the energy here. “WOW” trades in universal delights—bodies in motion, music that swells at just the right moment, water catching light in ways that feel almost cinematic. Bring the kids (ages 4+ are welcome), bring the grandparents, bring the friend visiting for the first time; everyone will find an entry point, and you’ll leave with shared goosebumps.

Three thousand shows in, “WOW” remains exactly what its title promises: a confident, splashy love letter to live performance. It’s a reminder that, in Las Vegas, the oldest magic is sometimes the simplest—light, water, music, and a roomful of people ready to be amazed.

Yesbitch Energy:

*How a Vegas original
turned noise into notes—
and came home louder,
funnier, and fully herself.*



Las Vegas has a way of boomeranging its brightest back to the neon. For Mikalah Gordon, the return feels less like a comeback and more like a coronation. The singer, comedian, and broadcaster—who first burst into America's living rooms as a teenager on *American Idol*—now splits her time between two quintessentially Vegas microphones: mornings as a co-host on 98.5 KLUC, and nights fronting a band residency at Fontainebleau. Somewhere between dawn drive-time and midnight encores, she wrote “Good Girl,” a pop-soul anthem with a swaggering hook, a generous heart, and a message meant for the 16-year-old who did everything right—and got judged anyway.

Gordon's origin story is Vegas through and through: scrappy, glamorous, and impossible to ignore. At 16, she made *Idol*'s Top 12 (and roomed with future superstar Carrie Underwood). That lightning-strike moment hurled open a string of doors: red-carpet correspondent gigs, and a sitcom arc opposite Fran Drescher on *Living with Fran*. But the same spotlight that accelerates opportunity also amplifies opinion. For a teenager, the echo can be deafening.

Two decades on, Gordon has something the younger version didn't: perspective—and a pen. “Good Girl” is a letter across time to the person who needed protection when the crowd got loud. The song tells her: we made it, we did what we set out to do, and the voice inside you—equal parts bravado and vulnerability—was always the compass.

The Sound: Pop Soul with Bite

Slide “Good Girl” between Amy Winehouse's melodic immediacy and

Jazmine Sullivan's steel and you'll land in the right register. Gordon wrote the track with fellow *Idol* alum Brandon Rogers, prioritizing a melody you can learn in one chorus and belt by the second. This is deliberate: the song invites the room to finish lines with her, to take ownership of the refrain, to transform from listenership into fellowship.

The lyric that hits like a confetti cannon: “You said I'm a clown—well, bitch, I'm funny. I make my money living out loud.” It's a wink and a boundary at once. People once mistook her sparkle for superficiality; the joke's on them. Close behind, another line plants a flag on the Strip: “Win or lose, love me or hate me, I'm a Vegas baby.” In a town that rewards reinvention, it reads like an oath.

The Frame She Chooses

If Gordon's music is a love letter to her younger self, her visuals are a mirror held steady. She's been candid about body image—the internet's whiplash from “too much” to “too little,” the way grief can redraw a silhouette, the pressure to satisfy an audience that always wants something else. Her measure now is plain: happy and healthy are the only metrics that matter.

In the “Good Girl” video, she leans into that clarity. She plays a showgirl who falls for another femme showgirl, a romance she couldn't safely put on-screen at 16. Sequins are not a disguise; they're a declaration. “This is my body. This is my sexuality. Love it, hate it—it's mine,” she says. The creative team is intentionally and proudly queer, because representation behind the camera shapes what the camera dares to show.

Not a Drag—A Diagnosis

There's a version of this story that spirals into grievance. Gordon declines the bait. “Good Girl” is not a takedown of *Idol* or

reality TV; it's a clear-eyed reminder that an algorithm doesn't absorb cruelty—people do. The target isn't a franchise; it's the comfort of anonymous criticism. The temperature stays warm: firm lines delivered with empathy for the kid who absorbed the first wave and for the grown woman still tender enough to admit, “If you say something rude, it hurts.” Strength isn't the absence of feeling; it's the decision to tell the truth anyway.

Comedy Timing, Diva Timing

Before the Fontainebleau spotlights and the KLUC morning bell, Gordon earned her pace the old-school way—on comedy stages at The Comedy Store and Laugh Factory. That timing stitches through everything she does: the way a verse swells into a chorus, the breath before a punchline, the look that lands the joke a half-beat after the lyric.

