

Disney Dining Plan: (or) Davey (and Jennifer, Alex, Allie, and Melanie) Does Dining!

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebook Co-Author

'Twas a time, not many years ago, when we considered Disney's vacation packages and their add-on options with skepticism. Buy a dining package? Ridiculous! You had to overeat at only the most expensive restaurants to get your money's worth. But Disney changed all that in 2005, with the introduction of the Disney Dining Plan package add-on for Magic Your Way vacation packages. The dining package has proven so popular that we just had to experience it for ourselves. So, for our 10-day research trip at Walt Disney World we bought adult-priced dining packages for the two adults and two teens on our team - \$37.99 each, per day, for our trip in 2007 (basic dining plan price in 2010 is \$41.99/adult and \$11.99/child in the regular season). You can study and theorize all you wish, but there's no replacement for actually experiencing things first-hand.

The Disney Dining Plan puts guests on a two-meal-and-a-snack per day diet for each night of their stay. There's great flexibility. Unlike older plans that supplied earmarked coupons for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the current plans provide "credits" encoded onto a Key to the World card. One card per guest room holds all the credits for that room. For our ten-night stay we had 40 table service credits, 40 counter service credits, and 40 snack credits that we could use any way we saw fit during our stay. The big challenge is to actually use them all wisely, since unused credits expire without refund at the end of your check-out day (11:59pm), and some meals are just not quite as good a value as others. Certain Table Service meals "cost" two credits, rather than one. Generally, these reduce the value you receive under the dining plan, sometimes substantially.

We've often said that two full meals per day at Walt Disney World are plenty of food, and this meal plan was proof-positive. How'd it work for us? Too well (looking at my poor waistline). Each Table Service credit buys appetizer, entree, dessert, soft drink, tax and gratuity, and each Counter Service credit buys entree, dessert, soft drink and tax. This is more than we normally eat -- we generally split or skip appetizers and desserts at table service restaurants, and don't bother with dessert at all at counter service. It takes a bit of will-power to say no to that extra, "free" food. After a big dinner, we sometimes didn't have an appetite for the next day's breakfast.

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Your dining receipts will list the number of dining credits you have remaining. We found that these numbers were not always accurate. Keep all those receipts in your PassPorter! At least once during your vacation, visit the lobby concierge at your resort for a detailed print-out of your dining activities, and compare those with your own records. You don't want to be caught a meal short on your last day by a computer error!

In one of those, "Wow, I coulda had a V-8" moments, I realized that the average meal prices that we provide in the dining chapter of PassPorter Walt Disney World are calculated on exactly the same formula Disney uses for its Table Service and Counter Service meals on the dining plan -- an appetizer, entree, dessert, soft drink, tax and 18% gratuity for Table Service, and entree, dessert, soft drink and tax for Counter Service. Do you want to know whether your meal plans deliver good value? Just add up the numbers from your PassPorter. You'll quickly see that an average Table Service dinner at Le Cellier (\$53) is worth more than the day's cost for the dining package. OK, so you usually don't eat appetizer and dessert? Deduct \$7.50 each for the typical cost of a Table Service appetizer/dessert, and you're still ahead. That means your Counter Service meal (average value \$12) and Snack (average value \$2.50) are freebies! It also explains why it's so hard to get a reservation at Le Cellier these days.

We have also calculated the average cost of Table Service and Counter Service breakfasts, lunches and dinners across Disney property to arrive at an average value for each kind of dining credit (you'll see even more detailed break-downs in PassPorter Walt Disney World 2007, due out in November). A Counter Service lunch/dinner averages \$12, Table Service dinners average \$41, and that snack credit is worth \$2.50. That adds up to a \$55.50 value daily. Pay \$7.50 cash for a continental-style breakfast, and your daily food budget is \$44.99 for meals worth an average of \$63.

Before you get too excited, consider the Signature Dining "gotcha." The value of the average Signature Dinner or Dinner Show (either of which cost 2 Table Service credits) is \$61, a value of \$30.50 per credit. Signature Dining at lunch drops to a \$42 value (\$21 per credit), and that coveted 2-credit Breakfast at Cinderella's Royal Table is worth \$40 (you do the math). Those can pull your daily meal average below the cost of the dining package on the day(s) you use them, but you may still come out ahead overall when you consider the savings on other days. You may be tempted to pay cash for some of these meals, to increase the value you obtain from your dining credits, but you still have to find ways to use those extra credits before they turn into pumpkin soup. You may still prefer to use two credits for those special meals, and pay cash for a

counter service meal to replace that Table Service credit. Keep your calculator handy to work out the best value for your needs.

