

**INSIDE VIEW:**

# SECRETS OF THE BRITANNIA RESTAURANT

**A Conversation with Jamie Firth, Maitre d' of  
the Britannia Restaurant on Queen Mary 2**

by

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**T**he Britannia Restaurant on Cunard's Queen Mary 2 is one of the most spectacular dining rooms at sea. Its pillared central area soars up three decks to a simulated skylight reminiscent of the ocean liners of the last century. It is also a very large room, seating some 1,250 guests at 246 tables on two levels. The man in charge of its day-today operation is Maitre d' Jamie Firth.

Firth has been involved with catering since he was 14, working in restaurants in England and Scotland. In 1998, he decided that he would try one world cruise on Queen Elizabeth 2. He has been with Cunard ever since, moving up through the ranks to his present position in the main dining room of the line's flagship. "It is quite a challenging restaurant, a big restaurant. There is nothing as wide as this. On other ships even of the same size, you just don't have that feeling of space. It is a beautiful room. I feel quite privileged to work here."

### *The Britannia's place on QM2*

**A**t Cunard, things are done in the traditional way not because that is the way things have always been done but because the line defines itself by the elegance of tradition. Accordingly, dining is done in the traditional way on Queen Mary 2. "One of the pillars of our brand is the formal dining. This is what we are selling whereas the flexible dining is being sold by other brands. This is what we do on Cunard."

There are three main dining rooms on QM2 - - the Britannia Restaurant and the Princess and Queens Grills. A fourth venue, the Britannia Club, is located in the Britannia Restaurant. The two Grills are relatively small (approximately 200 seats each) in comparison to the Britannia Restaurant.

Each guest on QM2 is assigned to one of the main dining venues depending upon his or her cabin category with passengers in the most luxuri-

ous suites assigned to the Queens Grill. Oddly enough, the vast majority of passengers are assigned to the most impressive of the rooms - - the Britannia Restaurant.

"We have the same basic menu for all the dining rooms. The Britannia Club also has an additional ala carte menu. The Princess Grill and the Queens Grill have an additional appetizer and main course on their menus compared to the menu here. The Princess Grill has an alternate ala carte menu slightly more extensive than the Britannia Club. The Queens Grill is much more elaborate - - if something is onboard, you can have it."

In the Grills and the Britannia Club guests have the same table for breakfast, lunch and dinner. "You have the same waiter so you build up a very strong relationship with the waiter because you have the same one all the time."

The Britannia Restaurant is open seating for breakfast and lunch. "People can come and request whatever table size they like and as long as it is available, we will do it. It is not often that people have to wait more than five minutes for a table. We are constantly turning over the tables."

The Grills and the Britannia Club are single seating for dinner whereas the Britannia Restaurant is two seatings. While the smaller restaurants give the guests more flexibility as to when to arrive for dinner "the advantage of the Britannia Restaurant is that the dining room is full [at each of the two dinner times] and you have a natural ambiance. In the other dining rooms, guests can come between 6:30 and nine o'clock so it is always pretty quiet."

In addition to the main dining rooms, QM2 has a number of other dining venues. The Todd English Restaurant is an extra-tariff specialty restaurant featuring the recipes of the Boston celebrity chef. On most ships, the specialty restaurant is a premium dining experience over and above the main dining rooms. On QM2, however, the main dining rooms are designed to be premium experiences. Thus, different factors differentiate the Todd English from the Britannia. The specialty restaurant reflects "a particular chef whose food is more intense in flavor, richer. It is all done to his specifications. The menu is completely different. The service is more relaxed. Some guests absolutely love it because it is going to a different outlet."

The Kings Court is a buffet restaurant, which becomes an informal alternative venue for dinner. The Golden Lion Pub serves a pub lunch and the Boardwalk Café is an open air venue for



*Jamie Firth*

hamburgers and light meals. However, the most popular of the dining options is the afternoon tea in the ship's ballroom. "We have the white glove tea service. We are the busiest company for afternoon tea of all the cruise lines put together just because of the sheer numbers we go through. Like yesterday, there were 750 people taking afternoon tea in the Queens Room."

#### *Staffing the restaurant*

Operating the Britannia Restaurant takes quite a few people. There are 297 people in the Restaurant Department on Queen Mary 2. Of these, 140 work as waiters or junior waiters and 22 as wine stewards in the Britannia Restaurant. They are supervised by nine head waiters. Mr. Firth also has an assistant maitre d', who looks after the upper level of the restaurant. "All in all, quite a lot of people."

While the restaurant staff is polite and friendly, the focus is on service. "At Cunard, things are more formal, more reserved than some of the

cruise lines out there where it is all singing and dancing. [On those lines, the emphasis] may be a little more on the personality side than a focus on the dining, the service and the etiquette of that. Consequently, even waiters who come to Cunard after experience at other cruise lines receive training. "When a new crew member comes onboard, they go through this process of learning what Cunard is all about. We have the White Star Academy and anybody who comes in, regardless of experience goes through that [and learns] how we want them to serve things."

