

What happens in Chicago...

By the time you read this, Gov. Pat Quinn may have signed into law a bill that would bring slot machines to both local airports and five new casinos to the state, including one in downtown Chicago. Yes, the odds of our dog winning the World Series of Poker are probably better than the chances of all that getting the green light. A safer bet: The Chicago casino Rahm is pushing for will be approved—Quinn has said he's open to the idea. Between that, the new Rivers Casino near O'Hare and legalized poker machines coming soon to Illinois taverns, gambling is having a moment. We chime in with local casino picks, tales from inside the biz and a look at the psychology behind the gaming floor—insights that, whether poker pro or slot player, you'll want to have up your sleeve.

PHOTO: CHIPS, MARTHA WILLIAMS; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: JAMIE DIVECCHIO RAMSAY

BEST BETS FOR...

Our guide to the greatest gambling hits within 75 miles has something for everyone—even the slot-machine virgin. By **Marissa Conrad** Illustration by **Morgan Schweitzer**

THE ENTRY-LEVEL GAMBLER

HORSESHOE CASINO HAMMOND This casino's not short on serious dice rollers. But on weekends, it draws a crowd of twentysomethings there for the scene as much as the slot machines, thanks to the proximity to downtown (a 17-mile shot over the Chicago Skyway) and free shuttles roaming Chicago. Grab a cocktail (they run as cheap as \$4) at Push, the sleek bar in the center of the gaming floor, and flirt with the penny slots or \$1-\$2 no-limit Hold'Em. Or just flirt your way through the inevitable bachelor and bachelorette parties—you'll probably have better odds.

SPOTTING CHAKA KHAN LOOK-ALIKES

MAJESTIC STAR CASINO & HOTEL This riverboat casino in Gary, Indiana, is like a time machine to the 1970s, down to the disco funk music and mirrored ceilings with track lighting. Tell me something good?

POKER

HORSESHOE CASINO HAMMOND Pros should watch for World Series of Poker-qualifying tourneys here (the last one, in October 2010, had buy-ins up to \$10,000). But all are welcome in the 34-table poker room, the largest in the Midwest, offering almost any popular style of the game at any limit. With chandeliers, leather chairs and photos of poker legends, it feels like a stately parlor—packed with men in baseball caps and mirrored sunglasses. Call ahead to secure a spot on weekend nights.

HARRAH'S JOLIET Get your feet wet with more than 200 video poker machines. The live poker "room" (it's more of a corner, with only eight tables) is home to dealers and regulars who know how to throw down. Try Mississippi stud, a riff on seven-card stud that allows for higher betting—Harrah's was the first in Illinois to offer it.

BACCARAT

AMERISTAR CASINO HOTEL EAST CHICAGO Most areas of this casino feature low ceilings and the stench of stale smoke, but the baccarat room is a different world. The 12 tables are nearly always full, sometimes with an audience, and you're next to a small observation deck where you can gaze at Lake Michigan while getting a much-needed breath of fresh air.

ROAD TRIPS

POTAWATOMI BINGO CASINO

This stately casino in downtown Milwaukee snags some good acts at its 500-seat theater. It's also home to a room with 115 TVs for off-track betting, not to mention a booming bingo hall. The wonders of sitting next to a 70-year-old woman who has her Troll doll collection lined up on the table are worth a visit, even if you don't get to scream "Bingo!" for a \$200 (or greater) prize.

FOUR WINDS CASINO RESORT

Set on Native American sovereign land, this Michigan casino/resort is a serene escape, from its skylit lobby to the low-lit Copper Rock Steakhouse. But the gambling is serious, with 3,000 slots, live poker daily and some unusual picks, like keno. Showseekers can head to nearby Blue Chip Casino Hotel Spa in Michigan City, Indiana, where recent headliners at the 15,000-square-foot Stardust Event Center have included Joan Rivers.