Her podcast, *So Funny It Hurts*, follows the same current. Many of the funniest people, she says, are simply the bravest at naming what hurt and turning it into air you can breathe. Music does that, too; it metabolizes pain into rhythm, into something hundreds of strangers can shout back until it belongs to all of you.

Powered by Joy, Anchored by Sobriety

The schedule would flatten a mortal—radio at dawn, interviews by day, stage at night—but Gordon describes the engine as gratitude on repeat. She knows the empty calendar and the overfull one; both taught her to treasure the work. Nearly three years sober, she speaks about clarity like it's a gift she unwraps daily. “I don't take anything for granted,” she says. “I just want to have fun with our community.” That sense of play—wry, welcoming, a little mischievous—bleeds into the banter at shows and the candor on air.

A Vegas Original, Reintroduced

Ask who shaped this era and she points to the city itself. Vegas is a finishing school for audacity: you learn to make your own seat at the table—and then you pull up chairs for others. There were marquee moments along the way (a key to the city, the giant building wraps, the billboards that wink back), but the deeper truth is steadier: Las Vegas doesn't forget its own. When Gordon came home, the community caught her mid-stride and set her down right where she belonged—under the lights.

For visitors dropping into town—and for locals who haven't yet built a ritual around her sets—Gordon's shows have a gratifying Vegas balance: old-school showgirl polish, new-school pop bite, and a comedic throughline that makes the night feel like a party you wandered into and now never want to leave. Expect a band that can turn on a dime, a voice that can slide from velvet to gravel, and patter sharp enough to double as a roast if you tempt her.

If You're New Here: How to Do Mikalah Right

Start with the song. "Good Girl" is the thesis in three minutes—learn the hook before the show (you'll thank yourself when everyone else shouts it). Catch her in the morning on 98.5 KLUC to hear the quick wit in a different gear; it's a primer on why her timing knocks in a live room. Then make an evening of it at Fontainebleau. Dress for the mood you want—leather or rhinestone, she won't judge—and plan for a night that moves. Gordon's set is built for motion: big choruses, sly asides, a surprise ballad that hushes the room, and at least one moment you'll text about later.

If you wander afterward, keep the vibe alive with a late-night bite at a classic Vegas spot (she swears by The Peppermill). It's the full-circle itinerary: breakfast radio, a nap, a glam, a show, a 1 a.m. plate the size of a cymbal.

