

Lander hoy!

18 Feb 2006 by JR

From the vantage point of the maitre d's desk all looked normal if hectic as we entered the restaurant. The large reservation list was full of names and numbers written neatly in pencil and the dark panelled restaurant behind was full of happy customers.

But once inside things were definitely different. Although our waiting team was as cosmopolitan as anywhere these days comprising a Hungarian waiter, a commis waiter from Mumbai and a female sommelier from Austria, we had been escorted to the table by the maitre d's assistant who had conspicuously proffered his right arm to my wife, leaving me to follow in their wake. And I fully appreciated that this restaurant operated on different principles when the next table asked their waiter whether Baked Alaska, that rather ostentatious flambéd dessert, was back on the menu only to be told, "No, I'm sorry sir, the Captain won't allow it for safety reasons."

The view of the pounding Pacific ocean out of the restaurant's windows was another difference in this my first- ever meal on a cruise ship as a guest of Crystal Cruises on the Acapulco, Mexico to Guayaquil in Ecuador leg of their 2006 world cruise. But while I had long heard of the huge improvements in the food on the growing number of increasingly large and increasingly popular cruise ships, and also of the copious quantities of food and drink consumed on board some of these behemoths, what I wanted to discover above all were the major differences between operating restaurants on land and sea.

The following afternoon I met up with Günter Lorenz, the Austrian Executive Chef for Crystal Cruises, and I began by asking him why there were so many Austrians involved in the hospitality side of the cruise world. Was it perhaps because Austria itself was landlocked? "No," Lorenz replied with a laugh, "but when cruising began to develop in the early 1990s there was an influential Austrian chef on the Royal Viking Line and he was instrumental in getting many of us interested. There are more French and Italian chefs on the Asian cruises."

But wherever they come from, and there are 630 staff on board the Crystal Serenity to look after its 1,000 guests, the result is an operation that serves close on 6,000 meals a day. Given that it is difficult to recruit chefs and restaurateurs on land, how does he manage it when any chef or waiter must sign up for a 10-hour day, seven days a week and for a minimum contract of five months at sea?

"There are obvious attractions for any young chef. It's a great chance to see the world, your food and lodging are paid for and there's the opportunity to save. But we do realise that our chefs don't have the possibility to go out, eat and widen their knowledge when they are working here so one of the reasons we and other cruise ships bring guest chefs on board to give talks and demonstrations is not just to keep the guests entertained but also to educate and excite our staff." The famous Japanese 'Iron Chef' was on board our ship, with his own film crew.

The ship's crew come from 45 different countries but Lorenz acknowledged that his particular labour problems had been alleviated by recruiting in the Philippines. "More than a third of my staff comes from there and they even have their own chef on board. They learn very quickly. We have two restaurant tie-ups on board, with Valentino in LA for our Italian restaurant and with Nobu for our Japanese restaurant. Nobu himself was a little anxious at first about the skill sets of the Philipinos but there hasn't been a problem."

Before taking me into the largest kitchen I had ever visited Lorenz added, "The other big difference is of course with our suppliers. On land a chef can talk to his suppliers every day and get deliveries whenever it suits. Here we load up in LA with 6,400 different food items and then take on containers of food and wine at widely spread stops along the way: in Lima, Papeete in Tahiti, New Zealand, Australia and Cape Town. It's a process that has become increasingly complicated because of international trade bans. For example certain countries now won't accept US beef. But after 15 years as a chef on cruises I think I've become something of an expert not just in foods that are currently in season, as chefs on land are, but on what's in season region by region and in both hemispheres."

As though to prove this point, the first poster I saw as we entered the ship's vast kitchen at 4pm, before the chefs came back to cook for the first sitting at 6.30pm, was entitled The Fishes of Australia even though, then being off the coast of Guatemala, we were still over 10,000 kilometres away from the land of yabbies. But I had little time to take in anything too specific in this vast acreage of kitchen equipment and stainless steel. In size and feel the ship's kitchen must approximate to one of those old hotel kitchens constructed at the beginning of the 20th century when manpower was inexpensive, but the big difference is that this kitchen has been constructed on one level which no kitchen on dry land could ever afford to be.

The second difference was that I had never been in a kitchen quite so clean. Normal hygiene concerns aside, a ship's kitchen is under more scrupulous attention not just because it is part of a hugely complex system in which any germs can spread very easily (passengers are required to disinfect their hands every time they return on board, and the Captain does not shake hands in his receiving line) but also because extensive medical help is not immediately to hand and can often be several days away. But this was the first occasion on which, for example, I had seen a washing up system in which, to prevent cross-contamination, those handling the dirty plates are physically separated at one end of the process from those handling the clean plates coming out at the other end.

By the time of my kitchen visit I had already appreciated some of the differences in scale: that over 1,000 lbs of meat are consumed a day; that the ship's kitchens must never run out of anything, however trifling, and that to provide for all the kitchen produces and that the guest and staff restaurants consume there are 11 chilled and frozen walk-in fridges spread over two floors filled to the gunwhales.

And it was in one of the smaller of these locked freezers that I discovered the biggest discrepancy between restaurants on land and sea. Nestling among the ship's tins of caviar were several guests' own stock of their favourite cereal, bagels and even soft drinks which they had sent on board to enjoy during their time at sea – something no self-respecting, land lubbing restaurateur would ever tolerate.