

RESTAURANT GUIDE:

DINING ON NORWEGIAN GEM

An inside guide with
Food and Beverage Director Ivo Belev.

by

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Ivo Belev is the Food and Beverage Director on Norwegian Gem. He has been with Norwegian Cruise Line for five years and has served on six NCL ships. Before coming to NCL, he worked for cruise lines in the United States and in Europe. In his present position, he has responsibility for all of the dining venues on the ship. Accordingly, I asked him to comment on the dining options on the Gem.

To understand dining on Norwegian Gem, one has to begin with Norwegian Cruise Line's signature concept called "Freestyle Cruising." Under the traditional passenger ship dining system, each passenger was assigned a specific time and a specific table in the ship's dining room for dinner. Under the Freestyle concept, a guest can dine at any time in any of the ship's restaurants, provided, of course, that it is open. In other

words, on an NCL ship, there are no assigned seatings and no assigned tables. When, where and with who to eat is up to the guest.

The Freestyle concept has won many fans because it gives the guests more flexibility to plan how their cruise will unfold. However, as Mr. Belev pointed out, it also improves the quality of the dining experience. Under the traditional system, "most of the menu items are pre-cooked and are just waiting to be served. There is no way around it. You cannot [cook for] 2,000 people at the same time. What we try to achieve with the Freestyle cruising is to do more ala minute cooking. We cook maybe 20 steaks, slightly precooked. Then once the doors open we start cooking based upon what has been ordered by the guests. The quality of the product is better than if it had been sitting in a warmer for

one or two hours. It is a different level of quality."

Seeing NCL's success with the Freestyle concept, most of the other major cruise lines have set aside portions of their main dining rooms for flexible dining systems in which the guest can come for dinner essentially on an open seating basis. Alternatively, guests can dine in the ship's buffet restaurant or in the one or two extra-tariff specialty restaurants on the ship. However, according to Mr. Belev, these systems are not the same as Freestyle cruising.

"To fully participate in Freestyle dining, you have to build the ship for Freestyle dining. You can't just convert from regular dining to Freestyle dining. For Freestyle dining to work, you need to have Freestyle set-up - - you have to have all of these different restaurants to give [the guests] a variety of choice. We have 12 restaurants. That is how we make the Freestyle concept work. You make the restaurants smaller but with a variety of choices. "

Having a variety of restaurants is attractive because it gives the guest more options. It also helps to ensure that none of the dining venues is overwhelmed by everyone arriving for dinner at the same time. To this end, outside of each restaurant and at various locations around the ship, Gem has video screens showing how busy each of the dining venues is and how much waiting time, if any, there will be for a table. A guest can decide to go to one of the venues where he or she can be seated immediately or to wait for a table at one of the other venues.

If the guest decides to go to one of the restaurants where there will be a wait, he or she does not have to stand on line while waiting. "We have a pager system. You get a pager and go and sit down and listen to the music or sit down in one of the bars and have a cocktail. You get a 20 percent discount on everything you buy. You don't need to wait on line. The pager goes off; you come back to the restaurant. The waiting time has never been more than 30 minutes."

"The prime time for all the restaurants is between 6:30 and 8:00 o'clock. This is the time when we make sure we do the fast turnaround and the tables get done faster." The peak hours do vary, however, depending upon where the ship is cruising. For instance, when Gem was sailing in Europe, it had "more Europeans, more Spanish and more Italians. They prefer to dine late and will never come at 6:30 for dinner. Their preference is after 9:30. It depends where the ship



Ivo Belev

is positioned."

Before looking at each of the dining venues, it should be noted that the various restaurants on the Gem are not merely differently decorated dining rooms with all the food coming from a common kitchen. "We have one production area and bakery supplying all the restaurants with fresh pastries. But every specialty restaurant has its own galley and its own kitchen staff as well as serving staff. It takes time to train the people to know the menu, to taste the menu, all the way to cooking. For example, with Cagney's Steakhouse, you need to be a really good grill cook to cook the steak to perfection. If the guest asks for medium rare and it comes well-done, the guest is not going to be happy. What we do is we will train the staff and the [restaurant] will keep them there."

