

DINING AT THE CHEF'S TABLE ON CARIBBEAN PRINCESS

By Richard H. Wagner

With all of the behind-the-scenes cooking shows on television these days and the prominence of celebrity chefs, it is clear that people are interested both in how food is prepared and the people responsible for its preparation. On Caribbean Princess, Princess Cruises is meeting this interest with a program called "The Chef's Table." Once or twice during a cruise a small group of ten passengers is taken for a tour of the ship's main galley and then to have a gourmet meal.

This is not the typical walk-through-the galley tour conducted on many cruise ships but rather a tour under the personal supervision of the Executive Chef Antonio Cereda and the Maitre d' Hotel Angelo Balbiani. The Chef is a graduate of the Hospitality College of Stresa, one of the most prestigious hotel schools in Europe, and his experience includes some 25 years on ships as well as at restaurants ashore. "But I'm still learning every day."

Mr. Balbiani, who is also from Italy, studied at the famous Cornell University Hotel School and his credentials include experience not only on the Princess ships but on Cunard's Queen Mary 2.

The group assembled in the Lobby Bar where we were met by Mr. Balbiani. We were then taken through one of the dining rooms to the entrance of the main galley. The ship had just that day passed a surprise U.S. Health Department inspection with a perfect score and those involved in the food department were both proud and anxious to maintain that standard. Accordingly, each of the guests washed his or her

hands and donned a white laboratory coat before entering the galley proper.

At this point we were joined by Chef Cereda, a friendly man with a twinkle in his eye, dressed in chef's garb complete with hat and ribbons. The Chef is responsible for the cooking of the food throughout the ship including not only the main dining rooms but the specialty restaurants, the buffets, and the lighter fare venues. The menus for each cruise are prepared by a team of chefs under the direction of the Corporate Director of Food and Beverage and Menu Planning at Princess' headquarters in California. However, Chef Cereda analogized the process to a musical performance where the conductor interprets and performs the piece. "The recipe is like the music, the one who plays adds something of his own."

The galley is a vast sea of gleaming stainless steel including large ovens, cauldrons, refrigerators, tables and racks. It is divided into several distinct areas including: an area where all of the cold dishes and salads are prepared; a fish preparation area; a meat preparation area; an area where soups, pastas and vegetables are prepared; a bakery; a pastry shop; a fruit and cheese pantry; a coffee pantry and a bar where the waiters fill wine and liquor orders. There is also a dishwashing area where 52 men work cleaning the china, glasses, silver, pots and pans.

Caribbean Princess' galleys work continuously. "24 hours, there are people working. The bakery, the pastry, the galley because we have vegetable preparation, we have the Horizon Court buffet 24 hours, so we

have 35 people working during the night," the Chef explained.

Unlike what one sees on television, there was no shouting going on as the food was prepared. This was the dinner hour and the galley crew were concentrating on their various tasks. However, several looked up from their work to offer a smile or a wave.

One of the reasons for this professionalism, Chef Cereda pointed out, is that on Princess ships, the galley crew are all over 21 years old. "The people when they come here they already have finished school and they have some experience at a hotel or restaurant in their own country. Also, there is training on board. When you join we have 15 days training before coming onboard; training for cook, training for assistant cook, training for sous chefs. One of the corporate chefs explains life onboard. Then, when you come on board, there is more training."

The various preparation areas are located around the periphery of the room and in the center of the room. In between is a path which is used by the waiters. After the waiters take the guests' orders, they come into the galley to the station devoted to a particular dish. Some dishes, such as salads, have already been prepared and the waiters take them from the refrigerated storage racks. In other areas, the waiter gives the order to a chef who then prepares the dish. "We try to cook as much as possible like a restaurant, by order." Chef Cereda explained.

"Basically, at the moment the waiter places an order, they place it on the grill. This is not for your eyes only but the way we proceed every day" added Mr. Balbiani, who is in charge of all of the ship's restaurants.

So that the waiters will be knowledgeable when taking orders, there are photographs of the various dishes placed on a wall. In addition, examples of some of the dishes are placed at the stations. "These are prepared for the waiter so he can see and vocalize what exactly he will deliver," Mr. Balbiani noted.

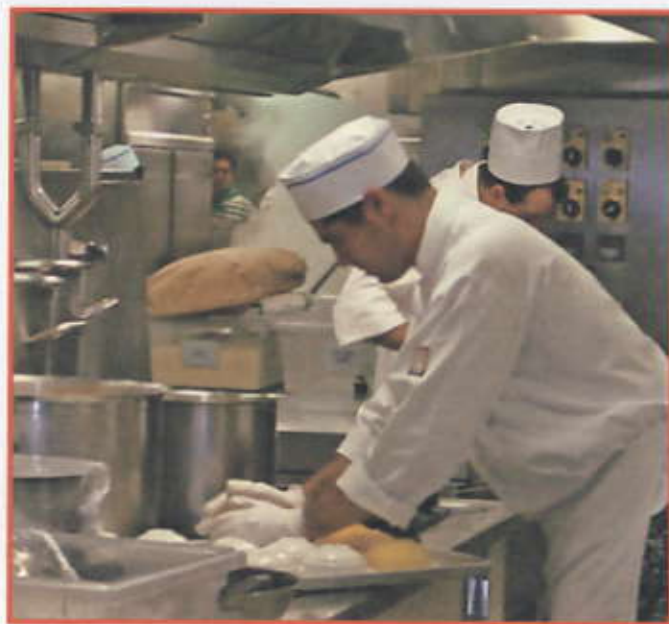
When not explaining how the galley functions, Chef Cereda gave insights into how to prepare certain dishes such as the proper temperature of the oil used in preparing a rosemary sauce or how to make a Parmagon basket.

At the end of the tour, the group was taken to a vacant "hot spot" table where a waiter was waiting with bottles of Mumm's Cordon Rouge (French) champagne. The Chef then went off to prepare some special appetizers including caviar with sour cream on potato; shrimp margarita cocktails; tuna carpaccio; and foie gras terrine. As each dish appeared the Chef or one of his sous chefs would appear to talk about it.



Executive Chef Antonio Cereda.

Following the appetizers, Mr. Balbiani led the group out to a large table in one of the ship's three main dining rooms. There, the group settled down to a multi-course meal paired with the appropriate wines. The first



course was "Home-made Fettuccine a la mode du Chef" which included "mushroom and seafood. And we made some fresh tomato Julian - - Roma tomato, a little bit of pepper to add a little bit of power, and a touch of cream."

This was followed by a sorbet made with strawberries and cracked pepper - - a unique blend of refreshing coolness, fruitiness, and spice.

The main course was "Double Impact Surf and Turf." In addition to the required lobster and filet mignon, the Chef added scallops and lamb rib chops with a choice of condiments and sauces - - a delicious and filling combination.

But, there was still more to come: roasted figs with gorgonzola cheese; soft chocolate fallen cake with chocolate ice cream; and finally coffee with the Chef's homemade petit fours.

As a climax to the evening, the Chef and the Maitre d' signed copies of the menu and gave each guest a copy of a coffee-table size book of recipes developed by Princess Cruises.

The Chef's Table is by reservation only and space is very limited. Thus, it is advisable to contact the Maitre d' or to call the Dinner Reservations Line as soon as possible after boarding. There is a charge of \$75 per person.



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