

CONTINUING THE TRADITION

An interview with Queen Mary 2 Food and Beverage Manager Bernhard Fischer

By Richard H. Wagner

Bernhard Fischer is the Food and Beverage Manager on Cunard's flagship, the Queen Mary 2. His department has 750 staff and covers "the entire spectrum of the service in all the public areas as well as the crew" areas including the restaurants, the bars, and even room service. His responsibilities also include the provisioning of the ship, except for technical items, scheduling the staff's vacations, and hiring and training replacements to ensure the desired level of service is maintained.

The food and beverage operation on Queen Mary 2 is defined by the Cunard style. "This is a continuation of the Cunard way of doing things, the liner. It is a unique product really. It is not comparable to a cruise ship anywhere. This was built on history and tradition. This is our product. Every time someone comes from [another line] and says do things like this, we say well, we don't because we are not just another ship. This is who we are, this is our product. It is like the Claridges Hotel is the Claridges Hotel. It is what it is. We have high tea and we do all these things."

"Here, we are not selling you a cheap ticket and expensive drinks. If somebody asked me how could we increase the volume by 25 percent, I'd say it would be the easiest thing in the world - - I would have the [staff] pitching every five minutes something else. That is what I have seen on other ships. But then, I would be destroying what Cunard is all about. That is not what we do. We are order takers, we are not sales people. There is a very big difference. Still, this is one of the highest earning ships in the entire Carnival fleet without the nonsense."

"It comes down to a certain level of guest that you attract. It will be even more so when the QE2 goes because people want to continue what they are doing with the QE2. There is a certain type of clientele. Not so many first timers, a lot of repeaters and they are looking for that the familiarity of it. It continues the tradition."

While Queen Mary 2 carries on in the footsteps of QE2, she stands on her own. "They did not try to copy anything. It is uniquely itself. I watched it for two years from the time it was built to when I actually joined this ship. You heard all the comments: This is going to be the biggest flop ever. Has Micky Arison [Chairman of Carnival Corporation] lost his marbles? It has been successful despite all of what they said because there is obviously a market for this. But this by itself is an institution by itself. It is like the Mount Nelson Hotel in Capetown or Claridges or whatever. It is what it is. The Waldorf Astoria is the Waldorf Astoria. The Mandarin and so on. You don't change it. When you go there, you expect to see certain things. That is the way it is."

In order to maintain the Cunard atmosphere, "we channel [new] employees through the White Star Academy. It is a two week course that we conduct on board. It familiarizes them with life on board - - what Cunard is all about, what the history is, the way one conducts himself in public spaces and so forth. So, when they do get into their place of work, they will know the way they are supposed to behave and what it

is all about. It is even for chefs, it is not just for public rooms service staff."

"To most people when they first come aboard it is a shock the way it works. First of all, it moves. Second, it is very condensed. It is restricted depending upon what job you do. You do not have the freedom of movement that you have shoreside. You have to get used to sharing a fairly small cabin with somebody you just met. It takes time to adjust and the two weeks are there to bridge that a little bit so they are not dealing with the pressure of getting into work as well as the environment. Other cruise lines don't do that. You get off the aircraft, onto the ship and into the uniform, within an hour and you are working. I have been there. It is a lot harder than here. This is rather civilized. It works for us, the end product is rather better."

Indoctrination into the Cunard style does not end when an employee graduates from the White Star Academy. "We have this strict policy of speaking English only, even in the crew areas. It is a constant reiteration of what we are all about. That is how you maintain it. It is a very formal approach to service."

