

INSIDE VIEW:

A DINING GUIDE TO EXPLORER OF THE SEAS

With commentary by Hotel Director Xavier Matthias
and Executive Chef Patrick McCabe.

Part II

by

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Explorer of the Seas has several different dining venues distributed around the ship. However, they are not merely different locations to grab something to eat. As Hotel Director Xavier Matthias explains:

"Each venue offers its own unique feel. It is a whole experience. That is what we try and achieve in all of our venues. It is a different experience based upon where you go. And we hope that it is a lasting experience, something that you would remember."

Royal Caribbean wants the passengers to look back and say: "I went on the Explorer and there is this restaurant up on top, I think the name is 'Johnny

Rockets' and they were doing the YMCA and it was so interactive that we joined in and danced. I went to Portofino and it was the best Italian meal I ever had but it was very intimate, very comfortable, very cozy, the ambiance was great. I went to Café Promenade and I enjoyed the fact that I was able to get my own coffee, get a Danish and get out quickly. And I went to the dining room and I was served a nice gourmet meal. Or I chose not to eat in the main dining room one night and I went up to the Windjammer and I was able to have some very fresh stir-fry. I had some pasta cooked for me just the way I wanted it, with the condiments I wanted, the sauces I wanted. In addition, they had sushi. So

it leaves that imprint on your mind."

"The way we look at our clients is this is the only time that they have to have a vacation and they have chosen to spend it with us. As such, it has to be a positive memory, not going away with a bad taste in their mouths. It is our desire to always wow."

Executive Chef Patrick McCabe adds: "The dining is an integral part of the success or failure of a cruise. From that aspect, if the dining is not up to par it can really affect the satisfaction of a cruise. There are 134 of us back in the galley and we are all striving to make sure that it is as good as it can be."

The Main Dining Room

The main dining room on Explorer is a grand room located towards the stern of the ship. Huge pillars soar up through a central atrium to a ceiling with a giant sun sculpture several decks above. Terraces of tables surround the atrium on three sides. Each level of the dining room is so big that it has its own name. It is a spectacular room.

"The vision of dining in the dining room - - I think it is old school dining," comments Chef McCabe. For dinner, it offers multi-course meals. One side of the menu offers a selection of appetizers, soups and main courses that remain the same each night of the cruise. These are traditional favorites including steak, salmon, and French onion soup. The other side of the menu changes each night.

"We don't necessarily theme dinners like we did in the past," Mr. Matthias notes. "When I began 17 years ago, every night [the waiters] had an outfit based on the nation you were presenting - - the Italian, the Mexican, the Caribbean and so forth. The dishes from those places are still served, like we have Italian night with the scampi; the Caribbean night, we'll do jerked chicken and the pork; and we'll do the French night when we have the coco vin, the escargot and so forth but it is not as highlighted as it was back in the past."

While it can vary along with the demographics of the passengers, the most popular item "is the lobster. Everybody craves the lobster," Chef McCabe laughs.



Hotel Director Xavier Matthias

His personal favorite, however, is "slow roasted prime rib. I think you can't go past it. And anything to do with chocolate." Both items are on the menu the same night and some guests order both.

Along the same lines, if a guest would rather have the side dishes from another main course instead of the side dishes that come with the main course he or she ordered, it can be done. "Mix and match as much as you want. We are not regimented - - [it is not] 'this is what the menu says; this is what I am doing.' You are here to enjoy yourself." Thus if a dish comes with rice, you can replace it with a potato "If that is what you want, that is what you get."

Similarly, if any item is not how you want it, tell the waiter. "If it is incorrect, it will be corrected straight away. There will be no questions asked. Whether it is [actually] medium rare or not does not really matter, if the guest wants us to cook it less, we will cook it less. If they want it cooked more, we will cook it more. We want to please. That is the main thing we want to do. We want everyone to leave the

dining room happy with food and service."

Each level of the dining room has its own galley, which is a beehive of activity throughout the dinner period. "The vast majority of it is [cooked] ala minute. We cook at the meal period for the meal period. There are always going to be a couple of exceptions to the rule, the lamb shanks, for instance, or the prime rib - - something which takes a long time to cook. And it is continuously cooked throughout the dinner period. So we don't cook at 5 o'clock for 6 o'clock service. We have enough for approximately 100 people at a time but we will continue to cook throughout the meal period. There is a ticket system and a meal count system. So as each request is coming in, we are counting it and that information is being relayed to the various stations so they know how much of everything to cook."

For dinner, guests have a choice of the traditional cruise ship dining system or of a flexible dining system called "My Time Dining."