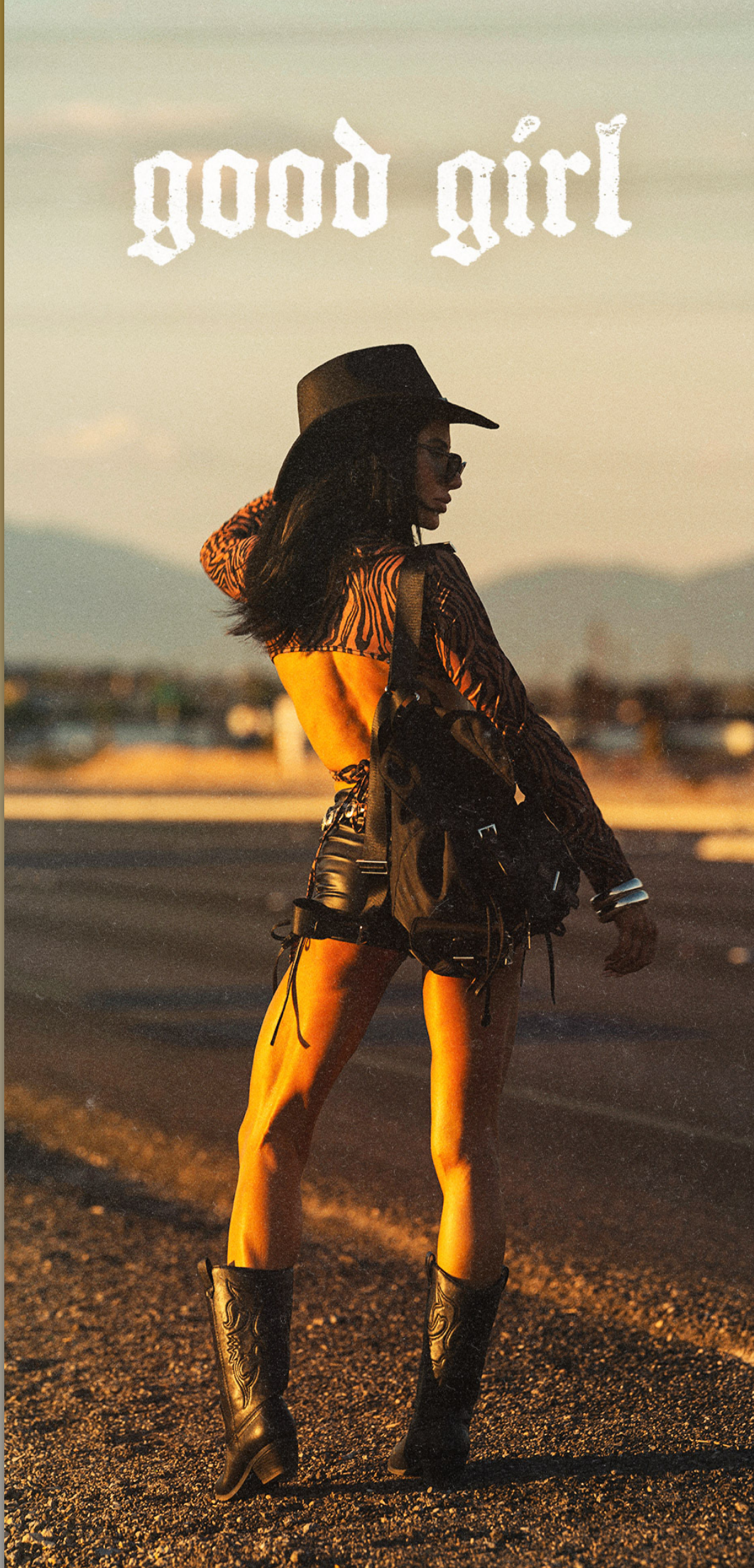
The Last Word

There's a single syllable that's followed Mikalah Gordon from punchline to mantra, from teenage TV to Vegas headliner: "Bitch." As in: yesbitch—one word, no spaces, all velocity. It's not a sneer; it's a grin you earn after you've survived a chorus of opinions and decided to sing your own anyway.

That's the core of the "Good Girl" era: not rebellion for its own sake, but reclamation for the sake of every younger self who stood in the dark wings and hoped. The lights came up. The mic is on. The crowd is ready. And Las Vegas—the city that never lets its own go dim—has her right where she belongs.

Where to find her: On your morning drive with 98.5 KLUC and onstage at Fontainebleau with a show that pairs showgirl polish with pop-soul fire. Bring your outside voice—and someone who loves a big chorus.

good girl





Meet Me at Azzurra Wine Bar: Water Street's Wine Room with a Soul

By Russ White and Ward Billieisen

Walk the Water Street District in downtown Henderson at golden hour and you can feel it—patios clinking, conversations stretching, a neighborhood finding its pace. Tucked into that rhythm is Azzurra Wine Bar & Shop the kind of room that turns curiosity into a house specialty. We came for flights and small plates; we left with a new favorite place to send friends who want a real conversation with what's in their glass.

This isn't a concept dreamed up on a spreadsheet. It's the latest chapter in owner Windom Kimsey's slow, thoughtful love affair with Water Street—the same one that started with an office building and a hunch. "We built an office down here and an employee said, 'You should have a coffee shop,'" Windom told us with a laugh. "Back then, Water Street was territory no one wanted to go to. Everyone turned me down." Eventually a team he knew said yes, the coffee shop opened, and the neighborhood started to change.

The restaurant came next. "I missed this Italian spot we all loved that had closed," he said. "At a Golden Knights event, I texted Walter—who ran front of house there—'Come look at Water Street.' Right timing, right energy. We cooked for the mayor, did a photo shoot, and I thought, this is going to work." That impulse became Azzurra Cucina next door—modern Italian with a neighborhood soul.

The wine bar idea, Windom swears, was always in the wings. The spark arrived on his wife's trip to Seattle: the host sent diners to a wine bar down the street while

tables turned. "Lightbulb moment," he said. "We close the coffee shop at 3; the space sits dark. Why not a wine room that dovetails with dinner?" The rest is what we tasted: discovery without pretense, hospitality without a script.

The room—and the way it behaves

Azzurra Wine Bar's palette is modern but unfussy—architect-clean lines; warm finishes that soften after sunset. Sit at the bar if you want to talk wine; grab a two-top when the goal is to sip and catch up. Service reads your mood quickly. We asked for breadth and got it—tastes poured before we committed, suggestions tuned to our plates, and not a single "because the distributor says so" upsell. Windom summed up the philosophy simply: "Let people try stuff. Discovery is the point."

