

Iron Chef Michael Symon, among others, to do what he does best at Savor Borgata

by MARIA WOLF

If you're a food and wine lover, then don't miss Savor Borgata: The Ultimate Food Experience, a two-day festival taking place Friday and Saturday, Nov. 9 and 10, at Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa.

The gastronomic extravaganza will feature celebrity chefs — Wolfgang Puck and Bobby Flay, among them — who will cook, teach classes and host intimate dinners at the 11th annual fete, which culminates in the grand ballroom celebration 8 to 10 p.m. Saturday.

Nearly 1,200 people are expected for Savor Borgata, which grows increasingly more popular each year. And for a very simple reason: "Where else can you go to have an ultimate food experience with this caliber of chefs all under one roof?" asks Becky Schultz, vice president of food and beverage at Borgata. "You can taste their creations, shake their hands, talk to them ..."

The atmosphere is festive; live music plays, wine and beer flow, and guests wander from station to station, noshing, nibbling and celebrating all-things food.

For Iron Chef Michael Symon, the event represents an opportunity to interact with his colleagues, whom he doesn't see often. "We're always so busy working, but at Savor Borgata, we get together, and we have fun.

"It's busy," says Symon of the kitchen on the day of the grand event. "But I'm surrounded by people who truly love what they do. It's not like they're punching a clock, making the food and going home. We are all like-minded people doing what we do best. There's a passion and a joy in it."

And a bit of friendly competition.

Symon will not reveal what he's making for the grand event on Saturday night. "If I tell you, Bobby or Wolf will steal my dish," he laughs, referring to fellow celeb chefs Flay and Puck. "I will give you a hint: It will be Italian."

As Saturday's celebration nears, the kitchen hops with energy. Dishes clang, pans sizzle, chefs and cooks work feverishly and food runners sprint back and forth into the ballroom.

It's "stressful," chuckles Symon. "But I mean that in the best kind of way. Right before the doors open, I get these little butterflies in my stomach, which is a good thing. A lot of people are coming in. And if you're going to feed 1,000 or 2,000 people, you want everything to be perfect."

Schultz and her team have worked hard to ensure that everything is perfect, from the food to the ballroom setup to the spin-off events. (See sidebar.)

"We're very hands-on and deliberate that way," says Schultz, "because once that first event kicks off, there's no stopping things."

As people fill the ballroom, Symon starts to relax. The lion's share of work is done, and he gets to do what he enjoys best: Talking to the guests.

"Obviously, we work hard (at cooking), and it's just great to see people enjoy it," he says. "Food should make people happy."

SAVOR BORGATA: THE ULTIMATE FOOD EXPERIENCE

When: Various times on Friday and Saturday, Nov. 9 to Nov. 10; 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. for Savor Borgata main event on Saturday.

Where: Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa, 1 Borgata Way, Atlantic City

How much: Tickets are \$89 per person. VIP, \$139 per person, which provides early admission at 7 p.m. Individual Savor Borgata events are priced separately.

More info: For more info or to purchase tickets, go to TheBorgata.com.

SAVOR BORGATA: THE EVENT LINEUP

Savor Borgata: The Ultimate Food Experience is the long-anticipated food fest, featuring cuisine from America's top chefs. A host of events are planned for Friday and Saturday.

Here's what's on tap for Friday, Nov. 9:

Chef's Table at Borgata Buffet. Executive Chef Tom Biglan's serves family-style specials and signature cuts of meat.

Italian Food and Wine Tasting. Count Giovanni Baonmartini-Fini, president of Barone Fini Wines, guide participants through a four-course tasting menu paired with wine.

Bubbles....With Geoffrey Zakarian and Moët & Chandon. Geoffrey Zakarian prepares a three-course prix-fixe menu and pairs it with Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot and Ruinart champagnes.

Japanese Whiskey BBQ. Michael Schulson cooks dinner and pairs the courses with award-winning Suntory Japanese Whiskies.

Vibes and Vino. Can music change your perception of wine? Can wine enhance your perception of the music? Sommelier Rob Bigelow invites you to discover this very thing.

Old Homestead Chappellet Wine Dinner. Executive Chef Romeo DiBona prepares a four-course dinner paired with Chappellet wine.

Here's the lineup of offerings for Saturday, Nov. 10:

Pantry Pampered: Food Facials at Immersion Pool. Estheticians teach participants to use everyday foods for an at-home day spa.

Lunch with Bobby. Bobby Flay prepares a three-course lunch paired with Paul Hobbs wines.

Symon Says...Pasta. Michael Symon teaches participants to make homemade pasta, followed by a three-course lunch paired with wine.

Tour of the Tastebuds. Chef Situ prepares Asian-inspired culinary selections paired with Asian influenced cocktails.

In the Kitchen with Executive Chef Tom Biglan. Guests watch Executive Chef Tom Biglan work in the kitchen as he prepares a four-course tasting menu paired with wine.

Tito's Toasts Gluten-Free. Chef Brian Perry makes gluten-free bites paired with Tito's Handmade Gluten-Free Vodka cocktails.

Playing with Pinot Noir. Master Sommelier Robert Bigelow explores the facets of Pinot Noir from Europe through California and Oregon with tasting portions of wine and light bites.

Bacon, Bacon, Bacon...Bourbon. Executive Chef Tom Biglan creates bourbon cocktails and pairs them with a three-course bacon-themed lunch.

Sugar and Spice. Executive Pastry Chef Thaddeus DuBois teaches a hands-on class on all things gingerbread.

Michael Symon's Playing with Fire Book Signing. Michael Symon signs his first cookbook, Playing with Fire, which features more than 70 barbecue and grilling recipes.

Tacos and Tequila. Explore the flavors of Blue Agave Tequila cocktails with small-plate tacos.