

# Disney Dining Plan: Making The Most of Your Meals

by Joan Finder, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Ah, those three magic words. I'll always remember the Valentine's Day when those three delightful words first made my cheeks blush and my heart flutter &hellip;or more accurately, made my tummy growl and my mouth water: Disney &hellip; Dining &hellip; Plan.

These three little words sum up one of **Disney's newest and most innovative offerings**, one proving almost as popular as Expedition: Everest. But just as those-in-the-know quickly discover that a little homework can make the Disney park experience even more enchanting, a little bit of knowledge can make the Disney Dining Plan (DDP) an even better value. The key to making the most of the Disney Dining Plan can be found by considering each of those three scrumptious words.

**Disney:** The [Disney Dining Plan was introduced in 2005](#) as an add-on option to Walt Disney World resort guests booking the **"Magic Your Way"** vacation package. For each night of your package stay, for each guest on the package, the basic plan includes one table service meal, one counter service meal and one snack. Unlike most vacation meal plans, the meals don't have to be used one per day but may be used in any combination over the course of your stay. You might use 2 or 3 table service credits on the same day, or save your snack credits to use four at a time. The credits are coded into your room key/park pass. After each meal, you will be given a receipt showing you exactly how many credits you have remaining in each category. Simple as &hellip;well &hellip; pie!

**Dining:** Currently priced at approximately \$49-\$51 per adult (ages 10 and up) and \$13-\$14 per child (3-9), **the Basic Disney Dining Plan can be a great savings.** It's certainly possible to eat at Disney and spend less, but this plan allows you to truly "dine" and experience some of Disney's better establishments for just a bit more than you would pay subsisting on hot dogs and French fries.

A table service meal allows each diner a choice of entree, dessert, and non-alcoholic beverage, and covers tax. Appetizer and gratuity are NOT included. While table-service credits can be used for breakfast, lunch or dinner, **using the credit for dinners will maximize your dollar value**. A typical dinner in most Disney table service restaurants will average about \$31 and, with tip and tax, can easily cost \$40 or more. One

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table-service credit is just that - one meal - whether it is a \$12 breakfast or \$40 dinner.

**Disney offers a wide array of beautifully themed restaurants** with surprisingly gourmet food. The restaurants are often an attraction in and of themselves, not to mention a relaxing respite from the crowds, noise and heat. The Disney Dining Plan (or DDP for short) provides an incentive to try new places and new food choices, such as seaweed in Teppanyaki or Maple Cr&egrave;me Brulee in Le Cellier. Savor those expensive entrees, enticing appetizers and rich desserts without feeling guilty about the cost per item. For those of us who typically order from the "right hand side of the menu" to save money, it is a rare pleasure to order whatever tickles our tummy. Generally, anything on the menu is usually included in the plan, although some specialty items may be restricted. Just ask before you order. The servers at Disney are very familiar with the plan, and will gladly explain the choices to you. This is especially true for counter service meals, where there seems to be more inconsistency. For example, at Cosmic Rays literally anything on the menu, including the ribs/chicken combo platter, is an option, but for some reason at Kringla Bakeri og Cafe the "lunch platter" is not available on the DDP.

Of course, value, like beauty, is in the eyes - or in this case - the taste buds of the beholder. In some cases, you may choose to sacrifice a bit of monetary value for a memorable experience. Disney has designated certain establishments as "**signature dining experiences**". These locations, such as Cinderella's Royal Table and California Grill, will use two table service credits for one meal. If atmosphere and magical memories are of utmost importance to you, then the credits are certainly well used. Likewise, most character meals are included in the plan. While a character buffet may not equal the dollar amount spent on a la carte dinners elsewhere, the chance to spend quality time with Mickey, Minnie and the gang may be better than a lottery win. Even for those of us who have left the autograph books behind, a breakfast at Crystal Palace before park opening, with photos of us in front of the castle with no one else in sight, may be priceless. The key is to determine what will make you the happiest guest in the world!

One word of caution, **some counter-service establishments may offer both snacks and meals**. Snacks are limited to soda, water bottle, coffee, single-serving chips, ice cream, popcorn, and fruit -- typically an edible, non-alcoholic, non-merchandise, non-souvenir item under \$4 (before tax). Some items, such as pizza slices, are excluded. Anything more may cost you a counter-service credit. Be sure to clarify your options, or you may find your morning muffin and coffee gobbling up the credit you had planned to use for lunch. Sometimes it may still be

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worthwhile to pay out-of-pocket for that special must-have item, the Main Street Bakery cookie or Dole Whip, rather than using a counter service meal credit. Generally, your best monetary value is to eat a very light breakfast - bringing cereal bars or bagels from home to eat in your room or grabbing a danish in the food court - and save the counter service credit for an early lunch. Consider sharing one counter service breakfast and then splitting a lunch. Or get a counter-service breakfast, skip lunch and have an early dinner. The portions at Disney eateries are ample, to say the least. Within a few days, most guests on this plan are gaining a pound or two. You definitely won't starve!

**Plan:** It is no accident that Disney terms this the Dining PLAN, as opposed to the Dining Feature or the Dining Experience. **The immense popularity of this plan has filled restaurants** that would previously accommodate walk-ins even on the busiest of days. You must book your advanced dining reservations as early as possible, especially for dinners. You can always try to make last minute changes if necessary, but if you want table-service dinners or character meals, reservations are now essential. Magic Kingdom actually puts a sign near City Hall advising guests if dinner seatings are no longer available and often lists limited openings for lunch at the table service restaurants. Many a family may find themselves disappointed without those valuable reservation numbers in hand.

Of course, the ultimate method of making the most of the DDP is to **take advantage of the occasional promotions** in which Disney includes the DDP at no charge as an incentive, usually for late summer/early fall off-season travel periods. This is planning at its best! But whatever the season, with careful planning, you'll find the DDP is a culinary treat and affordable luxury. Bon appetit!

*About The Author: Joan Finder is hungrily anticipating her lucky 13th visit to Disney World this December for MouseFest 2006, where she plans to taste her way around the World Showcase and savor the delicacies of the Bahamas.*

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