We also love how the wine bar plays with dinner next door. If there's a wait, a glass at Azzurra Wine Bar turns delay into bonus time. Windom is even tinkering with a buzzer system so Walter can ping folks back to their table without anyone hovering over a phone. A Water Street "campus," you might call it—wander, sip, loop back.

The list: grocery-aisle-avoidant, conversation-forward

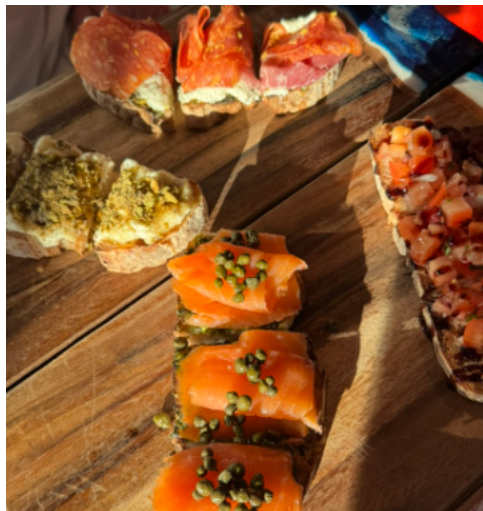
Azzurra Wine Bar & Shop's list is curated to avoid that déjà vu feeling you get staring down a supermarket shelf. "I want wines you don't see in the aisle, sprinkled with a few familiar names," Windom said. He's proud of the Italian bench, surprised guests with German dry whites, and has a soft spot for Greece—especially Assyrtiko from Santorini. Ask him why and you'll get a

traveler's mini-lecture—how vines sit low to the ground, basket-trained against wind, the way the island's stone shows up in your glass. "Drink it," he grins, "and you're there." (We believe him.)

We started coastal and bright with txakoli from the Basque country—Gaintza Getariako Txakolina—a beach-day snap of lime zest and sea spray, lightly spritzzy and perfect with salt (or a bowl of chips, if we're honest). Sardegna's Vermentino—Argiolas "Costamolino" 2023—shifted the mood to Mediterranean: citrus blossom, pear, a whisper of almond. It glided, where the txakoli zipped.

Red fans got a politely oaked Rioja Crianza (Calma 2019), all red cherry and sandalwood, the kind that calls for manchego before you realize you've asked for it. Then Daniele Conterno's Barbera d'Alba Superiore 2019, the most pairable wine of the night—plush fruit, bright acidity, low tannin, a diplomat with tomatoes and mushrooms. We finished with a bit of California swagger: "Diamonds in Space" Cabernet 2022 from Paso Robles—blackberry, mocha, cocoa-dust. It's a hug in a glass and downright flirty with anything grilled.

The retail wall doubles the fun—bottles you'll struggle to find at big box, priced to invite exploration. The by-the-glass program is generous, and staff will happily pour a taste to calibrate. Windom watches what moves and trims the rest. "We opened around seventy labels; we're near ninety now," he said. "We'll dial back to what people actually love." It's an alive list, not a museum.



Food that knows its job (and nails it)

We came to talk wine; we keep talking about the food. The wine bar's menu is built around shareables with real point of view—exactly what you want when you're tasting across a flight.

Start here: the board

The Small Board (\$25.95) arrived composed, not fussy—cheeses and meats that earned their place, accents that felt curated rather than decorative. The standout was a truffled Gouda with precisely the right hand on the truffle: aromatic, integrated, zero bully. Paired with those little sweet-tangy peppers, the cheese went from delicious to unforgettable. With the Vermentino, the almondy echo in the wine found the Gouda's bass note; we both paused and smiled. The Grande Board (\$39.95) is the obvious move for four—math you'll appreciate when plates keep drifting back toward center.

Reset your bruschetta expectations

Bruschetta (pick four, \$14.95) is the best bargain and a tidy little masterclass in pairing. Yes, there's a Classic Tomato—bright, garlicky, balanced—but the specials are where the kitchen flexes:

Smoked Salmon + Pesto (with capers) was the table favorite: oil meeting herb, capers popping like punctuation. The Vermentino loved every second.

Ricotta, Honey + Pistachio – fresh, lightly salted ricotta; honey that tastes like sunshine, not syrup; pistachios for crunch. The txakoli cleaned the slate after each bite and made the next taste feel new.