There is also ongoing training. "Every evening, we go through mini-training musters where we will pick a subject. That subject may have to do with body language. Another has to do with nationalities. We have one for [serving] German [guests], one for American, one for Japanese, Spanish, French and English [guests]. There are lots of variations with different nationalities."

"A lot of cruise ships have six months of doing the same four or five ports and are doing the same thing day after day. Here, we just came off a Norwegian cruise but not only was it a Norwegian cruise with a thousand English guests but in the middle we went to Hamburg and embarked Germans. Then after this crossing, we go to a four day American cruise and then we go into another crossing and a Mediterranean cruise. This ship is always dealing with four or five different types of voyages with different passengers and different expectations. The big thing we tell [the staff] is to make sure you are looking at the individual preferences and anticipating the guest's needs."

Waiters and other restaurant staff typically work 10 hour days, seven days a week. European waiters tend to work for six months and then have two months off. Because of the greater amount of travel to get home, Asian waiters usually work nine month contracts with two months off.

"The waiters in here have a lot of different duties. Some of them today are working breakfast, lunch and dinner. Some of them have worked room service breakfast. They will do afternoon tea, then dinner. Some have worked the Kings Court for the morning shift and then will come back on duty for dinner. Some of them are doing the Boardwalk Café today and then dinner."

On the days when the ship is in port at the end of one voyage and the beginning of another, the Britannia Restaurant waiters have other duties. Some of them will help with loading and storing the



provisions (food and other supplies) that the ship takes on for the next voyage. Others help with delivering the guests' baggage to their staterooms while still others direct the passengers to their staterooms. "We also have people working lunch in the Kings Court. So, out of 140 people, every embarkation day all but 10 people will have a duty assigned to them. They have a lot of additional duties. We go and help in every different area [of the ship]."

A number of cruise lines have done away with sommeliers in their main restaurants. Firth does not see Cunard following this trend. "With the formal dining, you need the sommeliers. We have wines that vary from \$20 up to \$2,500. If you ask a question [about the wine list], the sommelier is knowledgeable, just the same as if you ask the waiter a question about the menu, he is knowledgeable."

#### *The mechanics of the operation*

**A** guest's first contact with the Britannia Restaurant occurs before he or she steps aboard QM2. Prior to the voyage, the ship

receives an electronic document from Cunard's home office that contains such information as the guest's name, seating requested, table size requested, nationality and any special requests such as a request for a table by the window or to be seated with a certain other passenger. This document is then fed into a computer program that amongst other things shows each table and seat in the restaurant for each of the two seatings. "We seat people as close as possible to the information that we have."

In deciding who will sit where, the restaurant considers such things as requests made on prior voyages by past passengers, guests with special requirements, travel agent groups, and the nationality of the passenger. The latter consideration is important on QM2 because the ship attracts a large number of passengers from countries where English is not the primary language.

Despite the restaurant's best efforts, there will be people who will want to change their reservation once they come onboard. This can be due to an error in the information sent to the ship, a passenger deciding that they really would prefer the other seating, a desire for a different table, finding out that friends that the guest would like to dine with are onboard, wanting to be at a table served by a certain waiter etc. The restaurant tries to accommodate all such requests.

"We had about 250 people come to see us about table changes on the afternoon of embarkation day. After that, people continually come to see us. This voyage, there were 12 requests that we could not physically accommodate. We never say 'no' but we do sometimes get to the point where it physically is not possible." For example, such a situation occurs when the requests for tables for two exceed the number of tables for two.

Computers are also used in getting food on the table. "People sit down and the waiter takes the order. The junior waiter then gets a handwritten slip from the waiter and goes to pick up the starters, the salads and the soup [from the galley]. While he is doing that, the waiter is punching into a computer what main courses that table is having. In the galley, we have two 41 inch plasma screens, which show a meal count of what has been ordered. It tells the chefs how many medium, how many well done, how many fish have been ordered for the main courses so the chefs know in advance how many [of each] main course they need to cook."

Once the starters have been brought from the galley and distributed to the table, "the junior

waiter is sent to the galley straight away with a printed check [from the computer] to stand on line, pick up the main courses and bring them back to the dining room."

In the galley, there will be one line where chefs are working on the fish main course, one where they are working on the beef main course and one for each of the other main courses. If a guest decides that he does not want say the sauce that comes with the lobster, "the waiter will write on the check, 'I want three lobsters, one with no sauce. [The chefs] will do the next lobster that they are about to do with no sauce."

The desserts are handled in the same way as the earlier courses. The waiter inputs the information into the computer so that it shows in the galley how many of each dessert have been ordered. "Especially, when they are doing soufflés, they need to know how many in advance."

The computerized system helps to ensure that the food is still warm even though it has to travel a sizeable distance from the galley to the tables in the dining room. Rather than cook a massive amount of food beforehand, the chefs can gear their cooking to what and how much is being ordered. The chefs "can see that every time the screen changes, in 30 or 40 minutes, they will need to have that amount of food ready. Because they cook it fresh, that is why it is still warm."