

Designer dining

As cruise lines expand their culinary options, Rhian Owen asks Carnival UK's **Steve Williams**, HAL's **Rudi Sodamin** and **Enrico Borniotta** of MSC if celebrity chefs are now de rigueur on board.

P&O has developed alternative dining in-house.

Michelin-starred restaurants, television programmes and cookbooks have propelled many restaurateurs into superstardom.

Indeed, despite some renowned chefs having suffered in the recent economic crisis, there is now a wave of namesake restaurants opening across the globe.

However, while the world is taken in by celebrity chef culture, according to a poll by Bookatable.com last year, 82% of diners are not prepared to spend an extra £100 per head on a meal at a namesake restaurant. With a price-tag that often exceeds £150 for some eateries, it is easy to see why customers might shy away.

Enter the era of celebrity chefs at sea. Onboard big-name restaurants are certainly one way of enjoying the experience at a more reasonable rate. These eateries stipulate a nominal fee; usually no more than £30, although in some cases the meal will merely cost customers the price of the tip.

One of the first famous chefs to take to the seas was Michelin-starred Gary Rhodes, joining P&O cruises in 2005, although, Steve Williams, Carnival UK product services director, is quick to point out that "P&O's offering has come a long way since Rhodes joined six years ago".

P&O is concluding its relationship with Rhodes at the end of this year. But, Marco Pierre White, the man who, in his younger days, used to have a reputation as the culinary world's enfant terrible, launched a new restaurant this spring, the Ocean Grill, on the latest ship in the company's fleet, *Adonia*. The chef has been working with the cruise line since April 2008, when he opened the White Room onboard the *Ventura*.

This concept is fairly new, and stand-alone restaurants are still very much niche, but cruise liners are beginning to catch on to the fact that this is big business. While not all companies



Marco Pierre White recently opened his second onboard eatery, the Ocean Grill, on P&O's *Adonia*.

“ This top-quality culinary offer attracts gourmet lovers who would not have opted for cruising as a holiday option otherwise. ” **Enrico Borniotto**

boast celebrity eateries, passengers can still sample menus, as some well-known personalities appear on cruises as guest lecturers. For example, Holland America Line (HAL) has brought various renowned chefs on board to perform cookery shows, and it is the first cruise line to build a demonstration kitchen on board.

Alternative menu

While celebrity restaurants are growing in popularity, operators are also increasing their food and wine offering as a whole. Speciality eateries have become standard on modern vessels. Also called ‘extra-tariff’ or ‘alternative restaurants’, they typically offer an experience beyond that of the ship’s regular dining room. P&O, for example, boasts well-known chefs onboard, and has also developed alternative dining in-house.

But although celebrity and alternative restaurants offer reasonable value for money, are they not redundant bearing in mind that guests have already paid for a gourmet meal in the ship’s regular dining room? “Our customers tell us they want something different, an alternative option,” notes Williams. “It doesn’t have to be better, they just want a change. Marco Pierre White’s restaurant isn’t trying to be superior, it’s just aiming to provide our guests with more variety.”

This is particularly important as cruise lines plan longer voyages. Operators recently released details of their 2012 itineraries, and many, including HAL’s 30-day South Pacific journey and Silversea’s 115-day world cruise, feature more overnights. “Our guests on long voyages don’t want to go to the same restaurant every day for 90 days, so an alternative dining experience is especially suitable for them,” says Williams.

Recipe for success?

So are cruise operators noticing a new type of guest heading off on cruise holidays as a result of such offerings? “That’s a good question,” says Rudi Sodamin, master chef with HAL. “The jury’s still out on that one. I look at the concept as a value-added bonus. I’ve been told by marketing firms that the segment of guests that pick a cruise for its celebrity chef is small, but I’m not sure that’s true. I think it adds greatly to the whole experience.”

Enrico Borniotto, CEO of MSC Italcatering, agrees. “The idea of sending these chefs on board is another step towards providing a rich and varied product,” he says. “This top-quality culinary offer attracts gourmet lovers who may not have opted for a cruise holiday otherwise.”

However, Williams does not think this is the case. “It’s difficult to pinpoint the impact the celebrity chef has,” he notes. “I don’t think that anybody books a cruise solely because someone famous is on it. For one, the likelihood of meeting the celebrity chef is relatively small – they are only on board for a few days so most customers are never going to see them.”

What’s more, Williams says that very few guests actually use such alternative restaurants; they may attract up to 10% of passengers on a P&O cruising holiday. “The majority of our meals are still taking place in the main dining rooms and buffets,” he says. “Nearly half of our restaurants do not have a celebrity chef endorsement, but these eateries do as well in uptake as those that do. So, at best, it acts as a quality marker, a point of reference.”

Future direction

While this trend is still in its infancy, many industry officials believe there will be an increase in celebrity stand-alone eateries opening up. “MSC has been collaborating with top chefs for several years on a regular basis but as yet we have not implemented a celebrity restaurant,” Borniotto says. “In the future, however, that is a project that will definitely be considered.”

Sodamin says this could also be something that HAL implements sooner rather than later. “A namesake restaurant would be a venue I’d love to provide in the future,” he notes. “It would be something unique and original.”

However, Williams is sceptical that celebrity-endorsed eateries will be incorporated throughout the sector. “I don’t think the association with external chefs will automatically pick up,” he says. “However, one way or another, I think alternative dining experiences might be extended, but that doesn’t simply refer to an increase in celebrity restaurants; many cruise lines will find other ways to vary their offering.”

There is no doubt that fine dining and cruising are synonymous. And as operators launch big-name restaurants, bringing in critically acclaimed restaurateurs to further enhance their offering, they provide guests with something they’ve been searching for – choice. Clearly, alternative restaurants, including celebrity-endorsed eateries, will continue to open up. ■