Spicy Calabrese + Pesto brought the heat and the fat; Barbera did what Barbera does—lifted, refreshed, begged another bite.

Caprese was a diplomat between wine colors, the taste of late summer on bread.

We sampled all five options by adding an extra—do that. It feels like a build-your-own flight where the kitchen is your co-pilot.

The clincher: Gnocchi Bolognese

We ended with Gnocchi Bolognese (\$25):



potato dumplings in a slow-cooked tomato sauce built on ground beef, pork, and veal. The blend matters—beef for backbone, pork for sweetness and fat, veal for silk—and Azzurra Cucina (from next door) gets the balance right. The gnocchi are proper: tender, delicate, no rubber bullets in sight. With Barbera, it's textbook: acid lifts richness; cherry cozies to tomato; bite meets sip and the table goes quiet for a beat. Our bowls were empty in that "we didn't mean to finish it, but of course we did" way.

The vibe, the value, the why

On Thursdays a guitarist threads melody through conversation; Fridays lean jazz. Programming shows up enough to keep things lively—paint-and-sip here, a trivia night there—without swallowing the bar's identity. Staff reads the room well: tastes offered, never pushed; nudges when you want them; space when you don't.

Value is where the neighborhood-first mindset shows. By-the-glass pours are fairly set; two interesting glasses here often cost less than a single cocktail at a strip-side lounge. The Bruschetta flight at \$14.95 is value you can taste, the Small Board is generous at \$25.95, and Gnocchi at \$25 is a smart anchor if you're turning a tasting into dinner. On bottles, the pricing encourages curiosity—take a flier on Assyrtiko or a volcanic Sicilian and you won't feel like you gambled on a hunch.

Windom is candid about the learning curve. "Americans are drinking less," he joked, referencing a stat he'd read. "So the question is, how do we make the people who are drinking want to drink better?" His answer: keep the room welcoming, keep the prices sane, and make discovery easy. He's hands-on with the list ("I'm not a sommelier, but I drink a lot of wine") and happy to course-correct when something sits too long. The goal isn't to show off; it's to keep the energy moving.

We also appreciate the neighborhood nod baked into the brand. The color, the name—Azzurra, Italian for "blue," a wink at the national soccer team—ties back to the restaurant. The wine bar itself acts like a living room for Water Street. Teachers, firefighters, city and county workers wander



through; regulars wave at Walter; newcomers get a short, friendly tour of the list. It feels like a place built by people who actually live here—which, not coincidentally, it is.

Pairing cheat sheet (use freely, claim as your own)

Txakoli + anything salty/crisp (anchovies, olives, chips): the spritz and saline make snacks feel like a proper aperitivo.

Vermentino + Smoked Salmon + Pesto: oil meets herb, capers bridge to citrus; it's why Vermentino was invented, we're pretty sure.

Rioja Crianza + cured meats: oak spice meets spice; sandalwood finds smoke.

Barbera d'Alba + tomatoes (Classic Tomato bruschetta, Gnocchi Bolognese): acidity is your best friend.

Paso Cabernet + BBQ or chocolate: sometimes subtlety is overrated.

The verdict

Azzurra Wine Bar & Shop clicks because it remembers why we go out: to feel looked after while we learn something new. The room is handsome without being performative; the list is smart without gatekeeping; the kitchen respects the difference between simple and simplistic. And threaded through it all are Windom's traveler's anecdotes and neighborhood pragmatism—the coffee shop that started it, the Golden Knights text that nudged a restaurant into being, the Seattle wine-bar lightbulb that made the wine bar & shop make sense.

Is it worth the drive? Yes. For locals, it's the shorthand plan you don't have to overthink. For visitors, it's proof that Water Street is now a destination on its own terms. We walked out under the Henderson night talking about truffled Gouda of all things, the way those peppers made it better, and how culinary confidence often hides in the "simple" column. Mostly, we talked about coming back—because Azzurra Wine Bar & Shop is the rare place that makes next week feel like an inevitability.

Azzurra doesn't try to be everything. It tries to be itself—hospitable, curious, delicious—and that, we think, is exactly enough.

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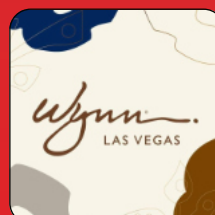
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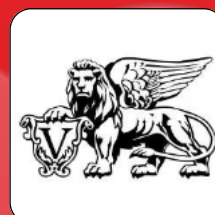
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