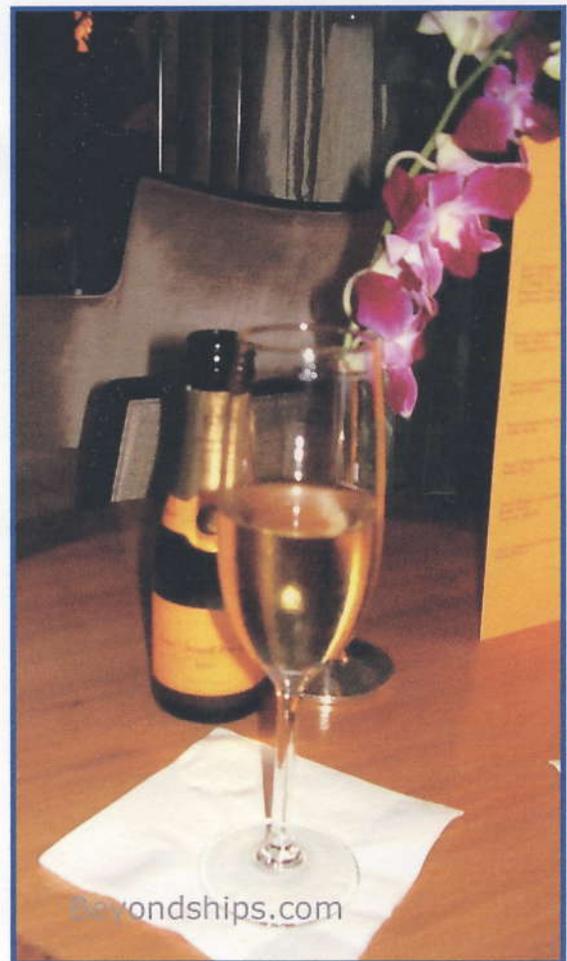
At the same time, Cunard recognizes that it must motivate the employees and maintain morale. "It is difficult to employ highly qualified people in this particular industry from the outside. There is a huge competition going on now with everybody building ships. Everybody is looking for the same thing. So, the biggest issue is to hold onto your staff."

To this end, "we need to create opportunities for people. We have an unwritten policy that we recruit from the bottom levels most of the time so that our people can progress through the different ranks. It is a bottom-in filling it up to the top type of system that works very well. It is not always possible but a lot of opportunities are being created by Queen Victoria, which has taken staff out of here. There has been a huge amount of movement. For a long time the company was static with very little movement between here and the QE2. It was not uncommon for people to be in the same position for years. With the QE2 going and Queen Elizabeth being built, there will be massive movement again. Right now, we see a lot of advancement and movement."

"The company does a lot for the crew. We have crew events on board, all kinds of natures, shapes and sizes you can imagine. There is something every night. There were six parties last night. They partici-



*Above: Food and Beverage Manager Bernhard Fischer.
Below: Champagne and a Cunard voyage.*





Above: A wine tasting for repeat passengers.
 Below: The Golden Lion Pub.



pate in everything. They have spa night for the crew. There is something going on all the time, you are not going to get bored here. The feeling is that we are all in the same boat and we prop each other up."

In general, two employees share a cabin, whereas it was six to a cabin on QE2 and in "the old days on the SS Norway we had ten to a cabin. You had hot bunking as well, early shift, late shift, but this was 25 years ago. Conditions have certainly improved."

"There is a nice mix of male and female that helps on the ship." Indeed, "another unique thing about this ship is that we have a lot of couples on board, married and otherwise. It was not common in other ships I've worked on. There, they discouraged it. Here, they encourage it."

Crew members get to go ashore based upon a rotation system. However, when the ship is doing back-to-back transatlantic crossings, which it does throughout the summer months, there is little opportunity to ashore. "New York is a turn around day, so is Southampton and there are only six days of water in between. There are no other stops." In sharp contrast, when the ship is doing a Caribbean or other cruise, there are port days and "there is time off for everybody - - a couple of hours or half a day. The shop people, the casino people, the bars - - only half of them are open during the day because of licensing issues - - they have a good life; they basically work in the evenings."

There are 19 bars on Queen Mary 2. Most of these are based on their own concept. "We want people to go there for different reasons. Obviously, the champagne bar is self-explanatory what that is all about. It is mostly a pre-dinner set-up. The Commodore Club is essentially a martini bar. That was what it was set up to be. But, anything else is served as well. Then, you

can have a drink with a smoke in the cigar bar, obviously it offers all the brandies, the cognacs and so forth. It is an after dinner venue more than anything else. The pub is a pub is a pub. You don't want to make a sports bar out of it or anything. Sir Samuel's is a kind of a coffee shop that doubles up as a wine bar in the evening. The Chart Room is basically a type of a lounge. It is quiet, you'll see that the music is very tuned down there. Those were the initial concepts. It does go into gray areas because everything is available everywhere."

