

RESTAURANT GUIDE:

DINING ON QUEEN VICTORIA

An inside guide with Food and Beverage
Manager Bernhard Fischer

By Richard H. Wagner

Cunard Line prides itself on its culinary offerings. On Queen Victoria, the dining venues are the responsibility of Food and Beverage Manager Bernhard Fischer. Therefore, I sat down with Mr. Fischer to discuss the various dining options on Queen Victoria.

During the course of our conversation, Mr. Fischer made a number of general observations about the dining operation on Queen Victoria and why it succeeds.

“If you look at the stats we have 50 percent returning guests and they come back over and over again. You have a nice formal dinner. You go and see a

show and you have a ball afterward. This is very civilized.”

“It is an evolving product really. One sticks to the history - - we are fiercely protecting this. But one has to go a little bit with the times as well. Eating habits do change.”

“Everything is still manufactured from scratch. We do not have any ready made products. There are no soup powders or anything else. We make our own stocks, our own soups.”

“Even in the Britannia Restaurant at night where we do almost a thousand people a seating, nothing is cooked in advance. It is a very labor intensive way to do it but it does make a difference.

Obviously, if we have a roast, it has been in the oven for two hours but it is cut there and then. Nothing has been laying there canteen style.”

“I have a very strong culinary team onboard. I have been with them for a long time, just about since the ship came out. We don’t move them around. We build teams on the ships and I think that is a big plus. It can have a huge impact if you have key positions changing and [the newcomer] is not quite familiar with the ship or is of a different skill level. I worked for another company before with a huge fleet where they moved the guys around just filling the slots. Cunard doesn’t do that. You stick to your ship unless you request to move.”

“The staff has been here forever. Most of the chaps are 10 or 12 years service or more. We are just having our service awards next week and there is 30 years, 45 years, with the same company. They are not necessarily in senior positions, I have waiters here with 36 years service. They are proud of the ship and they look after it.”

“We do a lot for the crew. This is just hardware here that you can replace. People that care and are proud to work for you I think is a rare thing.”

The Dining Rooms

There are three dining rooms on Queen Victoria: the Queens Grill, the Princess Grill and the largest dining room, the Britannia Restaurant. Which dining room, a guest will dine in depends upon his or her accommodations.

“The Princess Grill caters to the normal suites The Queens Grill is the top

suites and the penthouses.” All other guests dine in the Britannia.

Consistent with the concept of refined luxury upon which the suites experience is based, the Grills seek to provide top level gourmet dining. “It is open seating so you arrive whenever you wish. There is a different menu every day plus there is an ala carte option.”

“We also encourage you to almost make your own menu. ‘I’d like the Beef Wellington tonight or my wife feels like a lobster thermidor.’ We can produce just about anything that you like. That is what we are quite proud of. Some of the guests do test us severely on this - - they go from oriental to authentic French food to all kinds of things that they want to eat.”

“In the Grills, we basically have no limit. The caviar is available, the foie gras is available. If you want it every night, have it every night”

“It is a huge repeater clientele here. Even in these economic times, this is booked out. Generally, this is booked out first, before the Britannia is booked out. We have a 60 percent return rate of guests in the Grills. So they know exactly what to expect and what we can and cannot do. They love the table cooking in here, the formality.”

“To keep [the experience] fresh, we are constantly making changes to the menu. We follow the trends of the London restaurants. Last year, we introduced the rare breeds out of England. The rare breed farms is an association of British farmers who breed specific lines of pork, venison, and beef that have almost been extinct. They are bringing back strains that are free-range cattle and chicken, ducks, geese and all sorts of things. It has

gone down very well. Organic meats, organic poultry were other innovations that came in.”

The Grills are open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But the Grills experience is not limited to the restaurants themselves. “The same goes for the room service for these guests. They get together and have a sun-downer with six or seven other guests and we cater of that in the suite. There is no charge for that, it is all kind of inclusive.”

A Grills guest may “want four croissants in the morning - - four different ones - - at a certain temperature, on a warm side plate. One guest wants a specific mix of carrot and orange juice. It has to be 40/60 and we do that.”

Most of the passengers on Queen Victoria dine in the Britannia Restaurant. “It is a very comfortable restaurant. We are trying to create the same atmosphere. It feels a lot busier because there are a thousand people on two decks. [Still,] most people are very comfortable, they never move from there.”

Like the Grills, the Britannia is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Breakfast and lunch are open seating. For dinner, each guest is assigned to either the early or late seating. “Your dining seating depends upon what you want to do. We seem to manage to accommodate that most of the time.”

