

Why Cruise Ships Offer Dining Alternatives

By Maralyn D. Hill

We cruise a lot. For me, it is one of the most relaxing ways to clear my head and I've found Holland America Line (HAL) an excellent five-star choice for running conferences. Since 2009, I've arranged three conferences on its ships and am currently planning another. That means I've taken the time to check out many various details and the focus

of this article is going to be its dining choices.

Years ago, when cruise lines first started offering alternative dining choices, I just viewed it as another way for them to add revenue. It is, but revenue that is well earned. The best way I can think of to explain some of the reasoning is to help you look behind the scenes on HAL. I know this

line and have sailed it at least once a year during the past seven years.

HAL offers an extensive range of superb cuisine, from regional specialties to itinerary based dishes and traditional favorites, prepared by a dedicated culinary staff.

What Everyone Can Enjoy
As standard fare, the following are

offered and this is quoted from Holland America directly:

As You Wish® Dining
Choice of traditional, pre-set seating and dining times or completely flexible dining schedule.

Main Dining Room
Deluxe dining at its best, sophisticated décor, Rosenthal china,



nips



crisp linens, silver service. Five-course menus: classic dishes and regional favorites, plus vegetarian, Greenhouse Spa cuisine, Healthy Life Style and Comfort Food options. Daily Alternatives menu: simple preparation of fresh fish, chicken or steak. Flexible/open dining from 5:15 p.m. to 9 p.m. daily on one tier of the two-tiered dining room. Extensive global wine selection served by sommeliers.

The Lido

Casual, upscale buffet dining open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Large salad selection and carving stations serving U.S. Choice beef, poultry and seafood. Pasta, sandwich and dessert stations featuring fresh, cooked-to-order dishes.

Waiter service available at dinner; choice of Lido or Main Dining Room menus.

Late-night in the Lido: self-service with different themes each night (such as Chocolate Extravaganza), beginning at 11 p.m.

On the Lido deck for breakfast, I'm partial to the Beni station, where I'm able to indulge in my own combination of a poached egg on spinach, with crab, mushrooms

and hollandaise. I'm partial to eggs Benedict, but two are too many and I do like the Florentine and seafood combination. Having just one takes the guilt of my indulgence away.

Plus, HAL has 24/7 complimentary stateroom service and other specialties you can enjoy: Master Chef's Dinner, Captain's Dinner, Indonesian Lunch, mid-morning ice-cream on Caribbean itineraries, hot chocolate on the deck on Alaska itineraries, after-dinner cappuccino and espresso in the Explorers Lounge (extra charge), Afternoon High Tea, Royal Dutch High Tea, Indonesian Afternoon Tea, Chocolate Dessert Extravaganza, ice cream bar and vegetarian, diabetic, gluten-free, Kosher and health conscious dining meals arranged upon request with the Ship Services Department at least 90 days prior to departure.

As much as we enjoy high tea, the only days we opted for it were when we were dining late. Otherwise, I simply was too full. However, I find relaxing with afternoon tea a delight and welcome it, even if I do not partake in the full service.

Two new features introduced include **Dive-In at the Terrace Grill**. This new

gourmet hamburger and hot dog area offers guests freshly made hand-formed burgers and Nathan's famous all beef hot dogs, complete with a selection of fries.

The second is **Slice** with hand-tossed, Southern Italian-style pizzas, available by the slice and 12-inch gourmet pie--10:30 a.m. to 1:00 a.m. on the aft Lido deck of ms Nieuw Amsterdam, ms Eurodam, ms Veendam, ms Oosterdam and ms Rotterdam.

Master Chef Rudi Sodamin serves as culinary consultant for HAL's entire fleet of five-star ships. He spearheads a new line of signature menu items, as part of the line's Signature of Excellence initiative. Every season, I look for the changes that Chef Sodamin has implemented.

So my initial thought years ago was, "Who needs more than this?" It is not necessarily true that everyone needs more, but some guests may want more. They may want a special experience they could never have on land, or prefer to dine in a smaller intimate environment. Whatever the reason, all guests deserve options and HAL keeps increasing what they are offering.

So Why Do More and

What's the Difference?

When you think of HAL's beautiful dining rooms, as delicious as the food is, it is being prepared and served for a large number of guests at one time. When dining in the specialty restaurants, they are small and intimate and prepared to order. It is an elevated level of dining and service. Possibly, you could compare the main offerings as a wonderful banquet as opposed to those from an intimate restaurant.

Let's start with the Pinnacle Grill and its transformations.

