

Disney Cruise Line Dining: Cruising Gluten-Free

by Karen Horan, PassPorter Guest Contributor

My husband and I were looking for a new kind of vacation but were having difficulty finding something that would accommodate our gluten-free diets. Our family has Celiac Disease and it is medically necessary for us to eliminate wheat, rye, and barley from our diet. Over the past few years we had happily and successfully taken two Walt Disney World vacations with the family, but this time it would be a vacation WITHOUT THE KIDS. Walt Disney World was my first choice because I like being able to eat in restaurants without worry or explanations, but my husband wanted a break from the theme parks. On the advice of our travel agent who has multiple food allergies herself, we compromised with a vacation on the Disney Cruise Line (DCL).

We booked a seven day Eastern Caribbean cruise on the Disney Magic for the end of October, 2009. Our travel agent informed Disney that we were gluten free at the time of booking. Approximately six weeks before our departure, I sent in a medical form explaining in detail our specific dietary needs.

Dining aboard a Disney cruise ship has some distinct differences from other cruise lines. Each stateroom is assigned a table number and the same dedicated servers throughout the duration of the cruise. DCL offers rotational dining, in which guests experience one of three different restaurants each night with their assigned servers following along. Starting with the first meal, the head server came to verify our dietary needs and then shortly brought us a plate of warm gluten-free rolls. The first dinner was modified at the time we ordered, which meant my fish was served without the finishing sauce. After that we were able to preview the next night's menu and order before leaving the restaurant. The menus were practically endless in gluten-free selection and each pre-ordered meal was served as close to the menu description as possible. Some of my favorite dinners included; pasta with lobster sauce, a bowl of French onion soup with gluten-free bread and melted cheese on top, and veal scallopine served on top of a beautiful little scoop of gluten-free spaghetti. I can't remember the last time I had pasta in a restaurant!

Even though cruise lines are famous for their amazing and endless buffets, there was always at least one sit down restaurant open for breakfast and lunch aboard The Magic. For lunch we preferred to eat at the sit down restaurant. We found that by ordering even just an hour

ahead of time enabled the restaurant staff time to adjust almost anything on the menu to our dietary needs. At each buffet, the head chef was always happy to walk through the buffet line as well as make something fresh for us in the kitchen. DCL makes it very clear that although they can attest to the ingredient used in the kitchen, they cannot make any guarantee once a dish is set on the buffet line. There is just no way of knowing if another guest inadvertently contaminated it. The chefs prefer to bring an allergy guest a meal directly from the kitchen although this will always be about a 15 minute wait. There were several items on the buffet that we felt comfortable with, such as the beef carving station, since they were not near any bread or wheat items.

There were a few items that my husband and I felt comfortable with at the buffets. An abundance of sliced fruit is the first item on the breakfast buffet so it is highly unlikely to be subject to cross-contamination. Likewise, the omelet bar is at a separate station and the items available for filling do not contain gluten. As with any food service, it is always prudent to double-check ingredients frequently.

During our trip, I had the good fortune to have coffee with the Executive Chef of the Disney Magic. Stefan Larsson has worked with various cruise lines for the past ten years and been with Disney for two years. He gave me a ballpark estimate that the Disney Magic has 25 to 35 gluten-free guests per voyage in addition to passengers with other dietary restrictions such as dairy, soy, and nuts. He was able to give me some insight on how DCL is able to accommodate allergy dining.

I learned that DCL has protocol set up for special dietary needs in which dinner orders are taken a day in advance, reviewed by the executive chef and prepared by the head and assistant chefs in the kitchen. With a day's lead time the kitchen can modify most anything on the menu to be gluten-free. DCL attempts to make much of their food allergy friendly by using dedicated fryers and non-gluten thickeners whenever possible. All crew members receive continuous training, including accommodating food allergies. In particular, the staff is trained to politely say no if a dish cannot be verified gluten-free. I especially appreciate this honesty rather than taking a risk with our health and completely ruining our vacation. DCL regularly stocks over twenty different gluten-free products including bagels, donuts, muffins, pasta, rolls, pizza crust, waffle and pancake mix, cookies, brownies, and mac and cheese. Of course items change over time and are subject to availability.

We had a wonderful holiday and have put DCL at the top of our list for

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gluten-free vacations. As for taking on a Disney cruise without the kids, I would do it again in a heartbeat. There were so many activities and spaces just for adults that we barely saw any children. We had a late dinner seating and spent a good deal of time at the adult pool and sitting on our balcony. With children the cruise would have been a fun, active, and enjoyable family event. Without the children it was a relaxing and luxurious vacation. I am looking forward to taking our children with us the next time we cruise.

For more of the details and pictures from our trip I have posted a travel blog at <http://www.eattolearn.net/GlutenFreeTravel/Home.html>

General Recommendation for Traveling Gluten-Free on the Disney Cruise Line:

- * Notify Disney of food allergies at the time of booking.
- * Send in a detailed Medical Form at least three weeks before departing. This form is available on the DCL web site's online check-in area approximately 90 days before departure date.
- * Upon boarding the ship, meet with your head server to review menus and needs.
- * Be aware that there are 2,000 other non-allergy cruisers on board. Due to the number of meals the kitchen must prepare each day, they must have special orders in advance.
- * Buffets are at the guest's own discretion and risk. Although DCL can tell you what each dish contains, it is impossible to be sure other guests have not accidentally contaminated them.
- * In lieu of eating from buffets, the chefs will be happy to prepare food in the kitchen for you. Please be aware that this is made to order and will take additional time. Giving them advance orders is always appreciated.
- * Seven night cruises are recommended over 3 or 4 night cruises. This gives the chefs and servers a chance to really get to know you and accommodate your needs.

About The Author: Karen Horan is a consultant specializing in Gluten-Free living as well as an avid Disney Fan. Her web site is www.eattolearn.net. They even have a section devoted to Gluten-free dining at Disney!

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