

Dining on the Disney Dream: Exceeding My Expectations

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebooks Author

There's so much to say about the Disney Dream, it's hard to know where to start. So, why not start where many cruisers do? "Disney Cruiser, you just boarded the Disney Dream. What are you going to do next?"

"We're going to feed ourselves!"

Disney Cruise Line's food has always had our respect, but I can say without hesitation that the food I ate on the Disney Dream's two-day Christening Cruise is the best I've had in any of the cruise line's restaurants and counter service, with the possible exception of Palo, the adults-only extra-costs restaurant on the Disney Magic and Disney Wonder. Since I've yet to have dinner at Palo or its even ritzier cousin, Remy on the Disney Dream, I may have to amend my previous statement in a couple of weeks, after I have had a chance to dine there (I have reservations for Remy, Palo, and Palo Brunch on my upcoming February sailing. It's good to be a Platinum Castaway Club member!)

A warning: All the food I'm about to describe was prepared for a special audience of media, travel industry professionals, and corporate executives. While it may be an honest representation of what regular guests will encounter in the days and years to come, it's also possible that our meals were, as they say at Disney, "plussed" enhanced beyond normal expectations. We shall soon sail again, incognito, and will report what we find.

As part of the media contingent, I had a very busy schedule on both days of the cruise, and Jennifer and I decided to dine on separately, so our son, Alexander, could eat on a predictable timetable. From the moment I boarded at 1:00 pm until it was time for the lifeboat drill at 4:15 pm, I was dashing through a self-guided tour of the ship. This was a "You snooze, you lose" opportunity to see and photograph the ship's suites, kids clubs, and tween and teen areas, all of which are hard or impossible to access under normal circumstances. So, I can't tell you about the Welcome Aboard Buffet at either the Enchanted Garden dining room on deck 2, or Cabanas buffet on deck 11. However, Flo's Cafe, the quick service area, was right next to the media bullpen on deck 11. From the dizzying array of pizzas, burgers, hot dogs and brats, sandwiches and wraps, I chose a warm bacon and brie panini (panino, since I had just one) - very satisfying, with multigrain bread grilled to a satisfying crunch, bacon slightly chewy, and the soft, rich cheese

binding it all together. Now, I'd be able to survive until my 8:30 pm dinner seating.

My first night's dinner was at Animator's Palate, one of two restaurants on board that carry their names forward from the cruise line's older ships. You've probably seen artist's renderings and photos of the dining room, and have read descriptions of how Crush, the animated sea turtle from Finding Nemo, is swimming around, chatting with diners. While this dining room's theme, roughly, "Homage to Animation" is little changed since the Disney Magic set sail in 1998, the expression of the theme has moved from an animator's sketch pad to an animator's work room, the walls lined with representations of animators' desks, bookshelves, cork boards, and the tchotchkes they collect. The old Animator's Palate presents an ever-changing and dramatic transformation of black-on-white sketches into rich color drawings and animated sequences as the meal progresses, accompanied by a full, orchestral soundtrack that rises to a glorious crescendo. The new-style Animator's Palate maintains a fairly even keel, with animated undersea vistas gently rippling on nearly 30 large video screens built into the walls and partitions. Are we inside a huge aquarium, or have the animator's sketches come to life? It's hard to be sure. Intrusive moments are reserved for the breaks between courses, and the audio system is filled with restful sounds from the Finding Nemo soundtrack, so it doesn't fight conversation. Each animator's station has one large video screen and several smaller screens. The large screen displays an undersea vista familiar to any fan of the Disney-Pixar film, Finding Nemo and/or the theme park attraction, Turtle Talk with Crush. Soon, Crush, the 150 year-young surfer dude/turtle, is making the rounds of the tables, swimming from screen to screen, greeting diners. As the meal progresses, Crush returns several times, once to chat with the guests at table. Truth be told, conversation, whether with my table mates or the animated turtle, diverted my focus from my meal, but my overall impression was very positive, one of the best meals I've enjoyed at any version of Animator's Palate.

The Animator's Palate menu has evolved substantially since I last cruised. My favorite from years past was a parmesan-crusting veal chop. Long gone, alas, but what changes! I started with black truffle pasta pursiettes, the little purses bulging not with gold coins, but a rich, creamy cheese filling dotted with black specks of truffle. These more-than-morsels were napped with a light cream sauce and garnished with a very generous shaving of earthy black truffle and small bits of quality parmigiano cheese. Precious truffles, in a no-extra-charge restaurant that serves over 600 at a sitting? This was just the first hint that Disney's chefs have ratcheted things up a notch or two.

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I followed the pasta with a light salad of endive, arugula, and watercress with bits of peach, toasted almonds, and a light vinaigrette; the slightly bitter greens were a good choice after the rich pasta.