Under the traditional system, there is an early seating and a late seating. Each guest is assigned to one of those seatings for the duration of the cruise. They also have an assigned table. Usually, the guest gives his or her preference as to the seating and the table size when he or she books the cruise. Those who are dissatisfied with either should see the maitre d'.

While the traditional system is more regimented, Chef McCabe points out that it has its advantages. "You get a nice big table, you are forced to have conversation, you are forced to meet people. Okay, the first day, it might be a bit tenuous but after a period of time, you end up making friends for life on cruises. My mother and father came on a cruise a few years ago and they are still in contact with everyone from their table. I think that is one of the positive things with the dining room experience."

Under My Time Dining, the guest can come to dinner anytime the dining room is open. "You can go to dine as early as 5:30 and I think we take the last reservations as late as 9:30." Mr. Matthias says. "When it began, a lot of people elected that option because they wanted private tables for two and we are limited in terms of how many tables for two that we have at our disposal. As it has grown and become more well-received by our guests, we have seen that almost anyone takes it up."

Indeed, the program has proven so popular that Explorer is expanding its My Time Dining area to an entire level of the dining room. "That deck has the capacity of holding 450 guests. Generally, what we aim for is two and a half turnovers in terms of covers so in actuality we will be able to do 1,200 to 1,300 guests."

One level of the main dining room is open for breakfast. "We do a rotating breakfast menu. We do a chocolate breakfast where everything has to do with



Executive Chef Patrick McCabe

chocolate on the breakfast menu. That is extremely popular," the Chef notes.

Also on the last sea day of a cruise, a grand buffet brunch is held in the main dining room. This event substitutes for the traditional cruise ship gala midnight buffet and late evening chocolate buffets. Mr. Matthias explains: "We have seen [those] to be a waste of food. We did some market research and the guests said 'I enjoy seeing it but I can't eat that late.'"

The brunch "starts at nine and runs until two. It is continually replenished and refilled. There are a lot of things that are made to order."

The main dining room is open for lunch on the other sea days. Guests have a choice of ordering off the menu and being served or of taking all or part of their meal from an elaborate salad bar. "When we started out, we had a pasta bar and now they have changed that to a salad bar. That is much better received by our guests because everyone is into healthy living and counting calories. You can design your own salad and specify the quantities you need in terms of the green foliage and so forth. Also what is quite popular in the

salad bar is the meats that we have available, the prosciutto etc. A lot of guests will go and just have a main course salad."

The Buffet Restaurant

The Windjammer Café is Explorer's large buffet restaurant. It is located high atop the ship on Deck 11 with its large windows presenting views astern as well as to either side. It is not far from the ship's main pool area or from the ship's sports complex.

"At any given time, you have a choice of over 200 to 300 items. We try to keep it as exciting as possible. We have a variety of Asian style foods, we have a variety of different island foods - - we try to keep it a little bit itinerary specific and then there is a reflection of what is in the dining room will be up there as well. We get a lot of repeaters specific to the ship so we try to change the offerings up in the Windjammer on a fairly regular basis. We revise the menus usually on a two to three week basis," comments Chef McCabe.

While it is not open 24 hours a day, the Windjammer is open much of the time. "Breakfast, lunch, tea time, dinner - - basically from six in the morning until 9:30 in the evening. It is a busy little operation."

"For lunch and breakfast, the Windjammer would be the dominate venue," Mr. Matthias continues. For dinner, "the families [with kids] will go to the Windjammer for dinner. People with special needs who have to take a medicine at certain times will gravitate towards the Windjammer. A lot of guests gravitate towards the [Windjammer's] sushi bar in the evening as their main appetizer before going to the dining room."

"There is an Indian night and an Oriental night, but there are certain standards that we have. We have standard pasta cooking every night. We have the Mongolian Wok - - the stir fry - - that goes on every night. We have a carving station. Those are basics in terms of our dining experience."

The Specialty Restaurants

Explorer has two quite different specialty restaurants - - Portofino and Johnny Rockets.

Portofino is a relatively small elegant room overlooking the starboard side of the ship high on Deck 11. "It is quality food and it is also all about the ambiance of a fine dining restaurant. It is an experience as opposed to just coming into the dining room. The quality of the food, the presentation. We have a little more time up there to prepare. It is all ala minute cooking, there is nothing prepared in advance. It is all plat-

ed as it is required. There is nothing done in advance. It is an experience," Chef McCabe points out.

This romantic venue with a décor that echoes an Italian villa, is open for dinner from 5:30 until 9:45 p.m.. There is a cover charge of \$20 per person.

