

RESTAURANT GUIDE:

DINING ON ISLAND PRINCESS

With commenatry by Maitre d'Hotel Ignazio D'Agostino

by

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Island Princess has a variety of different dining venues. Each offers a unique dining experience. To help guide us through these venues, I asked Ignazio D'Agostino, Island's Maitre d'Hotel to give us some insights about dining on Island Princess.

Mr. D'Agostino has been with Princess since 1984 and is responsible for Island's main dining rooms and specialty restaurants. Princess refers to itself as "the consummate host and Mr. D'Agostino is passionate about this role. "This job you can't do it just because you have to do it, you have to love it. You have to love it in the sense to be accommodating, be smiling, be friendly to the customer. I believe that if a passenger is happy in the dining room, 99 percent [of the time he or she is] happy about everything."

The Main Dining Rooms

Island Princess has two main dining rooms, The

Provence and the Bordeaux. One is located on Deck 5 and the other on Deck 6 directly on top of each other. The layout of both rooms is essentially the same, as is the décor, the service and the menus.

While the Bordeaux serves breakfast, lunch (sea days only), afternoon tea and dinner, the Provence is only open for dinner. Breakfast, lunch and tea are done on an open seating basis and are open to all guests.

For dinner, guests must select either the Provence or the Bordeaux. The Provence features the traditional cruise ship dining system in which guests are assigned to a specific table at either the early seating or the late seating. It appeals to "people who like to dine everyday at the same table, be served by the same waiter every single night and seated with the same people."

The Bordeaux features Princess' flexible dining program Anytime Dining. Guests may come to the restaurant any time that the restaurant is open. "From my point of view, the idea of the Anytime is great. The

guests can call to make reservations or they can just show up at the door. If they want to dine by themselves, fine, if they want to enjoy other people, fine as well. It is more flexibility over all. It is a little more work for us but I believe on vacation you should not have to be thinking 'I have to go [to dinner] at this time.' The idea is to escape completely and just show up whenever you feel. Lately, it has become very, very popular; let's say 60 to 65 percent choose Anytime."

D'Agostino points out that Anytime Dining is particularly valuable when the ship has been in port for the day. "I have worked almost 27 years for [Princess] and I remember that people were missing the first seating and the only option for them was to go to the Horizon [the buffet restaurant]. Now, when we are in port, people do not have to rush to come to dinner."

In theory, a drawback to flexible dining programs is that you are not guaranteed to have a table at any particular time so the restaurant may not have a table for you if you arrive at a popular time. However, D'Agostino, explains that this is not a significant problem in practice. "The first few days, people tend to come early. After two or three days the flow of passengers changes. They start to come, not everybody as soon as we open, but at 5:30, six o'clock, 6:30, 7:00. Sometimes there is a wait. We give them a pager if the dining room is full and we call them as soon as a table is available. The maximum waiting time is 20 minutes."

Along the same lines, one of the advantage that the traditional system has had over flexible dining, is that over the course of the voyage, you come to know your server and he or she comes to know your likes and dislikes. Princess, however, has evolved its flexible dining program so that guests choosing Anytime Dining can also have this benefit.

"I have customers, who love to be served by a specific waiter so they ask me to be seated at [his] table I will do a standing reservation for them. They ask me, for instance, I want to sit with Alfredo at six o'clock every night. We will do it. No problem at all."

As noted earlier, the two main dining rooms use the same menus. However, "every night is a different menu."

The menus are geared to different themes. "We have on different nights: Chef's Dinner, Italian Dinner, the Welcome and the Captain's Gala Dinner and according to the place [where the ship is sailing], Caribbean night. Every night we have a different one."

While the right hand side of the menu changes each night, the left hand side presents a roster of items



Maitre d'Hotel Ignazio D'Agostino

that are "Always Available." "We know that people enjoy the filet mignon, people enjoy the shrimp cocktail, the chicken breast, the salmon, the fettuccini Alfredo so we always have [them on] one side [of the menu]. For instance, if there is a Caribbean theme and they are not into the Caribbean food, they may choose from the Always Available side."

Operationally, the two restaurants are organized in the same way. "In each dining room I have 30 [waiter] stations. Each waiter, supported by a junior waiter, has three tables - - one table of eight, one table of six and one table of four. Thus, for 18 to 20 passengers, we have two persons to take care of them. If you go to a restaurant ashore, you will see that the waiters have seven, eight, nine tables and they are by themselves. Here, they just have to focus on those three tables and provide the personal service to our customers."

In addition, "we have three [head waiter] sections in the Provence, and three sections in the Bordeaux. You will see the head waiter in charge of a section going around to track passenger satisfaction

and to ensure that the food and beverage service complies with what is required by Princess Cruises."

"It is very important for us for our crew to be smiling, to be accommodating, to place any passenger request - - that is the key of our business." To achieve this, "training is ongoing on every cruise, and we focus a lot on how to be the consummate host." Furthermore, "the happiness of the crew reflects in the service provided to our customers." Therefore, Princess also focuses on the quality of life for the crew. For example, in the crew dining areas, which Mr. D'Agostino also oversees, "Our priority is also to give great service to our crew, the officers and the petty officers."

