

# Red Hawk Casino takes a gamble on foodies

By Cathie Anderson, Sacramento Bee

Let gamblers enjoy the card tables and slot machines at the front of the house at Red Hawk Casino. Foodies would prefer to play in the rear.

Evan Smith holds the keys to much of this domain as the new vice president of food and beverage. His is the largest department, 400 of 1,400 workers. Six restaurants include Henry's Steakhouse, Pearl and Waterfall Buffet.

Smith took me behind the scenes where we chilled with salads and hors d'oeuvres in the garde-manger. He asked the head butcher to take a break from cutting beef short ribs to show me the prime short loins and rib-eyes that hang out in the dry-aging room for 25 to 30 days.

When we finally arrived at the front of the house at Henry's Steakhouse, he pointed out the \$2,100 bottle of Louis XIII cognac and wines that sell for \$20 to \$400.

Smith basked in the activity of each kitchen. His formal culinary training was with an Austrian chef at Contra Costa College, and he also worked for a French chef at Le Marquis in Lafayette.

"I worked six days at the restaurant, and I went to school five of those days," he said. "I pretty much lived, ate and breathed culinary arts every day of my life."

After college, he worked for two years at Chez Panisse in Berkeley before venturing out as a chef. He worked for 20 years in Lake Tahoe casinos, but he comes to Red Hawk from Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino, north of Fresno, where he led

the food and beverage unit.

As a senior manager at Red Hawk, Smith works closely with general manager Bryan deLugo to help improve the casino's fortunes. Owned by the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians and managed by Lakes Entertainment Inc., Red Hawk has struggled amid a poor economy.

The downturn heightened demands on food and beverage managers, who already faced stiff competition from a growing number of regional casinos, said Jean Hertzman, assistant dean of operations at the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration at UNLV.

"Because a smaller percentage of the casino's revenue is from gaming than it used to be, particularly after the last recession, now it's switched to where food and beverage also needs to be profitable," Hertzman said.

Casinos have stopped using \$3.99 buffets as loss leaders to draw gamblers. Meals now go for about the same price as those at comparable local eateries. Red Hawk's buffet ranges from \$10 to \$20.