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Working Through Paradise

The Provence through the eyes of a cruise ship chef

By Deirdre Michalski

On my recent river cruise through the Provence of France, I had the opportunity to learn about life on a river boat – specifically, life from the kitchen's point of view. The person educating me on all this was Benjamin Hausner, Executive Chef of the Viking Europe vessel, whom I was able to steal away one afternoon during the midst of my trip. During our discussion I was quite unexpectedly educated about things I had not even considered about cruises, such as the delivery of paper goods, the staff's down-time and how all the ship's fresh flowers and delicious cheeses magically appear on board.

The first step to this week-long journey happens before the river cruise season begins through some "pre-season" planning. In February, the Chefs get together at the company's headquarters in Germany to prepare for the season, which runs from March to mid-November. Once there, they share ideas, develop new recipes and menu plans, and swap resources on purveyors along the route. "Before the season starts I really enjoy all the Chefs getting together and planning the menus," Benjamin states. "There are so many creative ideas and we share our suggestions. We also tell the others of good resources and shops we have found along the way to purchase premium cheeses, vegetables and such for our recipes. We like our guests to experience the local flavors of the villages and towns we are visiting."



Nutritionists are also a participant in this process, as they are consulted to help develop menus for very specific dietary needs, which passengers identify during their reservation booking. The staff also receives special training to handle such special orders discreetly, as not everyone wants to announce their needs.

Once the season starts, the week-long schedule is fairly structured with Saturday being by far the busiest day of the week for the entire crew. With the exclusion of the first trip of the season, each Saturday is when the guests who have been on-board disembark, while a whole new group of passengers take their place by the afternoon. In the interim, the crew is cleaning the cabins and public areas, replenishing supplies, and taking the inventory of the food, all while the ship is being serviced. Meanwhile, the kitchen is abuzz with activity as they prepare for the new cruise's 7:00pm dinner service in the Dining Room. Every passenger will be there, hungry for food and eager to enjoy for seven nights of fun and adventure.

For those on the culinary team, the day-to-day schedule is a rather grueling one. It usually plays out like this:

- Breakfast ~ 7:00am - 9:30am
- Lunch ~ 1:00pm with a more casual buffet option in the lounge area.
- Dinner ~7:00pm most evenings

Keep in mind this schedule is designed to cater to a full ship, filled with hundreds of people. In order to be ready for the guests, Benjamin has a staff of eight helping him out, including his Sous Chef. Every day at 5:00 AM, four of the crew starts the day by prepping for the 7:00 AM breakfast service, which is immediately broken down at 9:30 AM as they quickly begin prepping for the lunch service. There is a brief break, and the staff then rotates out, with the second team coming in to prepare for dinner.

The passengers typically enjoy breakfast, and then they're off for a half day tour of whatever port they are at before returning to the boat by 1:00 PM for lunch. Afterward, many head back out for an afternoon of further exploration. Those brief windows of time are taken advantage of by the kitchen staff. They rotate the schedule so that each of the staff disembarks the ship at least once or twice a week so they can have the opportunity to sample the various towns and villages along the route. "Yes, we all like to get off the ship and explore," Benjamin states. "Our time is short in each port for the crew, so we rotate with the staff, so that everyone gets a chance to disembark in at least one town or another along the route."

For Benjamin, the late afternoons are his time to catch up on placing his orders, building the schedules, organizing the menus, and meeting with his team. There are also special culinary events to prepare for, depending on the day of the week. This includes a top-deck luncheon featuring international cuisine, a cooking demonstration, cheese tasting, and the Captain's dinner, a special event that acts as a culinary showcase for the Chef and his entire team.

The majority of the cuisine is prepared for "same day" enjoyment, although there are a few items that are prepared one day ahead. Two times per week the kitchen staff prepares a rich stock for use throughout the week for soups as well as the base for Benjamin's various rich sauces. Meat is placed in a marinade the day prior to its use, but other than that, most items are prepared the "day of" its use, including all the breads.