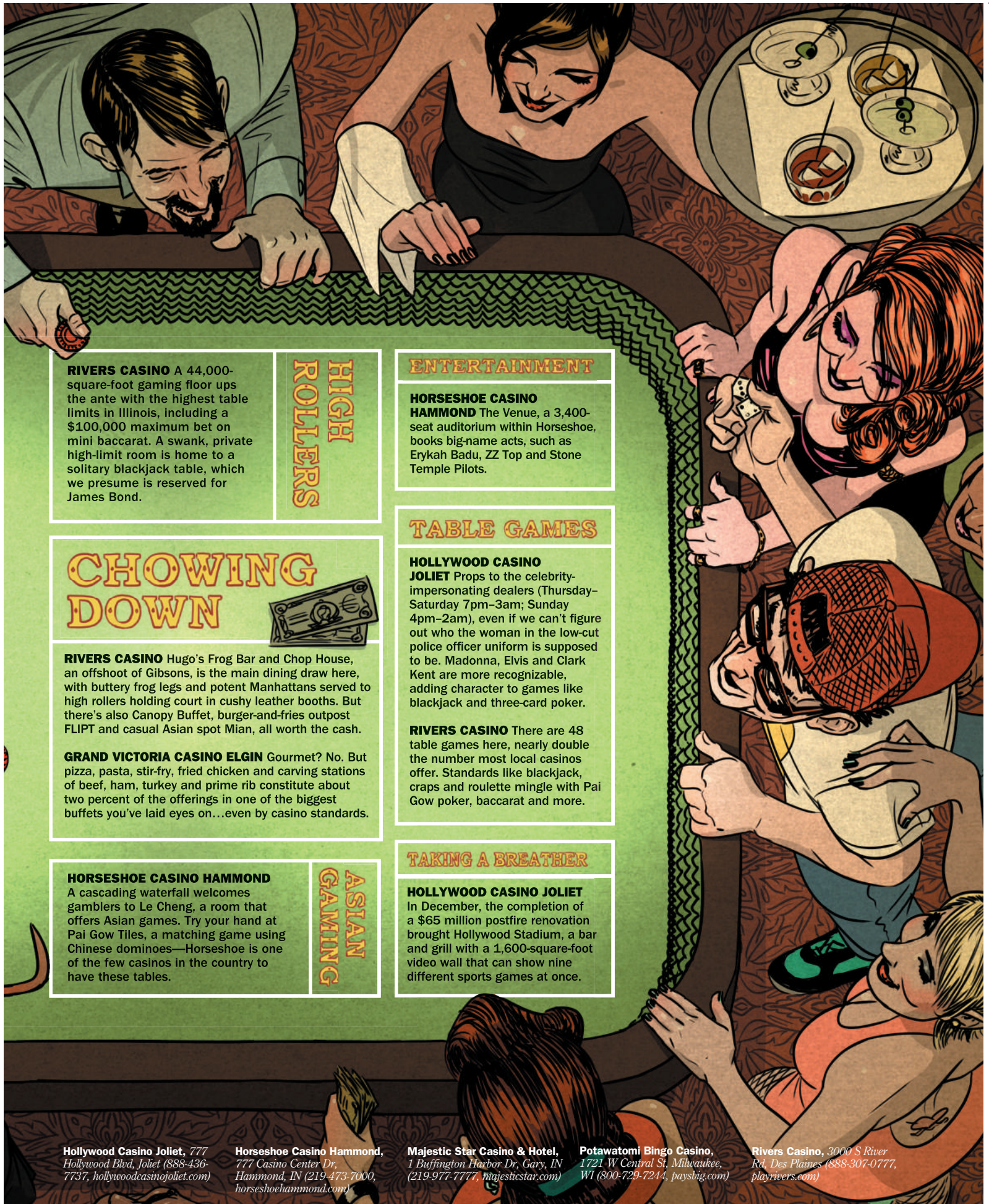
Ameristar Casino Hotel East Chicago, 777 Ameristar Blvd., Chicago, IN (866-711-4263, ameristar.com)

Blue Chip Casino Hotel Spa, 777 Blue Chip Dr., Michigan City, IN (219-879-7711, bluechipcasino.com)

Four Winds Casino Resort, 11111 Wilson Rd., New Buffalo, MI (866-494-6371, fourwindscasino.com)

Grand Victoria Casino Elgin, 250 S Grove Ave., Elgin (888-508-1900, grandvictoria-elgin.com)

Harrah's Joliet, 151 N Joliet St., Joliet (815-740-7800, harrahsjoliet.com)



RIVERS CASINO A 44,000-square-foot gaming floor ups the ante with the highest table limits in Illinois, including a \$100,000 maximum bet on mini baccarat. A swank, private high-limit room is home to a solitary blackjack table, which we presume is reserved for James Bond.