But on the heels of the remarkable starter my "grilled" black cod with morels was a let-down. I knew that the demands of cruise ship mass-production mean grilled items are typically started on the grill but finish cooking in a holding oven. It wasn't likely I'd get my black cod as it should be, slightly under-cooked, the flesh silky and luxurious on the tongue, but the kitchen needed a test, and I love, love, love black cod. Unfortunately, I was right - it was baked through and through, but at least the generous bits of precious mushroom were satisfying, and the seasoning was good. For dessert, I ordered a sampler trio that proved the skills of the pastry chef. My cup of black coffee was excellent; clean and rich, with mocha overtones.

For Thursday breakfast I headed to Royal Palace for a quick table service meal before dashing out to Castaway Cay for a guided tour of the island's recent upgrades and enhancements. I barely had time to absorb the restaurant's decor, and being breakfast, the room lighting was fairly bright and the staff was not in its formal, evening livery. I loaded up on breakfast, fearing my reportorial itinerary might again deny me lunch. Chocolate croissant, up to snuff, even if the assistant server didn't know it as "pain au chocolat." A request for fruit brought a bowl of cut melon with a dollop of yoghurt and a sprinkling of granola. Fine by me! Since I like to contrast salty and sweet, I asked for bagel and lox (without the bagel), and a sampler plate with pancake, waffle, and French toast. The French toast gets high marks, made from a nice, thick piece of a whole grain bread and dusted with powdered sugar. The small pancake was simply competent, and the waffle, alas, was almost definitely the frozen kind (what, no Mickey waffles?). My plate of salmon came with four nicely folded, generous slices of fish, a scoop of cream cheese, and garnishes of minced red onion, sieved hard-cooked egg, and capers - classic. The salmon was par for DCL, good, but not great; better suited for a bagel than as a stand-alone item. I opted for tea, my choice of a house blend black tea, or herbal. While I've never been a fan of the foil-wrapped Bigelow teas offered on the other ships, at least I had more varieties to choose from. And then, like the White Rabbit, I was off, for a very important date -- an Imagineer-guided tour of the new stuff at Castaway Cay.

I was back on board an hour later, for a media-only Q and A session with Disney execs and top Imagineers, followed by two hours of one-on-one interviews with more Imagineers and key ship crew members. No Castaway Cay barbecue for me! Fortunately, the interviews all took place on deck 11 aft, just a stone's throw from Cabanas, the casual

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buffet on the pool deck. An unexpected scrambling of my schedule allowed time for a quick bite at a reasonable hour.

Disney's publicity led me to believe Cabanas would be more "food court" than buffet, with a wide variety of themed serving areas. What I found, at least on this early voyage, was a nicely laid-out, conventional ship's buffet. Yes, there were themed serving areas for sandwiches, pizza, desserts, carved meats, and the like, but if there was sushi (something hinted at/hoped for), I missed it entirely, and the variety of foods little different than I'm used to. There was, however, a nice change from the grab-your-own-table routine at the Magic and Wonder's pool deck buffets. The staff assigned and saved a table for me when I entered - no need to search-out an empty table while balancing a tray full of food. The variety and quality of what I did sample (and I sampled quite a bite, i mean, bit) was excellent. Most memorable, a scooped-out zucchini squash filled with a coarse tomato stew and little cubes of soft feta cheese. The squash was perfectly cooked, bright green and nicely firm, the tomatoes savory and fresh-tasting, and the little nuggets of cheese soft and creamy. With veggies like this, meat can be completely optional. However, that didn't stop me from trying the grilled, marinated veal scallopini (quite nice), flavorful baked grouper, and a slightly spicy stir-fried beef with cashews that whopped any other cruise ship Chinese fare I've had. I bypassed most starches, but the herbed polenta cake looked really good, so what the heck? Polenta is little more than cooked yellow corn meal, but it can easily become a dense, rubbery mass tasting little better than library paste. To the chef's credit, the kitchen produced a light, flavorful side starch. I couldn't bypass the Jonah crab claws, but I should have looked for a nutcracker, because even with the shells partly sawn to aid opening, they were too challenging for a reporter anxious to get back to work. I set that aside and happily munched on little cubes of balsamic vinegar-marinated Italian salami, quality parmigiano cheese, and a nice assortment of Greek and Italian olives. Then heigh ho, heigh ho...

My dinner at the Enchanted Garden truly enchanted. I dined alone, my companions from the previous evening either worn-out by non-stop interviews, or had been invited to Palo (the New York Post apparently ranks higher than PassPorter Travel Press). Passayu, our server, was incredibly attentive and made my solo dining experience very enjoyable. Once he knew I wanted to sample and nibble, the plates kept coming, each one highly enjoyable. The quiet allowed me to enjoy a wonderful soundtrack of Disney classics, arranged for various chamber ensembles. Very Belle Epoque Paris/Vienna 1890s -- string quartets, wind ensembles, piano/flute duos... a wide range of instrumentation, mostly in late romantic style. A perfect sound for the environs.

