

RESTAURANT REVIEW:

DINING AT THE CHEF'S TABLE

on Norwegian Star

by

Richard H. Wagner

Chef's table dinner events have become popular features of the culinary programs of several of the major cruise lines. These events involve a multi-course dinner with wine pairings during which the ship's executive chef and members of the culinary team impart insights to a small group of guests. However, each of the cruise lines has placed its own stamp on the concept.

Norwegian Cruise Lines, long an innovator in cruise ship dining, has recently rolled out its version of the chef's table into its fleet. It is elegant yet relaxed, fine dining but not overly elaborate. I had the opportunity to experience it on the Norwegian Star.

On the first full day of the cruise, a notice in the ship's daily program, the Freestyle Daily, informed guests the Star would be holding a Chef's Table - - "the

finest dining experience on board." It would be held only once during the cruise on Day 5 and would be limited to 12 guests. Those who were interested could sign up at the ship's Restaurant Reservations Desk.

The guests who signed up for the Chef's Table were instructed by letter to meet at Gatsby's bar at six on the appointed evening. The evening that I participated in the event, there were several couples, a few solo cruisers and a group of three.

There was no dress code for the event. This is Freestyle Cruising after all and so you dress to suit your own style. Most of the guests chose smart casual but some chose to wear a jacket or a dress.

When we arrived at Gatsby were greeted by the maitre d' of one of Star's specialty restaurants who acted as the host

for the event. She sat us in a circle of chairs that had been reserved for the Chef's Table participants. A waiter poured glasses of a California sparkling wine for everyone.

This pre-dinner gathering served to break the ice amongst the participants. Crucial to an event such as a chef's table is a convivial atmosphere. If everyone just talks with the people that they came with such an atmosphere will not be created. The pre-dinner gathering allowed the participants to meet each other and exchange a few remarks. The rapport grew from there as the evening progressed.

Once everyone had assembled and had an opportunity to meet, the maitre d' asked everyone to gather on a nearby staircase for what she called a "class photo." One of the ship's photographers arranged the group on the steps and took a number of shots. A copy of the best one of these was given to each participant at the end of the evening along with a copy of the menu signed by the ship's executive chef.

Following the photo shoot, we were escorted to a private dining room adjoining one of the ship's main dining rooms, the Aqua restaurant. In the center of the room was a large rectangular table decorated with festoons of orchids and Versace serving plates. Around the perimeter of the room were easels displaying works on loan from the ship's art gallery. The lights were kept low, giving the room a romantic atmosphere.

We were then introduced to Executive Chef Andreas Sommerfeld, who acted as the culinary guide for the evening. In addition to telling us the name of each dish and its major ingredients, the Chef pointed out how the

different ingredients interacted with each other. As he explained, a key to fine cooking is to have contrasting flavors that stimulate each of the various taste centers on the tongue without allowing any one type of flavor to dominate the others. In other words, you need contrast and balance.

The Chef also gave us insights into how the various dishes were prepared. One goal of his stated goals for the evening was to broaden the participants' horizons as to what they can cook for themselves. Consequently, the dishes were simple rather than elaborate. "Simple but sometimes simple is very nice."

In addition to the remarks made by the chef, the ship's Head Wine Steward spoke about the wines that were to accompany the various courses. These had been selected by Norwegian's Master Sommelier Andrea Robinson and included a sauvignon blanc from New Zealand, a California chardonnay and a cabernet sauvignon also from California.

The nine course meal began with an amuse boche to stimulate the palette. A large pearl of mango provided sweetness while a salsa provided a contrasting sharpness.

Next came Ahi Tuna Tartare. The fish was glazed with orange juice and wasabi and sat upon a sesame crisp. Several of the guests only toyed with this course, skeptical of eating raw fish.

The meal hit its stride with the asparagus cream soup. The large, shallow bowl arrived at the table with only a cauliflower flan lying in the center. However, the servers quickly arrived and poured the soup around the flan. This allowed both flan and soup to maintain their integrity instead of merging together

into a soggy mass. The result was both creamy and spicy - - a nice balance.

Another dish that found favor with the guests was the goat cheese tart. Served in a pastry shell, the warm, soft goat cheese had a strong flavor but this was balanced by sweetness and acidity from the sun-dried tomato chutney.

To cleanse the palette, the next course was a granite. Its crushed ice had sweetness from Moscato wine contrasting with tartness from grapefruit juice. A few spoonfuls were all that was needed to refresh the tongue and position you for the courses to come.

The fish course was next - - pan seared sea bass. Chef Andreas explained that despite its name, this dish is not cooked entirely by frying. Instead, after the dish is seared in a pan - - necessary to give color to the plantain crust - - the dish is placed in an oven in order to keep the fish moist while cooking. The plantain crust provided sweetness and a salsa once again provided sharpness. A lobster sauce yielded yet another contrasting flavor.

This was a large portion; seemingly, equal in size to the main course in many restaurants. Although the flavor of the dish was well-received, some of the guests found the portion too large for such a multi-course meal.

The main course listed on the menu was a veal chop. However, those guests who do not eat veal were allowed to substitute a filet mignon. The meat was very tender and tasty by itself. But what really made the dish was the truffle sauce, which had a sweetness that contrasted with the meat's inherent saltiness.

Contrast also marked the cheese course. St. Andre Triple Crème is a soft, creamy cheese. Stilton, which rejoices in the title "the king of cheeses," is much

firmer and has a strong flavor characteristic of blue cheeses. Also on the plate were a small piece of honey comb for sweetness and slices of port wine infused figs for fruity acidity. On a separate plate were pieces of pickled watermelon and small "bagel chips."

For dessert, women were given a "Chocolate Log" and men received a "Dome". Couples were encouraged to share.

I was somewhat skeptical of the dome as it is not the type of dessert that usually appeals to me. However, the yogurt mousse was so creamy and balanced so well the lychee raspberry crème center that soon nothing was left.

After the final course, Chef Andreas introduced the crew members who had worked on the dinner. These included the servers who had so attentively and promptly presented each course as well as the four chefs who had prepared the meal under the Executive Chef's supervision. They were greeted by a hearty round of applause.

We were also informed that we would be receiving an invitation to visit the galley on the morning of the next sea day. Since this visit would take place between meals, the tour could be done more leisurely and less disruptively than a visit done that evening while dinner was being prepared. As promised, on the day, Chef Andreas led the group on an extensive tour of the main galley and some of the specialty restaurant galleys describing how the kitchen operated in some detail.

The group then adjourned to Gatsby's for after dinner drinks and coffee. By now the conversation was flowing amongst the guests and friendships were forming. All agreed that

it had been a delicious and worthwhile experience.

There is a \$75 per person cover charge for the Chef's Table.