

DINNER AND A SHOW TRANSFORMED



By Theresa Gawlas Medoff

ONCE UPON A TIME, dining and entertainment aboard a cruise ship were fairly predictable affairs. Passengers could choose either the first or second seating in the main dining room, and that choice determined whether they saw the early or late show in the theater. But times, they are a-changin'. Today, cruise guests have access to more dining options, more freedom of choice and a greater variety of entertainment than ever before—from full-length Broadway shows to jazz clubs to concerts from big-name entertainers.

“We like to say it’s a major sea change for cruising,” says Virginia Sheridan, spokesperson for the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), the world’s largest cruise industry association.



A MENU OF CHOICES

“For a long time, maybe up until about 10 years ago, the cruise industry was thought of as being the midnight buffet, and you’re going to eat a lot of food, and it’s just going to be okay,” Sheridan says. “But then the cruise lines started to think about [dining] in a different way because they wanted to be competitive with destinations and with resorts that were bringing in better restaurants all the time. People see dining as a really, really important element, and they pick certain destinations based on what kind of food is available.”

Disney Cruise Line broke the common dining-room mold when its first ship set sail in 1998 with not one but three dining rooms, all of them themed, through which guests rotate throughout the cruise. Next, cruise lines introduced specialty restaurants where guests could dine for a small upcharge. Additional complimentary options began to proliferate, too, and in response to customer demand, some cruise lines began to introduce more freedom into dining times. Royal Caribbean International called it My Time Dining. Aboard a Princess Cruises ship, it’s Anytime Dining.

The Starwater theatrical performance showing in *Quantum of the Seas*’ innovative Two70° venue

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Oceania cruise guests can shop with the ship's chef at local markets.

Royal Caribbean's *Quantum of the Seas*, which made its inaugural sailing from Bayonne, New Jersey, in November, (see page 32) has upped the ante yet again with its Dynamic Dining, which eliminates the main dining room altogether and replaces it with four complimentary, full-service restaurants for which guests can reserve a table to dine at any time they choose. Suite guests have a fifth option as well. Instead of the usual suspects—Italian and seafood—selections include the pan-Asian Silk, Chic's "food for a modern palate," the more traditional Grande, and American Icon Grill's menu of comfort foods. That's in addition to the complimentary buffet, another casual spot for sandwiches and salads, and the SeaPlex Dog House, which Royal Caribbean describes as "the first food truck at sea." The specialty restaurants remain, too.

Royal Caribbean has already announced that Dynamic Dining is coming to its Oasis-class ships, and the plan is to incorporate it across the fleet, according to Lisa Lutoff-Perlo, executive vice president of Operations for Royal Caribbean International. "It used to be just a small group of the population that cared about food, and now, with all of the celebrity chefs and all of the [television] stations dedicated to food and cooking, people—the masses—are becoming much more aware of great food and different types of food."

Even the smaller luxury cruise lines are hopping onboard the trend toward more choice in seating times and cuisine. Crystal Cruises already had its Dining by Reservation in addition to traditional seatings. This past summer, it introduced a divided menu on its *Crystal Symphony* and *Crystal Serenity*. On one side are the more traditional food offerings; on the other, a rotating menu of "modern," inventive specialties.

And it's not just that there are more choices than ever before. The quality of cruise ship food has improved, too. Even the

largest ships are partnering with celebrity chefs, instituting culinary advisory councils, serving healthier meal options and seeking out fresher, more locally sourced food. In November, Princess Cruises debuted a program of serving regional culinary specialties reflective of its destinations. The regional menus rolled out with the *Regal Princess* on her maiden Caribbean cruise season, but they will eventually be featured cross-fleet in destinations from the Mediterranean to Alaska to Hawaii. Oceania Cruises took it a step further, introducing its Culinary Discovery Tours in 2012. Its two new ships, *Mariner* and *Riviera*, each have a 12-station cooking school onboard. "This enables me to design tours where guests shop in local markets, and we come back to the ship with fresh produce, local products and wine—and truly immerse ourselves in the port," says Kathryn Kelly, chef and director of Culinary Enrichment for Oceania.

