THE CHEF TAKEOVER!
Beyond Nicole Grimes' cherubic grin lies an East Coast toughness—a significant asset in managing employees who are, in some cases, more than twice her age. "I like to speak to people the way I like to be spoken to," says Grimes, Rao's chef de cuisine, who cut her teeth at the Caesars Palace Italian eatery under former executive chef Carla Pellegrino, another strong-willed woman with East Coast ties.

Grimes is just 26, yet she's already been entrusted with overseeing one of the Strip's most successful restaurants. She grew up outside Pittsburgh, where she would wake up early to catch Julia Child on PBS, later attending that city's Le Cordon Bleu. Grimes landed an externship at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs before arriving in Vegas in 2006 to help open Rao's.

Regarding the familial recipes that have made Rao's famous, Grimes says she's "trying to carry on the traditions from New York on a larger scale." Since taking over, she has tweaked the dishes to align them more with their counterparts at the original Harlem location, providing her clientele with a more authentic Rao's dining experience. And she's not fixated on becoming executive chef, either, having already declined an offer from Rao's co-owner Frankie Pellegrino.

"Executive chef seems like such a big word. If what I do now works, why fix it? It's not broken."

ROBERT "MAGS" MAGSALIN
CHEF/CO-OWNER, FUKUBURGER

Fukuburger's self-described "burger flipper" started his culinary career early, when his grandmother drafted him into service helping her prepare egg rolls for her home-based catering company. At age 13, Magsalin went to help his father on a goat farm in Riverside, California, where the teen had the unenviable task of "butchering his friends." Barely into puberty, Magsalin already knew how to break down goats with expertise.

He enrolled in culinary school right out of high school and moved from San Francisco to Vegas at 19. After holding down a variety of industry positions, Magsalin met future partner Colin Fukunaga. The latter's vision for a mobile restaurant serving up Asian-flavored burgers coalesced during a series of late-night drinking sessions—"20 bottles of Maker's Mark and 100 Coors Lights later," Magsalin says.

Now 32, Magsalin says he's amazed by the rapid success of Fukuburger, which remains a local favorite food truck and recently opened its first brick-and-mortar location in Hollywood (See Page 44). A new father, Magsalin says, it's "making sure my family doesn't have to worry about a dime for the rest of their lives—being financially and mentally stress-free." Oh, and he'd like to open a video poker dive bar that only serves the egg rolls his grandmother made. "We'll have egg rolls, booze and machines you can lose your money in," he says. We'll have nothing but deep fryers and cow slices.

CHRIS PALMERI
CHEF/OWNER, NAKED CITY PIZZA SHOP
(INSIDE MOON DOGGIE'S)

Naked City Pizza Shop at Moon Doggie's Bar & Grill is a light year away from fine dining, and Chris Palmeri is okay with that. Purportedly the youngest executive chef in MGM history—he took the helm at Diggity's years ago when he was 25—Palmeri now serves pizza and buffalo, New York-style fare in more low key eatings.

You'd probably never guess the smoky pizzeria's surfer bar was home to a menu filled with the likes of penne alla vodka, local pig Bolognese homemade ricotta cheese, but within the Vegas food community the depth of Palmeri's recipe quickly gaining notoriety.

He says he was driven to open a Buffalo-style pizzeria out of dissatisfaction with the area's "I'm here" offerings. Plus, he spotted a niche. "If you leave western New York you either end up in Florida or Vegas. If you're over 35, you end up in Florida; otherwise you end up here.

And here he is. Palmeri's high-end dining experience has translated to both the business and culinary of restaurant ownership. In the kitchen, it's taught the importance of fresh ingredients and that preparing everything he can from scratch.

Palmeri hopes to expand Naked City beyond walls of Moon Doggie's within the next 18 months, establishing freestanding locations on both ends of the Valley to complement his existing center at the corner of Rainbow and Oakley and bring.

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