**HIGH
ROLLERS**

ENTERTAINMENT

HORSESHOE CASINO HAMMOND The Venue, a 3,400-seat auditorium within Horseshoe, books big-name acts, such as Erykah Badu, ZZ Top and Stone Temple Pilots.

TABLE GAMES

HOLLYWOOD CASINO JOLIET Props to the celebrity-impersonating dealers (Thursday-Saturday 7pm-3am; Sunday 4pm-2am), even if we can't figure out who the woman in the low-cut police officer uniform is supposed to be. Madonna, Elvis and Clark Kent are more recognizable, adding character to games like blackjack and three-card poker.

RIVERS CASINO There are 48 table games here, nearly double the number most local casinos offer. Standards like blackjack, craps and roulette mingle with Pai Gow poker, baccarat and more.

**CHOWING
DOWN**



RIVERS CASINO Hugo's Frog Bar and Chop House, an offshoot of Gibsons, is the main dining draw here, with buttery frog legs and potent Manhattans served to high rollers holding court in cushy leather booths. But there's also Canopy Buffet, burger-and-fries outpost FLIPT and casual Asian spot Mian, all worth the cash.

GRAND VICTORIA CASINO ELGIN Gourmet? No. But pizza, pasta, stir-fry, fried chicken and carving stations of beef, ham, turkey and prime rib constitute about two percent of the offerings in one of the biggest buffets you've laid eyes on...even by casino standards.

TAKING A BREATHER

HOLLYWOOD CASINO JOLIET In December, the completion of a \$65 million postfire renovation brought Hollywood Stadium, a bar and grill with a 1,600-square-foot video wall that can show nine different sports games at once.

HORSESHOE CASINO HAMMOND A cascading waterfall welcomes gamblers to Le Cheng, a room that offers Asian games. Try your hand at Pai Gow Tiles, a matching game using Chinese dominoes—Horseshoe is one of the few casinos in the country to have these tables.

**ASIAN
GAMING**

Hollywood Casino Joliet, 777 Hollywood Blvd, Joliet (888-436-7737, hollywoodcasinojoliet.com)

Horseshoe Casino Hammond, 777 Casino Center Dr, Hammond, IN (219-473-7000, horseshoe Hammond.com)

Majestic Star Casino & Hotel, 1 Buffington Harbor Dr, Gary, IN (219-977-7777, majesticstar.com)

Potawatomi Bingo Casino, 1721 W Central St, Milwaukee, WI (800-729-7244, paysbig.com)

Rivers Casino, 3000 S River Rd, Des Plaines (888-307-0777, playrivers.com)

Jackpot!

For our money, these are the funniest slot machines around. By **Marissa Conrad**



AIRPLANE!
Spotted at Rivers Casino, the Ameristar, the Majestic Star
 Leslie Nielsen's face spins faster than our heads after eating fish.



THE HANGOVER
Spotted at Horseshoe Casino
 We're not surprised it's here. We are surprised by the crowd of spectators surrounding it. Folks, the Village People Party (right) is wide open!



THE VILLAGE PEOPLE PARTY
Spotted at Horseshoe Casino
 Young man, pick yourself off the ground—and insert a 50.



INVADERS FROM THE PLANET MOO-LAH
Spotted at Harrah's Joliet
 Everyone's a sucker for a good bovine pun.



JOHN WAYNE SPINNING STREAK
Spotted at Harrah's Joliet
 This is only fun until they install a Cowboys & Aliens slot.



COUGARLICIOUS
Spotted at Harrah's Joliet
 The sultry stares. The cleavage. The leering man in the corner of the frame. Are we at Howl at the Moon?



MALTESE FORTUNE
Spotted at the Majestic Star
 Unfortunately, the "Kitty Glitter" slot was taken, so you ended up here.