Much had been made in advance of this dining room, allegedly inspired by the gardens of the Versailles Palace. But what is an Art Nouveau glass and iron conservatory doing on the grounds of Louis XIV's Baroque palace? 'Tis a fantasyland, indeed. Enter during the day, and the painted vistas through the conservatory glass are all sunlight and flowers. Fanciful overhead glass lampshades have tightly closed petals and glow a muted sky blue. Come dinnertime, the scene changes to permanent twilight, with the pink blush of sunset reflected in the pink and white costumes of the dining room staff and the petals of the now-open glass shades, glowing a warm pink. In a very subtle touch, wall sconces hold Japanese fans that are closed during the day, but open to reveal a cherry blossom motif at night. The classic trailing flower-and-vine motifs of the Art Nouveau era are expressed in the wrought iron structure of the "conservatory" and in many architectural touches. Look closely, and you find the menus, some of the floral decorations, and hanging decorative banners include pansies and roses from Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, while *Bambi*, *Thumper*, and *Flower* nestle among the asters in other scenes.

Now, on to the food! For first course, I chose thyme and garlic brioche. The soft bread was a mere container for chanterelle, hedgehog, and black trumpet mushrooms sauteed and lightly sauced with buttermilk - quite a nice starter for a 'shroom fanatic like myself. I ordered the caramelized sea scallop entree instead of a salad, and the quality of the kitchen continued to unfold. Perfectly prepared roasted asparagus, green and crisp. Large sea scallops, sweet and silky-soft inside. The "caramelization" was just a light brown smudge, but I'd rather that than a dark, crusty "sear" and rubbery interior. Just a smidge of brown sauce under each scallop, so as not to overpower. At the center of the dish, a neatly molded disk of savory pearl pasta cooked in veal stock and topped with crispy shreds of deep-fried leeks. This was a plate of many pleasures! My third course was another item chosen to test the kitchen. My juicy NY strip steak was tender and done exactly to order, the flavor enhanced by a topping of round pats of herb butter. It's a tribute to the kitchen and my server that the steak arrived at table appropriately hot, but before the butter had melted. The accompanying double-baked potato, mashed, enriched with cream, returned to the shell and oven-browned, was just too good. The caramelized flavor and aroma of the roasted Idaho spud puts any boiled and mashed potato to shame. Roasted root vegetables rounded-out the plate, with sweetly caramelized parsnips particularly grabbing my attention, considering how infrequently they make it to plate.

Once my server understood I wanted to sample, there was no stopping his enthusiasm. He'd ask if I wanted to taste something, I'd say yes to some, no to others, but somehow they all materialized, accompanied by

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my server's friendly smile. Chilled, thin disks of red and orange beets were fanned out on a plate, with a grinding of sea salt applied at table - quite nice - the beets were sweet and flavorful, but the sea salt didn't live up to it's special billing. The lobster ravioli starter, though, was stupendous - two tender pasta packets filled with chunky lobster and a bit of ricotta cheese as binding, floating in a delicate, clear tomato consomme with just the right acidity to balance the rich filling. Sitting atop it all, a generous morsel of lobster claw meat, a fried basil leaf, and a roasted garlic clove. This, in a "regular rotational dining room?" It's a good thing I had the table for eight to myself, because the array of plates before me covered half of it, each begging me to come back for just one more taste.

Finally, dessert. My server really wanted me to order the Sacher torte, but I didn't have the fortitude for its dense, chocolaty overload. The evening's sampler trio beckoned again. Remarkably, two of the three items were from the "no sugar added" section of the menu, a light cheese cake and a molded chocolate mousse. My hat's off to the pastry chef for having the skill and confidence to include no-sugar-added items in a main selection. I also couldn't resist a taste of the lemon pudding, which bested all comers. This was a British-style baked pudding, a light, warm, lemony cousin to plum or figgy pudding - almost a cake, but not quite. All these held their own against the predictably rich and heavy Sacher Torte, which Passayu managed to sneak onto the table anyway. Fortunately, the serving size was modest, in keeping with the torte's richness, and it was garnished with a beautifully-shaped dollop of whipped cream, a smear of apricot jam, and "Sacher" written in flowing, chocolate script on the plate. It was time to abandon the table and head up to the Pirates Party, before Passayu could offer me a wafer-thin mint!

It seems, whether you're cruising for pure relaxation, or have a "commando" itinerary as the press corps had this trip, meals are the glue that binds the incidents of the voyage into a single experience. It's a time to sit, relax, and enjoy, while sharing your tales with others. While any food might do, meals of the quality presented on the Disney Dream's Christening voyage can take a cruise to a much higher level.

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