These are all by reservation.

We've experienced the Pinnacle Grill on six different ships. Each one is intimate with elegant décor, Bvgari china, Frette linens, and Riedel stemware. The Pinnacle Grill features Pacific Northwest-inspired cuisine, Sterling Silver beef, and wonderful fresh seafood. Its extensive wine list highlights Pacific Northwest vineyards. It is open for lunch (\$10 p.p.) and dinner (\$29 p.p.).

An Evening at Le Cirque

Outside the Pinnacle Grill on the ms Nieuw Amsterdam, there is a circular area with a lounge and chandelier that is a replica of the New York skyline



right side up and upside down. After sharing a glass of Champagne and picking out the skyline buildings, it is easy to imagine you are walking into New York City, when you start your evening at Le Cirque in the Pinnacle Grill. We have been fortunate to experience this on other HAL ships and you still feel the transformation. I just happen to love the chandelier on the ms Nieuw Amsterdam and feel it adds just a little more glamor. At least one night per sailing on all 15 ships, Pinnacle Grill transforms to create a legendary Le Cirque-like atmosphere. Since we've dined at Le Cirque, we can appreciate the care that has been taken to recreate the experience. Menu offerings, wine selections, table decorations and restaurant setting are tailored to create an authentic Le Cirque dining experience, featuring French Continental Cuisine. Dinner is (\$49 p.p.). I'm quite partial to the china and wall coverings, which do so much in the transformation.

Inquisitive as I am, I dug below the surface to discover that contract between HAL and the restaurant took several years to iron out and is quite lengthy. In addition to purchasing Le Cirque china and décor, the staff had to go through Le Cirque training and Le Cirque gets a percentage of the additional charge. I think it is 50%, but that I do not have confirmed.

Why would HAL bother? To provide its guests a unique and outstanding experience they may otherwise be unable to enjoy. Many do not have the opportunity to visit New York, let alone get reservations at Le Cirque.

Taste of De Librije

Once per cruise, on the on ms Rotterdam and ms Eurodam, the Pinnacle Grill transforms into De Librije, featuring the cuisine of Culinary Council member and Michelin Star Chef Jonnie Boer. This is a five course menu, showcasing a selection of starters, soups, entrées and desserts from Boer's land-based eatery and is (\$69 p.p.) including wine pairings. We've not experienced this yet, but my guess is the contract negotiations were similar to Le Cirque.

Canaletto

This family-style Italian dinner menu features favorite Italian entrees that rotate nightly (\$15 p.p.). This is in a section of the Lido deck that gets transformed into an Italian Bistro. You really don't realize you are on the Lido deck. Reservations are encouraged, but walk-ins are accepted.



Tamarind and the Silk Den

This Pan-Asian restaurant features reservations-only lunch and dinner.

Its complimentary lunch menu is dim sum (Asian dumplings) soup, salad and dessert.

Dinner is Asian-inspired cuisine from menu or Rijsttafel, a Dutch adaptation of the traditional Indonesia dinner of rice, and more than a dozen intriguing side dishes (\$20 p.p.). Since I am quite partial to Rijsttafel, I thoroughly enjoy this experience and wish it was on all the ships. However, it is only on Signature-class ms Eurodam and ms Nieuw Amsterdam.

The Silk Den is an adjacent lounge offering signature Asian-themed specialty cocktails and Sakétinis. When you visit Tamarind or the Silk Den, you feel as if you have been transported to Asia. Every aspect of service matches its environment and theme.

Another Reason Why for Alternatives?

HAL has a large percentage of repeat passengers on every cruise. Many are booking suites which give them access to the Neptune lounge. For repeat passengers and new, HAL continues to raise the bar of service to exceed expectations.

In the beginning, we wouldn't consider alternative dining. Now, neither of us would want to miss out on the enhancement it adds to our cruises.

HAL is committed to excellence and has been honored by too many awards to mention. For one, it took top honors in the World Ocean and Cruise Line Society's category for High-Deluxe, 5-Star-Plus, Large Ships: "For the same prices, and often less, than those being charged by other cruise lines Holland America continues to provide its passengers with an Old World ambiance, friendly yet excellent service, fine food and many extra touches that passengers do not expect and do not get on other lines within this category. Also adding to the sense of value is the strong consistency of the product that Holland America delivers across its entire fleet."

www.hollandamerica.com/

For the record, only one of our cruises was comped and that was in 2011. When either Norm or I write, it is based on our experiences and because we want to share our thoughts.

Photos by Maralyn D. Hill