On the third day of our cruise, we have the pleasure of taking a tour of the kitchen along with Benjamin and a few other passengers. The kitchen appears to be the size of a 9' x 11' room. As might be expected, everything is very orderly with a clipboard holding special requests for each day of our trip. (I even see the note for my special birthday cake for the final night of the cruise!) The kitchen operates in typical restaurant fashion, with a sauté station, a grill & fry station, a salad & dessert station and the kitchen line. There is a walk-in refrigerator, however the prep area must be elsewhere, as I do not see that. It is hard to believe the sheer quantity of delicious food and fresh breads that are whisked out of that small kitchen each day.

When there is down time -- most likely in the late morning and afternoon, according to Benjamin -- the crew will retire to a cafeteria and sitting area where they can play billiards, enjoy meals, watch television, and enjoy a little R&R. Depending on the ordering, and special events on-board, they tend to work 8-12 hours per day, with some breaks in-between. It's hectic, but it's not all that bad, according to Benjamin. "Managing a staff of eight, I do have my hands full, but once we get into the rhythm of the week, it all goes pretty smoothly," he says.

The menus are different each day, with the exception of the Captain's Farewell Dinner. That particular dinner, for which I still have the menu (I had to keep it, as it was also my birthday that night), is very elaborate. The first course provides four options, including: Salmon Caviar and Crisps Potato Cake, Champagne Risotto & Grilled Shrimp, Arugula Salad with Cherry Tomatoes and Pine Nuts, or Yellow Bell-Pepper Potage with Sautéed Sea Scallops. The Main Course gives us with three lovely choices--- from Tournedo Rossini (Grilled Filet Mignon & Seared Foie Gras), Baked Lobster Thermidor, or Homemade Porcini Mushroom Ravioli. The Desserts includes a platter of wonderments such as: Mascarpone and Strawberry Compote, to classic Crepe Suzette, Coconut Creme Brûlée with Raspberry Sorbet, or Fresh Fruits. There is also a Cheese Plate (Comte, Saint Marcellin, and Tomme) served with apricot chutney and crackers.

Benjamin explains that once a month they receive deliveries for certain supplies that have a longer shelf life. Conversely, they receive water, flour, polenta, meat from the United States and so forth from their Germany-based headquarters office on a weekly basis, which is used for each cruise. During the week they secure some items from the local Farmers Markets that are along the route.



The final delivery of goods, an event informally known as The Big Exchange, is a celebration of sorts that occurs top-deck about four days into the cruise. A sister-ship with various supplies pulls up along-side our ship, and handshakes, waves, and supplies are swapped across the bows of the two vessels as they stand side by side in the Rhone. The transaction is completed with cheers and air kisses, cocktail toasts, and it is quite an eventful occasion. It is quite the spectacle, and we are glad we did not miss out on its fun!

Now, it's easy to forget that a person like Benjamin does have a residence beyond the boat. However, Benjamin does indeed have a place to retire when he's not cruising. His family lives in Vienna, and when he is home -- which is from late November through early March -- he enjoys relaxing and catching up with his family. However he is also active with sports such as snowboarding, soccer and table tennis. He also loves home cooking. When I ask him what HIS favorite meal is, he tells me it's his mother's goulash, and that she makes plenty of this for his celebratory return home.

Benjamin is amazing and such a joy to watch on-board. He is on his third contract, as he describes it, which means it's his third season on the river. His familiarity with the ship is very evident, as he is keenly aware of everything going on around him from the Dining Room to anywhere that the food and beverages were found. No matter what he is doing -- checking the coffee station, double checking the buffet set-up, walking about -- he is always doing so with a big, broad smile. I could just tell he is in his element. He is doing his dance, and it is a pleasure to observe his moves.

As my interview comes to a close, I offer a small token of my appreciation. I bring him and his team chocolate treats from the Valrhona Chocolate Factory we had visited in Tournon the day prior. He tells me the gift is a real treat for his team. It is my hope that their feeling of gratitude matches how it felt for me to be able to gain a look into his wonderful insights.

Deirdre Michalski is a travel and culinary writer who resides in Orange County when she is not exploring Paris. You can read more of her adventures near and far at her website www.TastesAndTravel.com.