The Main Dining Rooms

Norwegian Gem has two main dining rooms - - the **Grand Pacific Main Dining Room** and the **Magenta Main Dining Room**. "We have a seating capacity of close to 800 guests at a time. Breakfast and lunch, only the Grand Pacific is open. They are both open for dinner."

"The Grand Pacific, even though serving the same menu as Magenta, is more upscale - - the look, the ambiance as well. It is more formal. To keep the concept, we have a dress code. It should be a collared shirt;

it should be pants - - no shorts and, of course, no flip flops. If you don't feel like going to get dressed, then you can go with the shorts to the Magenta. It's a different venue and different ambiance. The service, the quality of food is the same."

Casual Venues

The **Blue Lagoon** "is a 24/7 restaurant. It is located on Deck 8 just over reception. Blue Lagoon is comfort food - - hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, a small variety of soups and salads. It is like an American-type of fast food venue where the people just pass by, get a chicken wings or have a hamburger - - something that is not really time consuming. It is for when you do not feel like sitting down and having a full meal. It is grab and go."

The **Garden Café** is Norwegian Gem's main buffet restaurant, located on Deck 12. "In the Garden Café, as well as in the main dining rooms, we maintain the menu cycle. We do not repeat the same menu apart from the hamburger station and the salad bar, which remain the same every day."

"We also serve pizza in the Garden Café. - - lunch and dinner. It is fresh made. We have at least four different pizzas. We start from the basic tomato and cheese pizza than we have pepperoni and one vegetarian choice each day and one calzone (a closed pizza)."

Just aft of the Garden Café is another buffet. "The **Great Outdoors** serves the same menu. Because of the size, we don't have the same variety." As the name indicates, this venue is outside protected by an awning. "It provides you with sort of al fresco dining experience. So if you don't feel like sitting in the Garden Café, you go to the Great Outdoors, grab a snack, a piece of chicken, read your book or get a beer or glass of wine. You sit down, have a glass of wine and watch the sun set."

Also outside is the **Bali Hai Bar & Grill**, which is forward on Deck 13. "The Bali Hai is a beach bar where you can sit down, have a beer and they will make a fresh hamburger for you. It is for the convenience for the guests. If I feel like having a beer and hamburger, I don't have to walk all the way from Bali Hai to the Garden Café to get my fresh cooked hamburger. I'll get it there right away."

In fact, there are several places where one can get a fresh cooked hamburger. In addition to the Bali Hai, one can get a hamburger at the Great Outdoors, the Garden Café, the Blue Lagoon and by the pool at **Topsiders Bar and Grill**.

"We cook fresh burgers ala minute. Maybe, it will take a minute or two but you are getting a fresh burger. It is not something that has been sitting on a

counter for fifteen minutes, that is dry and ice cold. You get something from the grill straight to your bun."

The Specialty Restaurants

Norwegian Gem also has several dining venues that focus on specific cuisines or styles of cooking. "There are a lot of specialty restaurants. The guests have a variety to choose from." A cover charge applies at each of these venues.

When NCL introduced Freestyle Cruising, **Le Bistro** was the first specialty restaurant it introduced. "Le Bistro is a typical French restaurant. It offers a small selection that pretty much combines the best from French cuisine."

"The French cooking is a special cooking. There is no other cuisine in the world that comes close to the French cooking. French cooking is nothing but good flavor - cream, a lot of sauces, full cream cheeses, butter. You can't cook any French dish without butter. To get the flavor and to get the taste to come to the original, obviously, you need to use the proper ingredients."

"Le Bistro is more formal. It is more of a place to go on special occasions, to take someone to dinner, to dress up nice. The service in the Bistro is more formal. You sit down, you have nice small portions. Your expectation is to have a few courses. You can have five, up to six courses with the petit fours and coffee. It is fine dining."

"The steakhouse, **Cagney's** is like the typical 60s/70s New York type of steakhouse. It is more like American dining. People go there, they expect to have a nice steak, a nice potato or some side dish, have a salad, have a great meal, a nice conversation, and go."

