

## Dining Review: Victoria & Albert's: Celebrating a Perfect Evening

by Annie Voss-Altman, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Victoria & Albert's -- the cr&egrave;me de la cr&egrave;me of Disney Dining experiences.

□ When our family went to Walt Disney World in May to celebrate my graduation from law school, I told my spouse, Howard, that I really wanted to go back to Victoria & Albert's for a special evening date night evening to celebrate both my graduation and our twentieth wedding anniversary.

For those of you who haven't heard of Victoria & Albert's, it's Disney's top 5-star restaurant, located in the Grand Floridian Resort & Spa. Dining there isn't cheap (\$125 is the starting price for dinner there), but the experience is as memorable a dining experience as you can find at Disney.

□ This was our second Victoria & Albert's experience. The first time, for our 15th anniversary, we'd eaten in the main dining room. This time, we opted for the new "Queen Victoria's Room" experience for our evening at Victoria & Albert's. Queen Victoria's Room is a small room off to the side of the main dining room. There's only room for 4 tables. On our night, there were two other couples dining with us. The Queen Victoria's Room features tableside preparation, and unlike in the main dining room, the menu is set in advance based on discussions you have with the staff when you make your reservation. We told them that we didn't eat pork or veal but that we loved everything else, especially seafood and game. Based on this information, they constructed our menu for the evening. (We found out later that you can also make special requests. I was asking our server, Jack, about this amazing Truffled Egg we'd had in 2007 and was told that it takes 2 days to make but that you can request it when you make your reservation. Next time!)

□ We were ushered into the side room by the hostess and greeted by our two servers: Jack and Cherie. Jack and Cherie met 20 years ago while working at the Coral Reef in Epcot, back when the Coral Reef had been Disney's premier park restaurant (our server in 2007 had also trained at the Coral Reef). They married and switched over to Victoria & Albert's, where they've been ever since. They were very cute to watch. Jack took care of the larger details -- bringing the plates, cleaning up the crumbs between meals -- while Cherie (whom Jack often called Ma Cherie ("my

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dear" in French -- it was very cute) oversaw the little details of each course.

Let me start by saying that the service offered by Jack and Cherie was perfect -- attentive but not overly present, friendly but not trying to be pals. Jack and Cherie were both extremely knowledgeable about the dishes and very approachable but neither arrogant nor overly friendly. They knew the evening was for the two of us, not the four of us. They were simply excellent, and I hope we see them again someday.

□ We were given our menus and discovered that it was much more extensive than in the main dining room. Our main dining room menu in 2007 had included an amuse bouche, four main courses (we'd had three selections for each course), a cheese course, a dessert (again, our choice) and coffee. Our Queen Victoria Room menu had an amuse bouche, six courses, a cheese course, a sorbet course, a dessert and coffee. Each item had also already been paired with a wine for the wine pairings.

□ Jack asked if we'd like the wine pairings, and we said of course, since Disney was driving and especially since it began with bubbly -- Tattinger Prestige Cuvee. We never turn down champagne! Wine pairings are an additional cost to the meal but the wine selections in each case were a perfect complement to the course. I highly recommend it.

□ Our meal began with an Amuse-Bouche of soft-poached quail egg with Galilee Caviar (left), burrata alla panna (a soft cheese similar to fresh mozzarella) with tomatoes and olives, and lobster panna cotta. It also included roasted butternut squash soup, which was delightful.

□ The next course was Maine lobster and mango with white sturgeon caviar and passion fruit pearls, served with a lovely white wine from the Loire valley in France. I adore both lobster and mango, so I loved this course. It was a great mix of flavors and tastes -- salty, sweet, and lobster-y.

□ At first, I felt a little odd taking pictures at the meal, but Cherie and Jack encouraged me, telling me that when they go to other restaurants in Orlando or elsewhere, Chef Hunnel, the head chef at Victoria & Albert's asks them to take pictures and to report back so that he can see what the other chefs are doing. To me, this demonstrated exactly what I mean about great servers. Cherie and Jack always strove to put us at ease, to make our meal as pleasurable as possible. This included telling me that far from looking like a tacky tourist, my picture-taking was welcome.

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□ It was the next course where the meal really took off. It was cold "smoked" Niman Ranch lamb with Fuji apple and curry dressing, served with a lovely German riesling. Wow! The lamb was quick cooked and served on a pierced dish, under which dry ice had been placed. The result was that the lamb was both warm on the inside and chilled on the outside. The Fuji apple and curry dressing perfectly complemented the lamb. Without question, this was our favorite dish of the evening and the Riesling worked beautifully with it.

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□ Next was our second favorite dish: Alaskan king salmon cooked tableside on a heated Himalayan salt rock. The hostess came over to prepare it for us tableside on a small grill topped by the slab of Himalayan salt rock. The dish was Asian in its flavors, with pickled mushrooms and seasoned edamame and served over wild rice with a soy reduction sauce. Amazing.