Cruise ships are paying more attention to the the quality and variety of their beverage offerings, too, with the addition of gourmet coffee shops and pubs serving microbrews alongside mainstream beers. Crystal Cruises introduced a connoisseur beer menu in 2013 that features rare, aged and limited production ales, stouts and other artisanal brews that can cost up to \$390 per bottle. The more mainstream Princess Cruises introduced its own "Seawitch" craft beer, and Carnival Cruise Lines inked an exclusive agreement to offer Cigar City Brewing's craft beers on all its Florida-based ships.

And while the martini craze has subsided, liquors and mixed drinks continue to grow in popularity. In response, cruise ships are creating "molecular bars where the cocktails are really unique, like with fog coming out of them. It's not your parents' or grandparents' Tom Collins and Manhattan," says Tom Gravett, AAA Mid-Atlantic Cruise Product manager.

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William Close demonstrates his Earth Harp, featured in *Quantum of the Seas' Sonic Odyssey*.

AN APPETITE FOR ENTERTAINMENT

The shift to flexible dining combined with technology and consumers' more sophisticated palates for entertainment has ushered in a new era in cruise ship show biz, too. "For many ships, especially the larger ships, it's a whole upgrading of the entertainment experience. In the past, it was kind of hokey, and it was kind of—crew turns into performers. Now, it's more like relationships with branded groups like Blue Man Group [Norwegian Cruise Line] or *Dancing with the Stars* [Holland America Line] and Broadway-style type entertainment," Sheridan says.

This year for the first time, Royal Caribbean cruise passengers will be entertained by full-length Broadway shows on the *Quantum of the Seas* (*Mamma Mia!*, which features the music of Abba) and *Oasis of the Seas* (Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*). [The home port for *Quantum of the Seas* is Bayonne (Cape Liberty), New Jersey until May 2, when it transfers to China. Beginning in the fall, however, the next Quantum-class ship, *Anthem of the Seas*, will be based in Bayonne.]

"We all know how entertainment has really stepped up across the world, and you look at different destinations like Vegas and at what people are offering in entertainment. ... [W]hen you think about entertainment in general...you continually try to push the envelope and think of things that you haven't done and ideas that have not been pursued before," says Royal Caribbean's Lutoff-Perlo.

Last year, Carnival Cruise Lines introduced a new concept for cruises: live onboard concerts with well-known musical performers. Tickets run \$35–\$60 for general admission, and in 2014, many of the concerts sold out. Performers board the ship in one of the ports of call, perform in the 900–1,300-seat main theater and debark at the same port. In 2015, the lineup will include Smokey Robinson, Journey, Styx, Rascal Flatts and others musicians yet to be announced.

Even the staple revue-style shows on cruise ships have gone high-tech. The new full-stage LED video wall in the theaters on Regent Seven Seas' ships is used to create elaborate scenes such as the *Moulin Rouge* or the setting of a popular television show. The new shows on Holland America's *ms Eurodam* and *ms Westerdam* likewise incorporate visual effects on the nine high-resolution LED panels installed in the main showroom.

Royal Caribbean's Quantum-class Two70° day-to-night venue uses the techno-wizardry of the Vistarama and 18 projectors to transform its expansive floor-to-ceiling windows into any scene, real or imagined, over a surface 100 feet wide and 20 feet tall. In addition, Two70° features six 7-foot-high roboscreens that create scenes while soaring and twisting solo or moving as one.

The *Sonic Odyssey* show in the *Quantum of the Seas* main theater promises something altogether different. The room itself, including the audience seats, is enveloped in an innovative Earth Harp that immerses the audience in sound. The performance also uses a drum wall comprising 136 drums, a Violin Dress and Vocal Percussion Jacket (yes, even the clothing makes music) as well as a cast of singers, dancers, aerialists and gymnasts.

Up on deck, the *Royal Princess* and *Regal Princess* have nighttime synchronized light and water shows, notes Gravett, and most cruise ships now have large outdoor screens that show not only family movies, but also concerts and sporting events. Two years ago, Princess began showing Monday Night Football on 11 ships departing U.S. ports, and Super Bowl cruises with big tailgate parties on deck have become all the rage, Gravett adds.

The increasing number of food and entertainment choices and the upgrading of quality across the board mean that cruising has become an even greater vacation value, says CLIA's Sheridan. "I think people will see that there's something new and different. I know that these ships are very entertaining now, either where they go or what they offer as an onboard experience, and I think it just raises the bar...on how good a cruise vacation is and that it really suits so many people." ■