The **Orchid Garden** on Deck 7 houses three Asian-inspired restaurants. "By far the Asian cuisine is the fastest growing in the industry. Nowadays, when it comes to food people are more open-minded. We all have different eating habits and tastes but we need to go and try different things and have different experiences."

The first of Gem's Asian restaurants is the **Sushi Bar**. A sushi chef prepares sushi and sashimi, as well as different varieties of rolls.

The second restaurant is **Asian Fusion**. "People say sometimes it is a Chinese restaurant but it is not exactly Chinese. The menu is mixed. You have a few Chinese dishes but it has Korean and Japanese and that is why you call it 'Asian Fusion.'"

Third, "we have a nice **teppanyaki**. 35 or 36 people can sit there at the same time. This is one of the most popular restaurants. Most of the time, it is completely booked.

"It is a different style of cooking. Obviously, it

takes skill. We can't just get any chef to work on the tepanyaki table. It is a show as well as cooking. All the flare is part of the cooking. It is quite impressive and everybody likes it."

Returning to the Western Hemisphere, Gem has the **Tequila Latin/Tapas Restaurant**. "It is a Tex/Mex [restaurant] and tapas bar. It has quite few dishes from Latin America and Spain. The tapas bar the concept was if you do not feel like having a full meal where you come in and are served for one and a half hours, you come in to the tapas bar and get small stuff - - sausages and antipasto with tomatoes."

La Cucina "is the latest dining concept implemented in Freestyle cruising. It is more about the family-style eating. When you go inside this venue, it says from the design, the layout, the way the table seating has been done -- they have these large tables that can sit 10 or 12 people, benches - - family-style/trattoria. We serve family-style. The pizza is right in the middle of the table so everybody gets a slice."

"The menu fulfills the concept. As soon as you sit down you get a large plate of antipasto, a nice bread selection with a variety of Italian bread. Everyone can have a bite until they make up their minds what to order. You have probably the best five Italian dishes as a main course choice. You have Ossobuco, which is typically Italian, then you have Saltimbocca - - a good Italian variety."

"It is combined Italian menu items. It does not really go to one specific part of Italy. It is a mix. The idea is to [have] the menu to represent the most popular dishes in this country. You sit down, you have a nice bowl of spaghetti with meatballs or Bolognese, the pizza is there, you have a nice selection of antipasto, you have a nice slice of prosciutto, a glass of wine."

"Freestyle gives you the flexibility to change your dining options - - to go from one menu and concept to another." Accordingly, NCL adds or changes dining options from time-to-time to meet the changing tastes of its guests. A concept that has already been implemented on Norwegian Epic and Norwegian Sun and which will eventually be extended to all of the NCL ships is the churrascaria. This is "a Brazilian grill with a nice salad bar/appetizer bar. You sit down, you've got your dining ticket, you flip it to 'grill' and the server keeps coming and slicing all these meats in front of you - - you have lamb, beef, sausages. It is a nice concept." When it is implemented on the Gem, this venue will probably occupy the area where the Tequila restaurant is now.

Special Events

In addition to the various dining options that are available throughout the cruise, Gem has special dining events that do not take place every day.

"We do a couple of barbecues during the cruise just to do something different." These include such things as "chile con carne, cooked ala minute and some fresh corn tortillas, soft and hard shell." They take place around the swimming pools on sea days when it is not too windy.

A more formal event is the "Taste of India" brunch. "There was high interest [amongst the guests] in Indian, spicy food [so we tried it] and it works well. On sea days, we give more variety to the guests beyond the Garden Café and the main dining room."

"We have another event, which we call 'Best of All.' On the last day of the cruise, we give you a venue and a menu where you can try the best signature dishes from every specialty restaurant. So for appetizers, you can try the best from Le Bistro, which is escargot, from Tex/Mex, it is spicy tuna, and the best from Cagney's, it is the cold colossal shrimp. It is the same for the main courses. We have the cote de boeuf [from Le Bistro]; we have the porterhouse steak [from Cagney's]. It just gives you a little touch and feel from every restaurant. We have a wide variety of restaurants. Sometimes the people do not have the time to visit them all. So that is why we came up with this concept".