

# Dining with Dietary Restrictions: The Disney Cruise Line

by Julie Mikesell, PassPorter Guest Contributor

My parents and I sailed on the Disney Magic's 7-day Eastern Caribbean Cruise the first week of September, 2006. When we made our reservations back in January, I had conveyed to our travel agent that my parents needed gluten-free meals, and I needed something with low sugar due to my diabetes. For those travelers with special dietary restrictions/requirements, it is often hard to travel and find those needs met. Yet, I was pleasantly surprised to find how accommodating the Disney Cruise Line was. In reading the frequently asked questions on the Disney Cruise website, it mentions any special diet-restricted needs need to be requested at the time of booking, to ensure that those needs can be met. The travel agent relayed that information on to Disney when she made our reservation. I was also quite surprised when Disney responded back to inquire if our room required a sharps container (a heavy-duty plastic container for my diabetic needles) -- I have traveled quite a bit, and have never been asked if I needed a container before.

After boarding the ship, we proceeded to Rockin' Bar D, in order to check that all the appropriate arrangements regarding our special diets had been made. The crew member replied that when we arrived at dinner that night to inform our servers, and they would take care of us from that moment on. And take care of us they did!

Our waiter, Sonny, explained that our meal that night would be served from the menu, but that he would provide us with the following night's menu as dinner ended and we could pre-order our meals. Sure enough, just after dessert, he came to us with the following night's menu, and wrote down our selections. The hardest part of this was deciding what you want to eat while still feeling so full from the meal you just ate!

Our head waiter, John, was also a valuable asset. He stopped by to make sure that we had received the menus for the following night and he arranged for a standing order of gluten-free pancakes at Lumiere's. He explained that we did not need to eat breakfast at Lumiere's every morning, but if my parents felt like having pancakes on any particular day, we could show up at Lumiere's and they would have the pancake batter available. He also made sure that my parents had gluten-free pancakes the morning of our character breakfast. Our final breakfast before our disembarkation was at Lumiere's. My parents ordered an express breakfast -- eggs, choice of meat, hash browns. They were

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pleasantly surprised when the waiter brought out the gluten-free pancakes. It appears that when our head waiter saw us arrive at the restaurant, he placed the order for them. Such service!

Many times, you would not have known my parents' food was gluten-free when comparing the dishes to the "regular" entrees ordered by our table mates. If the dish was a pasta dish, the chef used rice pasta instead of wheat. Potatoes or white rice were also readily available at every meal. Only the bread looked different. Every night, the waiter would bring out a basket of gluten-free rolls, which usually didn't match the featured bread of the evening. But had you not known they were gluten-free, you would have never known just from looking at it. Another special touch: unknown to my parents, the waiter also ordered a gluten-free dessert for them each night when he placed their meal order.

For my "lower sugar" diet, every night there were at least two no-sugar-added/sugar-free desserts. Also, I was able to preorder some of my meal -- requesting syrupy sauces removed or served on the side. If I waited until dinnertime to place my order, I was often out of luck because most of the items were prepared ahead of time.

While breakfast and lunch were less structured than dinner (no preordering required or accepted), it was still easy to find solutions to our dietary needs: Breakfast always had egg, meat, and potato options for my parents and sugar-free syrup and jams for me. We were able to find many lunch options that also met our needs -- the buffets carried fruit, salad, vegetables, hand carved meats, and seafood. For dessert, there always seemed to be at least one option for me, and many times there would be some form of Jell-O, pudding, or mousse for my parents. We never went hungry.

While our diets did not focus on vegetarian needs, Disney had that covered as well. There were always at least two vegetarian options at dinner every night. With breakfast and lunch having buffet options, a vegetarian would have no problem finding the right combination of items to satisfy his/her appetite.

You may ask, "Ok, so your diets were accommodated, but how did the food taste?" My mom commented that all the gluten-free food, from the bread to the pasta, was wonderful. She could barely tell (if at all) that she was eating gluten-free, even though she felt confident that she was. As to the no-sugar-added/sugar-free food, I was pleasantly surprised. I, too, could not tell a difference. There were no funny aftertaste or texture issues that can come with sugar-free foods.

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We felt so well looked after; it was hard to leave at the end of our trip. I would highly recommend the Disney Cruise Line to anyone, and especially to someone who has a special dietary need. When our family sailed on another cruise line last December, my parents had requested a gluten-free menu. For the most part, they were given gluten-free cornbread, but they had to enquire about the menu every night as to what they could or could not have. Very little attempt was made to anticipate or accommodate our needs. With Disney, there was no need to worry about what we could and couldn't eat. Disney took care of all of our worries so that we were truly able to enjoy our cruise.

Below are some tips to ensure that your special diet-restricted needs are met:

- \* Make sure you express your needs at time of booking, as outlined by Disney. This gives them plenty of time to make sure your needs are met.

- \* When you arrive on board, make sure your waiter (and even your head waiter) knows of your needs.

- \* When in doubt, ask. I did not realize that no-sugar-added desserts were available at the buffets, as no items had been specifically identified as such. I was told that the no-sugar-added items were not laid out on the buffet, but they were always available.

*About The Author: Julie Mikesell is a true Disney-fanatic. She has been to Disneyland numerous times, Walt Disney World five times (including this October for her first Halloween experience), Tokyo Disneyland, Disneyland Paris (when it was still named EuroDisney), and took her first Disney cruise this past September.*

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