

# THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

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## **Morongo's new dining concept from Fabio Viviani puts a twist on the traditional buffet**



*Fabio Viviani, pictured here, is in charge of a new food hall concept that will open at Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa in December. (Courtesy of Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa)*

By ALEX GROVES

When Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa announced a partnership with Fabio Viviani earlier this year, casino officials said he would explore everything from tweaking menus to coming up with new dining concepts. Turns out, Viviani was handed a blank canvas with the casino's former Potrero Canyon Buffet.

Already, the celebrity chef, a former "Top Chef" contestant and cookbook author, has begun building concepts incorporating everything from the best roadside barbecue stands to a Brazilian churrascaria to what Viviani described as "sushi with an Italian twist" — and they're all under one venue.

The Marketplace by Fabio Viviani will replace Potrero Canyon Buffet and is expected to open at the Cabazon area resort in December. Although it will have familiar buffet elements such as a set price at entry, it aims to evoke the feeling of being in a high-end food hall with multiple eateries under one roof.

A growing number of Southern California casinos are swapping buffets for other concepts in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but the Marketplace will be unique in that it's the first celebrity chef branded dining concept we've seen at Southern California's tribal casinos.

Viviani said he was eager to do something in California again. His Café Firenze in Moorpark closed in January 2020 because the landlord in charge of the property had different plans for it, Viviani said. Osteria by Fabio Viviani, his concept at LAX, is listed as temporarily closed on LAX's website.

Working on the Marketplace not only let Viviani return to the Golden State, but with a massive project to boot, he said.

“California is the one that got away, but the Morongo folks brought it back with a bell, a whistle and a white horse,” Viviani said in a recent videoconference interview.

The new concept will have branded spaces that will function like the stalls of a food hall, rather than more generic dessert and carving stations. Customers will be greeted by chefs and select items off of a menu that will then be freshly prepared.

“The majority of the production is made in front of the client,” Viviani said. “There is not going to be big batches and big trays and a chafing dish full of things that have been sitting there for a while. Everything is a quick turnaround, executed in front of the customer.”

The food portions will individually sized on single serving plates. Think of tapas rather the traditional buffet model of grabbing food out of a serving tray and piling it onto a plate, said Richard St. Jean, Chief Executive Officer of Morongo.

After getting their individually sized, made-to-order plates of food, customers then take the items back to their table. Servers will greet them and ask them if they want drinks, cocktails, beer or wine.

Viviani said the goal of the space is to have the same quality of food that you would find at a high-end downtown restaurant but without the matching wait times because typical restaurants have only one kitchen and one set of chefs.

“If we have 300 people in The Marketplace, we have an array of kitchens, a selection of chefs, an array of stations and culinary experts that are making food from scratch so the speed of execution is a lot higher without affecting quality of delivery,” he said.

Viviani said a lot of the decisions about what concepts to offer within the space were based on what Morongo knew its customers would like.

“The key to success for every hospitality operation is to understand who you are serving,” he said.

Dining options will include Mercato Centrale, specializing in Italian fare; Al Comal, featuring Mexican and South American items; Prime Cuts, serving traditional steakhouse and Brazilian churrascaria items; Pescato, offering a range of seafood from clam bakes to that Italian-inspired sushi; Sukiru, featuring Pan-Asian cuisine; and Sweet Things, offering a variety of international desserts.

### **What to Eat**

Viviani said one of his favorite concepts coming to the space is Pork & Waffles, which will serve barbecue and Southern-style comfort food. He said it was inspired by roadside restaurants that you can find in gas stations along the highways in the Southern U.S. where you can get a pack of gum, cigarettes, Listerine and “the best fried chicken you ever had.”

“We’re trying to bring that value, that homey, home-cooked food feeling, because you can tell me whatever you want, I’ve never seen a fancy barbecue restaurant that I liked,” he said. “Barbecue is dirty in a saucy way, it’s comfort food. You sit in there, it’s hot, it’s smoky.”

Viviani said the signage and ambiance of that concept is meant to remind customers of one of those roadside joints.

## **Bringing the Marketplace to market**

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, many casinos throughout the region began rethinking their buffet spaces, either reconfiguring them in a way that they could be safer or turning them into other concepts. Valley View Casino & Hotel in Valley Center was one of the first casinos to bring back its buffet, but with a model where food was brought to customers' tables instead of self-service; Casino Pauma eliminated its buffet and reconfigured the as Mexican restaurant Lindo Valle; and Harrah's Resort SoCal and Agua Caliente Casino Palm Springs both have plans to replace their buffet spaces with different concepts.

Casino officials at Morongo were considering a change to the casino's buffet space even before the coronavirus pandemic, but that sped up the effort to come up with something different, according to St. Jean.

He knew he wanted to deliver a food concept to Morongo's customers that was high quality, but also done quickly and at a value, he said.

The resort brought in Viviani, who has experience revamping dining spaces at casinos and has created several food hall-type concepts for casino company Penn National Gaming at properties in Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Now, it's time to bring a new vision to life at Morongo.

"He's going to make it sexy and fun," St. Jean said.