Another "gotcha" might be your hotel room rate. We had to surrender our Annual Pass discount at All-Star Sports in order to qualify for the dining plan. The new reservation cost us an extra \$20 per room per day (\$40/day in our case), or \$10 per adult. Add that to the cost of the dining plan (\$47.99 total, in our case), and we weren't necessarily getting a big bargain, although the way we utilized the meal credits, we still came out a bit ahead.

Free dining is offered as part of some of Disney's vacation packages. Since the value of the meal plan is the same regardless of the resort you select, you'll get the most bang by staying at lower-priced resorts. A good Annual Pass discount at a deluxe resort may provide greater dollar savings than the free meal plan, but be sure to factor-in the savings you may enjoy using the dining plan, not just the purchase price of the plan, since you won't be able to combine the dining plan and an Annual Pass discount.

Your Table Service server will love the fact that you're on the dining plan. His/her tip is calculated using the actual menu prices of the items you've ordered. You may not have the appetite for dessert, but if you order it and just eat one bite, your server is the richer for it. On the average, we had better service using the dining plan than we ever had when we paid cash, and considering the normally high quality of Disney service, that's really saying something. We were treated like cruise ship passengers. "Are you sure you don't want dessert? It's wonderful! I'll box it up for you if you can't eat it here." We could also stretch the budget by using dining plan appetizers as toddler Alexander's meals. The more extravagantly we ate, the brighter the glint in our servers' eyes.

As part of the experiment, I made a habit of ordering the most expensive items on the menu. While that was a very satisfying tactic at some establishments, at others (like 50s Prime Time Cafe) it seemed like the kitchen was skimping on the "best." Prime Time's top-priced shrimp cocktail consisted of a half-dozen soggy, medium-sized defrosted shrimp, a bit of iceberg lettuce, a lemon wedge and some bottled cocktail sauce, slapped on a regular bread plate. No appealing presentation, no flavor, nada. The \$19 sirloin steak couldn't have weighed more than 6 ounces. Granted, six ounces is plenty of steak for my lunch, and it was tastily prepared, but I'd have been incensed to have received either the appetizer or entree if I had been paying cash. The 50s Prime Time "standards" like onion rings, meatloaf and fried chicken were far more satisfying, even if they didn't add up to the maximum bang for the dining credit.

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Your estimation of value extracted can plummet when teenaged girls are involved, at least in our experience. What happened to the kids who are drawn like flies to the most expensive items on the menu when we're home, paying cash? When all restraints were removed, they went right to the bargain-priced comfort foods! Appetizer? "Do we have to?" (That's one way to get a free toddler meal!) Even desserts weren't tempting them. In short, whatever Disney may have "lost" feeding me, they more than made up feeding Allie and Melanie.

I've focused on the values to be had at the Table Service establishments. What of Counter Service? Our magic spreadsheet determined that average costs vary little, whether you're buying breakfast or lunch/dinner. A counter service breakfast with all the trimmings at a resort food court averages \$10.50, and the lunch/dinner average is just about \$2.00 higher. So, if you need a big breakfast to start your day, you aren't really cheating yourself by using a Counter Service credit.

The Snack credit was the biggest surprise for me. Skinflint that I am, I hate to buy treats at theme parks, gas stations and convenience stores. "I'll just have a sip/bite of yours, honey!" Sure, I'd do a Dole Whip once a visit or a Mickey Bar when I'm not worrying about chocolate stains on my white polo shirts, but normally; I just hit the water fountain when I need to hydrate. Oh, the luxury of an ice cold Coke in the blistering Florida sun! Even so, it was hard to use up all those credits. Our solution? Spend your remaining snack credits on Mickey Rice Crispy Treats -- they're virtually indestructible in your baggage and a fun way to share the magic with friends back home.

And one more trick while we're talking about beverages. If you've purchased refillable mugs at your resort, use the soft drink portion of your Counter Service credit on a bottled beverage from the Grab-n-Go. It'll come in really handy later on. Meantime, your refillable will do all the heavy sipping at the food court.

All in all, we had a very satisfying experience with the dining plan. While it's not a one-size-feeds-all solution, it is a viable option for many vacationers.

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