Gambling is my life

From dealer to bookie, five locals put their betting-biz stories on the table. Photographs by Allison Williams



PRO POKER PLAYER

◀Tom Koral, 28, Skokie

"The great thing about being a poker player is that you're your own boss. There are certain days where the poker action picks up, like Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays usually, so I'll try to go [to casinos] on those days. . . . [Tournaments] are held all over the place. There's one held in the Bahamas every year, there's another really big one in Melbourne, Australia. . . . Because the tournaments typically take four days or longer, you really want to try and get yourself in a healthy state of mind before you play. Try and exercise the day before or get outside and do something, or eat healthy so you don't feel like you're weighed down at the table. . . . The [tournaments] almost always start at noon—noon or later—so it works out well. It's about 10–12 hours of playing and then the rest of the day [there are] sporadic breaks, and a dinner break usually, too. The longest game I've ever played straight is about 27 hours. But I've heard stories about poker players playing even 40, 48 hours straight. . . . Since I mainly travel to the bigger buy-in [tournaments], [I play] 25–30 a year. . . . I make six figures a year, pretty consistently. There's a famous saying, 'Poker is a hard way to make an easy living.' There's a lot of stress to deal with, but you make an easy living if you can do it correctly." —Tom Obaro

EX-BOOKIE

Anonymous, 37

"Sixteen years ago, during high school in a small south suburb of Chicago, I started hanging out at a local baseball card and comic shop. After befriending the owner, I came to occasionally help him with customers when he was on the phone. It quickly became apparent why he needed my help. On the other end of the wave of phone calls he received after 4:30 each day were 'customers' wanting to place bets on sports, which were all dutifully recorded in a spiral notebook. After expressing my curiosity, and given I was a trusted member of the coterie, I began to work in the 'organization.' Guys would call in giving me their account number or code name (one guy's name was 'Hawk'), asking me what the spreads or odds were on certain games and making their wagers. Once every week or two, each of these voices on the phone would show up to discreetly pay their deficit (typical) or collect their winnings (infrequent). Soon, I was off to college, where my own personally bankrolled bookie operation slowly grew from a few curious clients to about 30 students, including a third of the tennis team. From sophomore year through the end of senior year, I took bets on pro and college football, pro baseball, pro and college basketball, and pro hockey. Bets were typically smaller: \$10–\$15 per game, as opposed to \$50–\$500 at the baseball card shop. I'd make \$200 a week on average. The key to getting paid on time? Telling your clients that there's someone above you in the chain, someone quickly prone to anger perhaps, in need of getting his money. I only ever got stiffed once." —Marissa Conrad



CELEBRITY-IMPERSONATING DEALER

◀ **Cody Gregory, 38, at Hollywood Casino in Joliet**

"I impersonate Marilyn [Monroe] on Thursdays and Saturdays, and I do Madonna on Fridays and Sundays. Most of the celebrity impersonators get the job as an impersonator first and then get trained as a dealer, but I actually worked in a casino in Indiana for 12 years so I already had the gaming experience. I'd been called Marilyn daily for 12 years so I just tried being her. But after a singing audition, [the casino] decided to make me Madonna. I just recently started doing Marilyn as well. Madonna was more of a challenge because I sound like her, but she's known for dancing and I

have two left feet. . . . One of my first days as Marilyn, we have a player—he's one of our favorite players, he's in every weekend—it was his birthday and so I got up on stage [near the table games] and sang "Happy Birthday Mister High Roller" to him a cappella and he just loved it. . . . Normally before a shift starts we get here an hour-and-a-half early to do costuming and makeup. It's staggered so every ten minutes someone is up on stage performing. . . . We're a very tight group. We have a Kid Rock, Ozzy Osbourne, Dolly Parton, Elvis, Britney Spears and a Lady Gaga. . . . Getting on stage and just singing is the best part." —*Jamie Friedlander*

PIT BOSS

▼ **Jose Lebron, 52, at Rivers Casino in Des Plaines**

"We open at 9am, but nine is one of the slowest times, so I try to get here by 11am. . . . Typically, we hope our managers take care of customer complaints, but I do handle them as well. [Customers] may complain that they didn't get enough play for their money. Waiting in line can be a common one as well. In some instances, only a simple apology is needed. In other situations, we look to make amends for an error, [sometimes] with a complimentary meal. . . . [Cheating] doesn't happen often, but our teams are well-trained to spot the signs and behaviors when such activity is happening. In roulette, someone may try to distract the dealer by the roulette [wheel], so that their partner can make a late bet down at the other end of the table. . . . Blackjack, craps, roulette and mini baccarat are among the most popular [table games]. If no one's really playing a game, we may remove it. But you can't just pick up a table and move it. We work with the appropriate regulatory parties to make changes. . . . Ninety percent of [my job] is being on the floor and seeing how things are working throughout the departments. I'm also always monitoring equipment. We're nonsmoking, but people do spill drinks. Our tables are designed to weather [spills], so cleanup is actually fairly simple. I also take a playing-card inventory. The last thing I want to do is run out of cards. . . . I typically leave work around 10pm."

