
In Search of the Best Break, Defense, Vintage, Bet and Exit

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The Sommelier

From Dealing Cards To Dispensing Bottles

It is 1978. Ricardo Ocasio, child of the Bronx, is a junior at Lehman College there. His mother and father, just back from a trip to Atlantic City, burst with stories about the wonders under construction there. A casino, Resorts International, had just opened -- the city's first. There are more to come, all with jobs. Lots of jobs.

Mr. Ocasio, facing the future with vague hopefulness (he is a liberal arts major), tunes in, turns on. Then he drops out.

He goes to casino school. He learns to deal cards. Three months later, he lands a job at Bally's Park Place. A year later, the Golden Nugget. He gets to know Steve Wynn, gambling impresario and "a great guy." Fast forward to 1989. Mr. Ocasio is in Las Vegas, lured by Mr. Wynn and his Mirage. Later, it is the Bellagio. He deals baccarat to high rollers. It's a living. But he wants more.

He continues his education, at the Culinary Training Academy, which turns dishwashers into busboys, busboys into waiters, waiters into sous-chefs. It turns Mr. Ocasio into a sommelier. A wine master, offering service with sniff.

His teacher, a master sommelier named Angelo Tavernaro, ruled the wine cellars at Caesars Palace for 20 years. Mr. Tavernaro, who has taught at the Academy since 1998, says Mr. Ocasio is one of his brightest stars, "a miracle on the way to happen." JIM WILSON