

# Caesars makes way for MontBleu

The minute one walks into the hotel lobby entrance of the changing Caesars Tahoe, it becomes obvious this is a Lake Tahoe property.

Bright blue glass panels stretch from floor to ceiling. A big, bold name dominating the panels spells out the fall of the Roman Empire – MontBleu, which is French for blue mountain. The exterior signs are expected to go up in June, unveiling a major renovation inside.

Last June, the casino was sold for USD 45 million by Caesars Entertainment in Las Vegas to Kentucky-based Columbia Sussex, which also owns the Horizon Resort and Casino across Highway 50. Columbia Sussex executives and property management pledged to turn the casino into a fun place with a young, hip urban appeal. They took a long look at the restaurants and bars and conducted a major upheaval. It's been at least two decades since the casino has had an extensive remodel.

„There's quite a diversity. We wanted to cover all aspects of what people like,“ casino General Manager Kim Sumimoto said. Casino officials declined to disclose how much the renovation is costing.

Columbia Sussex brought in a 26-year veteran in the hospitality field as the food and beverage director. John Maskovich has worked at the Casino Aztar in Evansville, Ind., and the Colorado Belle in Laughlin, Nev. He was last running the bars and restaurants of the River Palms in Laughlin.

„We are fortunate to have John as part of the Caesars Tahoe and MontBleu team, especially during this exciting time for the resort,“ said Joe Yung, Columbia's director of development.

Maskovich will start with a fresh slate.

- Going in where the Primavera once stood, 20 Four Continuous Cuisine provides an around-the-clock version of a 1950s diner.
- Across the hall, the Aroma Cafe will be replaced by the South Shore's seventh Starbucks coffeehouse.

The Emperor's and Cleo's lounges are gone.

- The „unbuffet“ is still a buffet, but with carving tables and a taste of international cuisine.
- For fine dining, Ciera Steak + Chophouse will go in where the Broiler Room was located.
- Down the steps from the Aroma Cafe, the del Soul Mexican Grill features traditional cuisine from south of the border and a lengthy tequila list. Live salsa music is expected to be the highlight of the cocktail lounge, with seating that opens up to the casino.

Maskovich said the goal is to „offer exquisite food and top-notch service, but also provide a sophisticated and fun environment.“

With higher ceilings highlighted by large overhead lights and an open floor plan, the changes reflect a spacious but visible feel to the casino.

„We've designed them so that when people come down from their hotel rooms they'll see side-by-side restaurants,“ hotel General Manager Patrick Bassney said, while out on a stroll of the grounds. As he toured the area where the Stone Street bar once stood on Tuesday, construction workers began to tear down the wall where an unnamed lounge will be built. Club Nero will fall to another nightclub to be announced this spring.

- A video monitor above the elevated HQ bar that opened in December features an upgraded sound system to be heard

throughout the casino.

– Other changes include enhancements to the pool area, where parties for special events may be scheduled, Bassney pointed out. The nearby spa will play host to a line of Aveda products.

– Down the hall, the Sport Shop stays and a second Romantic Adventures, a South Shore retailer that specializes in intimate apparel, is due to go in.

The first phase of the casino renovation included the replacement of 35 table games and 1,100 slot machines.

The construction didn't seem to hinder one Manteca woman's concentration on an „All that Glitters“ machine on Tuesday. Workers were faux painting above the del Soul bar behind construction sheet dividers.

Bassney said that if customers are inconvenienced by the construction they've offered free rooms.

„It's customer good will. We try to appease them. Unfortunately, there's never a good time for construction. There's always going to be a disruption. We just try to minimize it,“ Bassney said.

Things at the new Caesars are constantly evolving.

It didn't seem to faze Kevin Lee, who was staying as a business guest from Los Angeles. He plopped down in a cozy chair set up in a concierge area near the hotel lobby to pull out a computer planner. All he asks for are a restaurant with a sampling of Japanese food and more practice pronouncing the casino name.

„It's hard to pronounce if you're not French,“ he said, joking.