Portofino is not just a dinner venue anymore. Mr. Matthias elaborates: "We have transformed Portofino into a dining area for our suite guests in the morning. It is a little more intimate. It is not as rushed and not as crowded as the main dining room. You can get anything that you can get in the dining room plus. Previously, we had a continental breakfast in the Concierge Lounge. But this is something above that. In Portofino, you can get eggs to order and so forth. You can get a proper hot breakfast. It is all there. We run this from 8 to 10. Then also we offer sandwiches in Portofino for the suites from 12 until 1:30."

Then once a cruise, a "Savor Lunch" is held in Portofino. "That's an effort to promote our cookbook and market the chef in terms of what he can do given the opportunity and a small crowd. Obviously, there are different dynamics associated with cooking for 3,600 guests and cooking for two people. We generally have an attendance of between 65 and 80 guests."

Chef McCabe adds: "I invite a few officers there as well so everyone gets a chance to talk with somebody about ship life or whatever you want to talk about. I do a galley tour, I do a little bit of a speech, let people know how much quantities of things we go through, answer as many questions as I can. We have a nice lunch."

"We have a couple of appetizers, a soup, salad course, main course and then a dessert. It is a choice. It is not just a set menu. There is no wine pairing but we do serve wine with it. It is not a chef's table, it more of an informal gathering with the chef, some officers and some good food."

Johnny Rockets is a fun venue. Modeled after a mid-20th Century American diner, it specializes in hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, shakes and sundaes. In addition, from time-to-time the staff dance in the aisle. "Johnny Rocket's is as the Johnny Rocket's that you'll find ashore," Mr. Matthias comments.

Chef McCabe goes on, "It is a franchise. We man it, we do it and everything else but it is all done to the specs of Johnny Rocket's. We use their ingredients, their recipe cards. Its good. As with everything else, it is fresh ingredients. We make the burgers onboard."

"We offer the floats and the root beer - - the full offerings. There is a cover charge of \$4.95 and the different specialty drinks, there is also a charge associated with that. But the cover charge gets you your burgers, your fries and your onion rings. The secret sauce that is amazing." Mr. Matthias continues.

"We do the YMCA [dance]. The crew that works there is hand-picked. They are trained. We have the [coins] to play the juke box and everything like that."

"Yes, it is a burger joint but it is not a McDonald's or a Burger King. It is a whole experience."

Coffee, Pizza and Snacks

A trademark feature of Royal Caribbean's large ships is the Royal Promenade - - an indoor mall running down the center of the ship. Along it are stores, bars and a casual dining venue called "The Café Promenade." Its seating area extends out onto the promenade like a sidewalk café. "It is the social place of the cruise. You go, you have a cup of tea, you sit, you chat, you look at people passing by on the Promenade."

One popular feature of this 24-hour venue is its self-service area where guests have a choice of coffee and different teas. You can also order a specialty coffee from the counter. "We have partnered now with Starbucks. We had a Starbucks trainer onboard training our guys in terms of their specifications and making their coffee. So we are no longer selling Seattle's Best, we are selling the Starbucks product itself."

Alternatively, guests can order drinks from Café Promenade's full service bar. There are also pitchers of ice water and baskets of fresh fruit.

The menu at Café Promenade changes throughout the day. "You have early in the morning a selection of Danishes that runs until 11. From 11 until 3 a.m. in the morning, you have different sandwiches, pizzas and little snacks. At three in the morning, it is whatever we have remaining, there is no menu per se. You will always be able to get pizzas but I can't promise you that you will have a roast ham sandwich or whatever," Mr. Matthias smiles.

"All the snacks are complimentary. Any of the items coming from the bar - - the specialty coffee, the ice cream - - there is a small charge for those. But the Danishes, the pastries, the self serve coffee are all complimentary."

Looking ahead

The dining operation on Explorer of the Seas is dynamic. As Chef McCabe explains: "We are continuously trying to change. People are cruising a lot more than they used to. The more you see the same thing, the less of a wow it is. So we have to continuously try and come up with things.."

In addition to developing new ways to use Explorer's existing venues, Royal Caribbean plans to add new dining venues to the ship. "The company has committed to revitalizing a number of our vessels and so when we go back in drydock [in 2014] we are going to have a lot of specialty restaurants." Mr. Matthias foresees these additions as being along the same lines as the venues that were added to Radiance of the Seas in 2011.

"A lot of guests [prefer] going to different restaurants because it adds a sense of adventure to your cruise vacation. You are not structured - - six o'clock I have to go to dinner. You have a nice day out, you have a reservation for 8 or 8:30, you go to a nice restaurant, have a bottle of wine. You know those options are available for you. That is what our market research has shown the guests are asking for."