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## Still Shining On

### Twelve Las Vegas Valley hotels snag AAA's designations

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It's had four owners since 2000, but downtown's Golden Nugget just put on a display of remarkable consistency.

When AAA unveiled on Monday its 2006 list of Four Diamond hotels and restaurants, the Golden Nugget landed the award for the 29th consecutive year -- a Nevada record.

The honor might surprise consumers who believe Las Vegas' high-end era began with the 1989 opening of The Mirage, a Four Diamond winner on the Strip for the last 15 years. The Mirage's duration on the Four Diamond list is the closest any other Nevada hotel comes to the Golden Nugget's achievement.

But Mary Louise Seifert, secretary of the American Society of Travel Agents and owner of Welcome Aboard Travel in Scottsdale, Ariz., said the Golden Nugget's precedent-setting appearance among AAA's Four Diamond winners is no accident.

"It was a Wynn property at one point in time, and owners over the years have kept the property up and made it better," said Seifert, who stays at the Golden Nugget two to three times a year. "Certainly with the new ownership, you can see they're upgrading the property, and they keep it up."

Casino developer Steve Wynn bought the Golden Nugget in 1973. In 2000, Wynn sold it and his other Mirage Resorts holdings to MGM Grand. Dot-com millionaires Tim Poster and Tom Breitling purchased the property from MGM Mirage in 2004 and sold it to Landry's Restaurants of Houston in 2005.

Despite the changes, Andre Carrier, chief operating officer of the Golden Nugget for six years, said the hotel has continued to nab the perennial AAA honor through an emphasis on service.

"We have many tenured employees at the Golden Nugget who have longstanding relationships with our guests, and they take the service they provide very personally," Carrier said. "It's a commitment we keep every day in how we maintain the property and how we maintain service standards."

Carrier said AAA's stamp of approval is good for business, so the hotel includes the four-diamond insignia on all its advertising.

"It's a moniker that helps our guests understand what they can expect when they come to the Golden Nugget," Carrier said.

David Dennis, a spokesman for travel Web site [Expedia.com](http://www.Expedia.com), said high marks from trade groups can bring hotels new customers.

"People absolutely look at ratings," Dennis said. "They look at ratings as a benchmark to compare properties."

To gauge just how well hotel owners are operating a property, AAA has 65 full-time evaluators who audit 50,000 resorts nationwide. AAA's guidelines say that earning four diamonds requires "refined and stylish" surroundings and "an extensive array of amenities combined with a high degree of hospitality, service and attention to detail."

This year, 18 Nevada hotels -- 12 of them in the Las Vegas market -- garnered four diamonds. Last year, 14 hotels, including 10 Las Vegas-area properties, made the cut.

New to the roster this year are the JW Marriott in Summerlin and the Renaissance on Paradise Road.

Strip properties with the designation are Caesars Palace, The Mirage, Treasure Island, Mandalay Bay, The Hotel and Paris Las Vegas.

In addition to JW Marriott and the Renaissance, off-Strip winners include Green Valley Ranch Resort and the Hyatt Regency Lake Las Vegas, both in Henderson.

AAA also gave four diamonds to 15 restaurants statewide, including 13 eateries in Las Vegas. That compares with 10 restaurants, six of which were in Las Vegas, last year. The MGM Grand claims four of the new winners: Nobhill, Seablue, Shibuya and Pearl. Bellagio's Prime Steakhouse and Shintaro also merited the rating, as did Fleur de Lys at Mandalay Bay.

The increase in four-diamond hotels and restaurants suggests that Las Vegas continues to go upscale, Seifert said.

"Las Vegas is rated as the No. 1 domestic destination by the (American Society of Travel Agents), which shows that Las Vegas is a destination not to be missed," Seifert said. "It has definitely upgraded with new properties. The competition in the market is such that if you don't keep up with other hotels, you'll lose market share. For travelers, there's an appeal to going to an area where you have a concentration of such wonderful hotels."

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