"The other ones are deck bars. They are there but it is not what you would find on a cruise ship where you have a lot of action at the bars [on the open decks]." QM2 has an international following and the mix of nationalities changes from voyage to voyage. These demographic shifts affect which venues will be patronized. When there is a "large amount of British guests on board, you have higher sales in the bars than in the dining room. Next voyage, it will be exactly the other way around. We have a large contingent of Western Europeans, Swiss, Germans and French, there is about 400, there are quite a few French Canadians, 600 British and about 800 Americans. You will see it shifting. Your wine consumption will be a lot higher, your beer consumption will be a lot lower, that is just the way it is."

This in turn affects the mix of provisions the ship takes on. "We adjust for that. We have the projection of the nationality mix and we buy accordingly six weeks in advance."

Since QM2's schedule is dominated by six day transatlantic crossings, provisioning is done primarily in New York and Southampton. "Most of our provisioning is done in the States, it is half the cost of England. England is expensive as far as food is concerned. We do a 14 day load [in New York] and we do a top off in England. What we do is a 12 plus two -- two day standby, which we are required to do by maritime law in case anything happens to the ship"

European products, such as European wines, are also loaded in Southampton during the transatlantic season. "They are shipped over from Amsterdam by truck. They leave in the morning and meet us that afternoon. It has become quick. Europe has become a very small place, the world has become a very small place." However, when the ship is deployed elsewhere in the world, other re-supply points are established. For example, in the winter of 2008, QM2 was doing Caribbean cruises out of New York. "All our China, our cutlery, our glassware, the British beer, and the things that we normally receive from Europe -- certain liquors, the European wines, they [were] all shipped to Barbados."

To be consistent with Cunard's image, freshness must be maintained. "Temperature control, really that is all it is. We [ensure] the products are controlled in the ideal temperature from the manufacturer until we get it on board and we maintain that whole chain. When we get to New York, we get fresh fish on board. For the

first two days, it is fresh fish and then it is fresh chilled fish."

"I was speaking to a lady last night who asked: 'How do you make sure your bananas don't all become ripe at the same time?' I said: 'You buy them accordingly.' It is gauged by the days that you want to consume it. You buy a certain amount of the 500 bananas that you use on a [ten-day] voyage for the first three days ready to serve, the next few days will have a few days to ripen by the time on board, the rest are basically green and will ripen during the last six days of the voyage. The same with avocados and any other sensitive item like that. They come in different stages of ripeness. It is the same with the melons and all the other fruit. That is how we buy them. We have special cabinets where we ripen them. It goes from one temperature set to another temperature set. We do that in the provision area."

There are 11 restaurants on Queen Mary 2. However, each passenger is assigned a place for dinner in either the main dining room, the Britannia Restaurant, or one of the two small Grill restaurants, depending upon his or her cabin category. "Essentially, there are two big differences. One is that [the Grills are] not restricted to a certain seating time, we don't have an early and a late seating. So, whenever you feel like having breakfast, lunch or supper is when you arrive. Secondly, basically, it is the Britannia menu but in addition to that it has a Grill menu, and in addition to that it has an ala carte menu. The Princess Grill has a slightly more limited choice [in comparison] to what the Queens Grill has."

"In addition to that, you can ask for whatever you want and they will cook it for you. If you feel like a lobster thermador tonight, we will make it for you. You want to have a party in your suite or whatever, we will make it for you and serve it to you. There is no limit on anything in the Grills in either one of them. You want to eat lobster every night, eat lobster every night. You want steak, have steak. They won't question that. You want us to cook some funny bread, we will do that too. You get some really strange requests and as far as humanly and skill-wise possible, we will do it. Some people come with their own recipes and their own ideas and some people come to test us and see what can be done. Chocolate soufflés the size of buckets, if that is what they want. Some guys eat snails every night, I don't know why."