Specialty Restaurants

Island Princess has two specialty restaurants - - Sabatini's and the Bayou Café.

Sabatini's is a Princess tradition that is throughout the Princess fleet. "Sabatini's features Italian cuisine. In Italy, we have a different way of cooking in each region. From one region to the other, we use different spices. North, we use more butter, south, we use more garlic and tomato. And each region has its own pasta shape. [Sabatini's] covers most of the regional cuisines."

Decorated like an Italian villa, Sabatini's is an elegant dining experience. "It is very quiet, very nice ambiance, nice music and a great menu, of course."

Although Sabatini's is a tradition, the concept has changed recently. "Before it was trattoria style. People did not have to order everything, only the main course. We used to [automatically] pass around all the appetizers, salad and pasta. [Only] the main course was ordered by the customer. We had feedback from the passengers that this was too much food. So, now it is by order. Whatever you feel like having, you order. So the concept has changed a little bit."

There is a \$20 per person cover charge for dinner at Sabatini's. In addition to being a dinner venue, Sabatini's offers a complimentary breakfast to guests staying in Island's suites.

The Bayou Café is a venue that can only be found on Island Princess and her sister ship Coral Princess. "They play jazz music there at the bar and it has an ambiance like New Orleans."

This venue is divided into two areas - - a restaurant area and a bar area, which has tables and a dance floor. "People can go into the restaurant for a dinner or people can have a beverage outside next to the dance floor. For people who enjoy jazz, if they want to dine inside the venue they are welcome or they [can] sit at the bar and just to listen to some great jazz music."

The menu carries forward the New Orleans

theme featuring Cagun/Creole cuisine. In addition, it has several steakhouse offerings. "The quality of the cuts is the same as in the Sterling Steakhouses [on other Princess ships], which is a premium cut meat." There is a \$20 cover charge for dinner in the Bayou Café.

An English-style pub lunch is also offered in the Bayou Café on certain sea days. It is open to all and the food is complimentary.

Another specialty dining event is the Chef's Table. It is a combination of: a lavish meal; a behind-the-scenes tour; and an opportunity to interact with the ship's executive chef and maitre d' hotel. The overall experience is more than a sum of its component parts, however. It is usually only held once or twice during a cruise and participation is limited to a handful of guests. Thus, it is advisable to sign up for this event as soon as possible.

The evening begins with the maitre d' welcoming the participants and explaining the issues presented by having guests visit the ship's main galley while dinner is being prepared and served. "He goes over all the public health points before he takes them to the galley and lets all the customers wash their hands." The guests then don white laboratory coats, which they will wear throughout their time in the galley.

Next, the maitre d' introduces the ship's executive chef and together they give the guests a brief tour of the galley and explain its operation. Stopping at an unused preparation area, the guests are given glasses of champagne and a stream of specially-prepared appetizers is brought to them. During this time, they can chat with the executive chef and maitre d' and ask questions about how the ship's culinary operation works or about cooking in general.

The guests then adjourn to a large table in one of the main dining rooms for a multi-course dinner. This is a feast that would have pleased even Henry VIII. Not only is there quantity but the quality of the dishes prepared just for the Chef's Table is beyond all reasonable expectations.

"For the Chef's Table, we have several menus. The chef will choose according to his professional taste. He has a free hand in that. Of course, the chef puts in his inventive insights for a very personalized dinner."

As each dish is presented, the chef and/or the maitre d' explain what it is and how it was prepared. In addition, there are wine pairings throughout the meal with a sommelier discussing each wine.

At the end of the meal, each guest receives a copy of Princess' hardcover cookbook "Courses" autographed by the chef and maitre d' plus a group photo-

graph taken by one of the ship's photographers.

The cost is a \$95 per person.

Informal Dining

Island Princess' buffet restaurant is the Horizon Court. It is open for breakfast, lunch, afternoon light snacks and dinner.

The Horizon Court is located near the op of the ship in the forward part of the superstructure. The seating area offers views forward as well as to port and starboard. It does not look like a cafeteria but rather like a restaurant/observation lounge.

"We have introduced personal service up there. We try to give as much service as possible to our customers regardless of if they come to the dining room or the Horizon. We call it personalized service to the customer."

While passengers select their food from the buffet lines, there are waiters to assist them once the passengers sit down. "There are three guys in charge of each section. One cleans the table; one serves and one does beverage service. We set up the tables. All three of them do public relations, asking 'how was it' and getting as much feedback as we can as to customer satisfaction."

In addition to Horizon Court, Island Princess has several smaller informal dining places. On Deck 15, the Grill offers hamburgers and light fare. One deck below, there is the Pizzeria and the Ice Cream Bar. Also, during the day, there is a cart in the main lobby's La Patisserie that has a selection of pastries and sandwiches which changes during the course of the day.