—*Allyson Byers*



COCKTAIL WAITRESS

▲ **Shannon Torrence, 31, at Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, Indiana**

"Just the atmosphere made me apply here. The people at casinos just always seemed so friendly. Our shifts are normally an eight- or nine-hour shift with two 30-minute breaks. There are over 100 [cocktail waitresses] here. I would say around 18 cocktail waitresses work on a given shift. . . . It's really knowing where the slot machines are that is the hardest part. We have to remember exactly what machine we're walking to. I'd say I serve over 100 drinks [an hour]. . . . I love my slot regulars. If I'm working [the VIP room] for an entire week and come back on slots they're like, 'Where did you go?' Some

regulars are here all night, sometimes even when we get here in the morning. . . . Last call is at 2:30am and first call is at 7am. I've worked the 11pm–7am shift and there are customers waiting to drink who are bugging me, 'Is it seven o'clock yet, is it seven o'clock yet?' I'm like, 'It's seven o'clock, why do you drink at seven?' There are a few people, I can't say there's a lot, but there's a handful that sit there and drink at 7am. . . . I get hit on all the time. Once or twice people were too forward, but I immediately called security and they took care of it. . . . I don't gamble, I don't know how to gamble and my parents don't gamble. We're not allowed to stay here and gamble and that's probably a good thing!" —*JF*





PUT A RING ON IT
Admire the ceiling at Hugo's Frog Bar.



CHIP COUNT Rivers is home to 48 table games.

Rivers rising

How far can \$100 get you at the state's newest casino?
By **Frank Sennett**

Rivers Casino doesn't need your money.

Or at least it didn't the day after its July 17 opening party, when the new gambling mecca just east of O'Hare Airport (3000 S River Road, Des Plaines, 888-307-0777, playrivers.com) was so crowded officials asked people to delay visiting.

Things have calmed down since then. A bit. Though Rivers probably still doesn't need my business, you'll be hard-pressed to find a nicer spot to gamble in Illinois. That's why I decided to determine the best way to drop \$100 during an evening there.

If you want to ensure a payoff, come hungry and spend most of your Franklin on food. A small, elegant iteration of Gold Coast mainstay Hugo's Frog Bar (here, basically a scaled-down Gibsons) delivers high-end steaks and seafood, ranging up to an \$86 surf-and-turf with Australian rock lobster tail. You can save cash by heading next door to the Canopy Buffet (lunch \$19-\$21; dinner \$26), which reminds me of the gold-standard buffet at the Aria in Vegas in presentation (modern, upscale), variety (especially the seafood and desserts) and execution (mmm, rare prime rib). When I share the comparison with executive chef William McIlroy, he beams. He came to Rivers from MGM Detroit, but took a buffet research trip to Vegas that included stops at Aria and Wynn.

Except for Hugo's, all of the restaurants here are served primarily by the kitchen behind the buffet, and other than the pasta, all of the food is made in-house daily, down to the hand-cut fries at FLIPT, the gourmet burger joint next door. But I end up at Mian, the 16-seat noodle bar one storefront over, where I drop \$19 on a giant bowl with chopped duck and a bottle of Tsingtao.

Before hitting the tables, I check out the Rivers bar scene. Craft cocktails are available at central piano bar Lotus for \$11. Each has at least one offbeat ingredient—organic apricot jam, Italian maraschino cherries or a splash of Mexican Coke—but the friendly bartenders are crushed serving beer and wine to the gaming throngs and have trouble tracking down the speciality fixings. Rivers should consider moving this service to a side lounge, but even amid the bustle, the Bulleit Rye Manhattan with those cherries, so rich they taste like chocolate, is worth the wait.

After draining my glass, I head to Cube, a lounge that often features live entertainment, and check out one of the two spacious covered patios perfect for alfresco fun with friends. It'll be especially nice this fall when the fireplace dividing the seating areas gets fired up.

Speaking of which, I've got about \$60 still burning a hole in my pocket and I'm ready to play. On my way to the table games, I get sucked into

the slots area by the new machine based on the old *Airplane!* movies (see page 16). It's one of those slots with multiple ways to win and a bonus game, and I have no clue how many Leslie Nielsens and Otto the autopilots I need to line up to score big, but the 20 bucks is fun while it lasts.

