

RESTAURANT GUIDE:

DINING ON CRYSTAL SYMPHONY

An inside guide with
Food and Beverage Manager Walter Pietschnig

by

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Crystal Cruises is renown for its dining experiences. On Crystal Symphony, Food and Beverage Manager Walter Pietschnig, has day-to-day responsibility for maintaining this reputation. I sat down with him to discuss the various dining venues on Crystal Symphony.

The main dining room on Crystal Symphony is the 500-seat Crystal Dining Room. "My favorite restaurant is actually the dining room. I am just really impressed with the quality of the food here in the dining room and the variety."

"Everything is cooked ala minute. You can't do everything ala minute. Certain things [you have to begin beforehand] and then finish it up. But we don't really cook in advance. We have really high standards in the dining room, especially for dinner."

"In the dining room, we have a huge variety. When we are going on the world cruise -- 110 days -- every day a different menu. We never repeat the menu except for the Captain's Welcome and the Farewell on every segment."

Another important element of the dining experience is the service. More than once when I have interviewed officers at other lines, I have heard them say that their service is "almost like Crystal," implying that the service on Crystal is the ultimate aspiration. The question that naturally arises is how is Crystal able to provide service like Crystal?

"You have to hire the right people. Most of the staff here have been here a long time already. Some of them have been here since the beginning in 1990. They have a good life here. We take good care of the crew."

When they are off duty, there are a lot of activities for them on the ship. They can use all kinds of facilities. There are parties for them. They are motivated. Our strength is number one the way we take care of the crew. You can ask anybody who has been on other cruise lines, you cannot compare -- product delivery, the quality of the food and especially the service."

The Crystal Dining Room is open for breakfast and lunch on an open seating basis as many of the passengers elect to take those meals either in their staterooms (room service is complimentary) or in the ship's buffet restaurant the Lido Café.

For dinner, Crystal Symphony offers both the traditional passenger ship system with two seatings and assigned tables or a new flexible dining system. "You have the choice of signing up for main, late or open dining. Three quarters of the dining room is [dedicated] to the regular main seating or late seating." The remainder is for the flexible dining program. "It is a restaurant within a restaurant."

The flexible dining system is called: "Open Dining by Reservation." You can come now at 7, 7:15 or 7:30. You can come basically anytime but you still need to make a reservation before. You can try to walk in and you might get a table but you are supposed to make a reservation like in the specialty restaurants. Every cruise, we have like 150 or 200 signing up for it, which is a lot."

With regard to the traditional system, the popularity of the two seatings varies depending upon the cruise. "On the World Cruise, for example, everyone wants early -- six o'clock. It is really a challenge. We had this also the last few cruises going up to Montreal and back. In the summer, in the Mediterranean, it is the opposite. [The guests] are out every day and come back at six in the evening so everybody wants late. It really depends upon where we are going."

Crystal is also balancing tradition and flexibility with regard to the dress code. "On a regular 11 day cruise, we do two formal nights, two informal and the rest is casual. We used to have three formal nights. People still like to dress up but twice [a cruise] is enough. We still do informal. Other cruise lines have stopped informal -- it is 'smart casual.' But still our regular clientele, they like to dress up. It becomes an issue actually on certain cruises. It is hard to enforce. Last cruise, on an informal night, many people were without jackets. But how do you enforce it?"

As an alternative to the main dining room, Crystal Symphony has two specialty restaurants -- Prego and the Silk Road. Within the Silk Road is the Sushi Bar, which is essentially a separate venue giving guests three dining options.

"Our goal on the specialty restaurants is to be on



Food and Beverage Manager Walter Pietschnig

the standard of a two-star Michelin restaurant. The Silk Road is spectacular. Prego is fantastic. Both are complimentary."

Prego is a concept developed by Crystal and features Italian cuisine. It is not a pizzeria but rather "upscale Italian cuisine." As with the Silk Road, "you can come more or less whenever you want with reservations."

Both the Silk Road and the Sushi Bar were developed by the noted restaurant firm Nobu Matsuhisa. Nobu did not merely lend its name to these operations but rather is heavily involved. "All our chefs are from Nobu restaurants. They do full contracts, I think it is for four months."

"Once a year, we have a trainer here from Nobu and he or she will come out and stay for a whole cruise. They have a training program to train everybody. I know the President of Nobu, I have had dinner with him twice, and for him the most important thing is that the waiters know their food and they explain their food dish by dish."

"I have talked to many guests -- they've eaten in London, they have eaten in L.A., in New York in Nobu -- and they all say the same: the food is at least as good as shoreside maybe even better and the service is ten times better than on shore."

With such high quality specialty restaurants included in the cruise fare, there is considerable

demand for tables. The Sushi Bar is operated on a first come, first served basis but the Silk Road and Prego require reservations.

"When you are at home, you can do online reservations for the Silk Road and Prego but only one for each restaurant. Then when you are on the ship, you can see the maitre d' or the Front Desk or call in [to make a reservation]. Some people come on and say 'I only want to eat there, I want to eat there every night.' So, you have to do it on a day-to-day basis."

Yet another alternative dining venue is the Lido Café. As noted earlier, its buffet is popular for breakfast and lunch. Usually, it is not open for dinner but twice a cruise it is open for "casual dining. It is very popular. We do not do it buffet style. It is sit-down casual dining. You have a menu on the table and [are served by a waiter]. We have some nights with a fresh fish on, you have a steak on, you have lamb chops or whatever, escargots, shrimps, lobster cocktails - - really some nice stuff. It is really popular."

Crystal Symphony also has daytime alternatives. The Trident Bar and Grill serves hamburgers and light fare poolside each day until six. The Bistro overlooking the ship's lobby is "open 9 am to 6 pm. In the morning, we do a late risers breakfast with smoked salmon, lochs and bagels, lots of different types of Danishes, yogurt and muesli. Then at 11:30 we change to cold cuts and

cheeses and fruits."

Finally, Crystal Symphony offers a traditional afternoon repast in its spectacular observation lounge. "Every afternoon 3:30 to 4:30 in the Palm Court. It is classic English teatime - - sandwiches, cakes, and scones each day."



A grilled Black Angus filet mignon in the Crystal Dining Room