“There is a huge choice on the Britannia menu as well. They almost serve the same menu [as the Grills]. I think it is a very substantial menu - - good variety. We offer besides that vegetarian options. And we cater for all of the medical conditions [such as] salt-free, gluten-free diabetics. We do cater for special

requests as well, not just dietary. ‘I’ll have the caviar.’ It is available down there but you would have to pay for it.”

The specialty restaurant

When Queen Victoria entered service, she had one purpose-built specialty restaurant.

Then as now that venue is the Todd English Restaurant. It is open to all guests for dinner and for lunch on sea days.

There is an extra charge for this venue.

“It was first launched on the Queen Mary 2 and it worked extremely well there because she carries a lot of American passengers on the transatlantics. Todd English is a celebrity chef who has done very well in America. He is a Boston-based chef. He is not well known in England. It just sounds very English.”

“It is a Californian-Mediterranean fusion cuisine. It is very rich. Americans like it. British struggle a little bit with it. They enjoy it but they are not going to come back two or three times during a voyage. It is fully booked most of the time. Lunch is stronger than dinners.”

Alternative dining

Queen Victoria now offers what Cunard calls “alternative dining” in the Lido Restaurant. The Lido is the ship’s buffet restaurant but the alternative dining is not a buffet meal. Rather, this is full service dining with waiters.

“The Lido is basically in three sections. You have port side and starboard side, which are identical and then you have the center section in the front where

the sandwich stations are and the live cooking. We just close off one. It gives us a seating capacity of about 60 maximum. We don't double book it. [You have the table] for the evening."

"There is a minimal cover charge of \$10. It is more of a gratuity for the waiters, it does not go into the food cost."

Alternative dining "is very popular. It is mostly for the people who have a special occasion. It is the most scenic point to have dinner. Leaving the fjords or going in and out of ports, it is great. It is a very enjoyable experience."

While the physical location remains the same for each of the alternative dining options, the type of food changes and with it the name of the restaurant. "You have the Coriander, which is authentic Indian food. This is extremely popular with the British guests. We have the Asian food. We have the Prime, which is basically an American steakhouse. In the colder weather, we have a fondue menu, everything is cooked by yourself on the table. It is very social with sharing of food on the table. It is very relaxed."

"We normally run [each option] for three consecutive nights." The alternative dining is open to all guests.

Casual dining

The Lido Restaurant is a popular venue for breakfast and lunch. Guests can also have informal afternoon tea and snacks there during the day.

In addition, the Lido offers dinner options beyond the alternative dining options. "The Lido alternative dining is

one side and on the other is the evening buffet."

"We run the buffet and we run theme nights as well. It was Mexican the other night, German last night, as we go into Greece, it will be a Greek evening. We try and link it to the locations we are in. It is very nice, casual and people enjoy that. You can sit outside if you wish."

"There is always a fresh cooking station like on the seafood night, they will be cooking seafood in front of you. The fish is fresh and it will be cooked to your liking. Then we have a steak night, where we have ten different cuts of meat that will be cooked to your liking."

Another popular casual venue is the Golden Lion Pub. "We have the lunch in the pub, which is a British fare. We have now started doing a pub dinner [on some evenings] as well, which some people quite enjoy. They don't want to be bothered having to go to the [dining room] half way through a soccer match. 'Why don't we stay here and have another beer or glass of wine.' We also link it to some type of entertainment in the pub - - a quiz night or jazz - - we link the food to that."

On the open deck at the aft end of the ship is the Lido Pool Grill. It is essentially a poolside, light lunch venue. However, "you can't do the same thing over and over again each day. You have to put some different things in there. So we do a German sausage thing, a bit of Mexican food, a bit of this and a bit of that just to spice it up. You can't just do hamburgers and hot dogs. You keep those as a staple but you just add a few things that are different."

For the same reason, this area is also used from time-to-time in the

evening. “We have dinner on the open deck weather depending. If the ship is not moving or is going very slowly, you can do this on the aft deck.”

“We have a small bistro menu, very simple. It is fresh salmon, steak, Caesar salad - - all the favorites that you could serve just about everyday. It is a no-booking thing. You get there from 7:30 afterwards We have done it for the sailaway quite often. People just like it.

It is informal. It is lovely, especially in good weather.”

“You throw in the odd thing now and then as an ad hoc thing, which causes a bit of a surprise, which the guests enjoy.”

In addition to the dining options discussed above, Queen Victoria offers a formal afternoon tea in the Queens Room each day. Guests can also enjoy specialty coffees and pastries in the Café Carinthia.