Down to \$40, I find a seat at a table and try a variant of Texas Hold'Em poker in which everyone plays heads-up against the dealer and you risk a minimum of \$5 per hand (the blackjack tables here run at least \$15, and there's no poker room, sadly). I quickly lose my stake, but I feel as if I'm getting the hang of this game. As I so often do when I make a casino run, I reach for my wallet again.

I end up breaking my vow and investing \$200 in chips, but my patient play pays off and I walk out a few hours later \$200 ahead, more than covering my food and drink purchases. I'm glad Rivers didn't need my money this visit, although I suspect it'll end up hanging onto some of it next time.



Mind games

Colors, crowds and even certain odors can affect how much you play and how long you stay at a casino. By **Kaylia Cornett** Illustration by **Rob Funderburk**

As we walk through the Horseshoe Casino in Hammond, Indiana, general manager Dan Nita describes the “conspiracy theory” behind casino design: They have no clocks or windows so people will lose track of time and spend more money.

While you won’t see natural light or clocks in most casinos, it’s not for the reasons you might think, according to Nita. “We recognize that everybody has their own time devices, whether it’s their phone or their watch,” he says, pausing under a glittering chandelier. Direct sunlight, he continues, would create a glare on cards and machines.

Granted, if the lack of clocks at the Horseshoe is what’s making that chain-smoker go to town at the *Sex and the City* slot, Nita probably wouldn’t be the one to tell me. But the man has science on his side. In a recent review of more than 15 psychological studies on casino design, British psychologist Mark Griffiths found no conclusive research on the effect of windows or wall clocks on gamblers. Still, Griffiths, who has been studying gambling since the ’90s, turned up plenty of unexpected factors that play into how you spend your cash on the gaming floor.

Picture a casino and you probably conjure an image straight out of *The Hangover*: blackjack players throwing down bets with Flo Rida’s “Right Round” playing in the background. Casinos modeled after that mold may have you betting at lightning speed, too. In one study, Griffiths found 56 volunteers to play roulette,

piping in different combinations of music and lighting colors. A combo of red lights and fast-tempo music made people bet at a faster pace than did white lights and no music or slow music, probably because it matched gamblers’ images of a sexy, high-stakes casino.

Crowds matter, too. In 2009, scientists at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, sat down a group of 484 male and female gamblers in a simulated casino, studying how they reacted to various stimuli, including the number of people gambling near them. When the gaming floor was less crowded, females reported the urge to gamble more than they had planned. Why? The women may have felt inhibited when they knew their behavior was being observed by many others, researchers say.

And here in Chicago, Dr. Alan Hirsch, founder and director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Streeterville, has studied the effect of certain scents on gamblers. When a casino in Las Vegas pumped a pleasant but unidentifiable scent (Hirsch says a mixture of so many notes that you wouldn’t say “Aha, rose!” or “Aha, violet!”) into a slot-machine area on a Saturday, the machines raked in about 50 percent more money than on the previous or following Saturday. The smell may have boosted gamblers’ moods, causing them to stay longer and spend more, Hirsch says. Or it may have triggered sexual arousal, which he says

leads to “a more aggressive behavior pattern”—in this case, more aggressive gambling.

Meanwhile, architects are doing their part to debunk the myth of the “cave” casino, incorporating windows into many newer blueprints to be more energy efficient and to offer more of a resort experience, says Ethan Nelson, president of Las Vegas’s Steelman Partners, a firm that designs dozens of casinos each year. Locally, you’ll see this in the Horseshoe’s Village Square Buffet, which offers views of Chicago’s skyline. And, on the main floor of Des Plaines’s new Rivers Casino, you’ll find clerestories—high windows that diffuse sunlight to prevent glare, says architect Charles Porter of Development Management Associates, the firm that designed Rivers.

As we wind around the Horseshoe, Nita lets me in on one more casino myth: that you’re meant to get lost on the floor so more games will catch your eye. This one, however, may hold a nugget of truth. David Canter, a British psychologist who studies the way architecture influences human actions, compares a casino’s layout to that of a department store. “I don’t think [architects] want to deliberately make casinos confusing,” he says. “But I think it’s very much the idea that people get swallowed up into it and feel comfortably part of it.” If Gov. Quinn loosens his stance on state gambling laws, maybe Macy’s would do well to stick a few slots between housewares and the men’s department.