

DISNEY CRUISE LINE

Making Magic



Stephen Walker, executive chef and food manager aboard the Disney Magic

Each week, Disney Cruise Line distributes over 600 Guest Satisfaction Management surveys to their guests, garnering feedback on every aspect of the cruise from staff to food quality.

"Being Disney, we are all about our guests. We truly listen to our guests, value their feedback, conduct research and implement guest wishes," said Ozer Balli, vice president of hotel operations. "There is always learning when you truly listen, value feedback and take immediate action."

Following this feedback, Disney has recently changed dinner menus in every restaurant onboard the Disney Magic and Disney Wonder. In addition, 2004 has brought a new twist on dining to peak guests' tastes, including character breakfasts, themed dinner parties and alternative dining options. "In the past year, we've changed all of our menus, introducing five course dinners with lighter fare and vegetarian selections," said Balli.

Disney's goal, according to Balli, is simple: to continuously improve the quality, variety and presentation of the food to surprise and delight passengers. With over 10,000 meals served every day, the impact of all this change fell squarely

on Stephen Walker, executive chef and food manager onboard the Disney Magic.

After extensive chef training in Germany and London, Walker joined Disney five years ago as a chef de cuisine. Three years later, Walker became the executive chef and now has six chefs de cuisine reporting to him who oversee 120 chefs. Walker is responsible for food service in the Disney Magic's three main dining rooms: Lumiere, Parrot Cay and Animator's Palate; the alternative dining spots: Topsider Buffet, Pinocchio's Pizzeria and Pluto's Dog House; Disney's signature restaurant, Palo; and room service. He also feeds a crew of 950.

A Day in the Life

Walker begins each day at 7:00 a.m. when he meets with his six chefs de cuisine to discuss the current day's events. Each oversees a particular dining area, its kitchen staff and operation, giving Walker time to attend to his other duties. "I like giving them freedom. They are obviously the best we can find, so if you're a chef in the kitchen, it's a very responsible job and we have lots of trust in our chefs." During meal service, Walker is on the floor as much as possible and highly visible to both staff and guests. "I'm not one to be cooped up in an office," Walker said. This visibility and availability, especially to his staff, is one key to Walker's success. "Our door is always open. We're approachable as much as we can be, which creates a great atmosphere in the kitchen. It's one big family onboard," he said.

This leadership quality in Walker resulted from Disney's Navigation Series, a leadership training program that helps leaders effectively lead their teams.

For dinner service, Walker holds a pre-shift meeting with his team at 5:30 p.m. to discuss the dinner procedure. Each evening Walker's staff will serve 1,200 guests at each of two seatings and up to 150 adults at Palo.

And dinner is where the greatest changes have occurred. This year, Disney introduced a number of new themed dining experiences, such as the *Captain's Gala* featuring a menu of French Conti-

mental cuisine; *Around the World*, an end-of-cruise dining experience with dishes from all over the world; and *The Best Of*, American cuisine prepared Disney-style.

In addition to his daily kitchen responsibilities, as executive chef, Walker is required to hold environmental meetings, safety meetings and crew meetings, plus meet with the sanitation department, ending his day around 11:00 p.m.

Seven Days Out

Preparing to feed three to four meals a day for 2,600 passengers and 950 crew members is no easy task. To begin the process, Walker meets with each department leader to discuss the previous cruise. "We go through the history of the food consumption and plan accordingly depending on the number of guests," said Walker. After each cruise, a detailed account of weekly food consumption is recorded, retained and used to prepare for the next cruise. This allows Walker to maintain the inventory needed onboard to avoid running out of a particular item.

Next, Walker creates a master list of food for the next cruise and reviews the list with Tony Wills, the shoreside food and beverage standards manager. Wills orders everything directly through the procurement services at Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, which allows them to control quality and selection.

Controlling and maintaining quality is top priority. Product vendors have to pass a stringent certification process with their food, safety and quality team. Each product purchased is checked on arrival at Walt Disney World and checked on the dock by the food managers with the cruise line before being brought onboard.

The most challenging portion of his job is creating menus and running the entire operation, but Walker will just laugh and tell you it's part of the job. A bigger challenge will come next year when the Disney Magic sails two 14-day cruises repositioning between Port Canaveral and Los Angeles, and Walker will once again be saddled with the responsibility of making magic out of food.

— Suzy Feine