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□ Next we were given roasted quail forelle with Asian pears. This was paired with a very light red from the California Piedmont region. I don't have a strong memory of the taste of the dish, although I remember its textures as being both crunchy and chewy, but the pictures can't do justice to its beauty. The yellow balls on either side are the Asian pears, with the quail in the center in a double reduction sauce. The quail wasn't a favourite dish for either of us, but it was the most beautifully presented dish of the evening.

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□ The next dish was also beautifully presented: poulet rouge with hedgehog mushrooms and truffle gnocchi, accompanied by a Rhone red. The truffles were actually whipped to create a truffle foam that coated the dish. It resulted in an interesting taste experience, like a memory of truffles, since the truffles weren't really there. Chicken always seems to me to be a secondary dish, so I wouldn't have ordered it if I'd been given a menu of choices. However, Howard had the poulet rouge both last time as well as this time (it was the dish that came with the truffled egg), and both times it was excellent, so I'm glad it was on our menu that night.

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□ The last main course dish was Australian Kobe beef with garlic potato puree. It was prepared simply but perfectly, with a reduction sauce on the side. Now, certainly, there is a reason why the Kobe beef was the last item of the main courses. It is famous for its flavor and its tenderness. What was interesting, though, was that after so many other amazing, gorgeous and sometimes exotic dishes, the beef didn't stand alone but instead fit seamlessly into the whole - one more fantastic taste for the evening. That made me realize what an incredible job the chefs did in taking relatively ordinary food and making it extraordinary. It also made sense to me that they allowed the Kobe beef to stand simply

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on its own merits, since all it needed was excellent preparation, which it received. It was accompanied by a fantastic full bodied red from Sonoma Valley.

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□ Following this course, we were given a cheese course, presented on a lovely wooden board and accompanied by an assortment of nuts, chutney and bread to match the cheese. I wish I could remember what the cheeses were right now, but after 7 half glasses of wine (plus a 6 year old port with the cheese -- and Cherie gave me extra once Howard told her how much I loved port), my memory was wearing a little thin. I remember there was a blue and a stilton and a comte, and that's about it!

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□ I haven't talked about the bread yet. We were served various breads throughout the evening (in fact, it was when Cherie was trying to serve us bread that she kept getting snagged by our flower arrangement, which you can see in the corner of some of the pictures). All were excellent, freshly baked downstairs in the Grand Floridian's own bakery.

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□ After the cheese course, Jack asked if we'd like coffee. Howard doesn't drink coffee but I do, and since I knew there was no way I'd make it to an Epcot late Extra Magic Hours without coffee (our plan to end the evening), I happily ordered it fully loaded. They have a special blend created just for Victoria & Albert's, but I am a huge fan of Hawaiian Kona coffee, which isn't so easy to find 100% pure and not in a blend with other beans. When Jack said that pure Kona was a option, I took it.

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□ I love how they serve coffee at Victoria & Albert's, which is the same in both the main dining room and the Queen Victoria's Room. The water percolates up from the bottom, passing through the coffee as it rises. It's a fun process to watch. The coffee itself was smooth and delightful.

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□ A sorbet course followed. It was a chartreuse-pineapple sorbet served with orange panna cotta. It was a lovely transition, and it gave me the breathing space I needed in order to eat my dessert, as I was getting very, very full by now.

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□ Dessert was chocolate, of course! A mocha-scented Tanzanie chocolate mousse timbale served with a chocolate cocktail. Okay, even though, I was very, very full, I found room for every bite. The presentation of their desserts is quite remarkable. The hoop around the chocolate is spun sugar and that's edible gold decorating it, punctuated with one violet flower. The mousse itself was in the middle, served in an edible chocolate pot and topped with crunchy chocolate crumbles. Yes, how many different tastes and textures can you find on this plate? Behind it on the right you can see what looks like my glass of port. It

isn't. That's the chocolate cocktail, which is liquid chocolate, fairly bitter but with a bit of sweetness, to add another taste and texture of chocolate.

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□ Okay, really, we were done. However, we weren't really done. Jack came around and offered us an assortment of truffles to finish. We noticed that the couple next to us had had theirs boxed up to go, so we asked for the same and enjoyed them with the children the next day. Four and a half hours after we started, we finished our meal. Jack offered to show us the kitchen and introduced us to Chef Hunnell's sous-chef, who was in charge that evening since Chef Hunnell was away on vacation on a Disney cruise (Woo-hoo for Chef Hunnell! I love how Disney people love to do Disney things, even in their off-time.) It was the perfect ending to a perfect meal!

*About The Author: Annie Voss-Altman is a first-time contributor and frequent visitor to Walt Disney World.*

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