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IN THIS ISSUE: INTERCONTINENTAL  
SINGAPORE'S HERITAGE AFTERNOON TEA

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OF THE  
YEAR 2016

life's refinements

Sip-worthy  
California  
wines



Korea

China

Singapore

Indonesia

Caesar  
Salads  
you'll love

Steak & Lobster:  
make the best  
surf n' turf ever

From  
Sea to Sky  
our airline and cruise  
dining issue

New Zealand

# Fine dining on the open seas

Enjoy an opulent and sybaritic gourmet lifestyle while cruising the high seas. By Priyanka Elhence

**F**ood has always been an important part of the cruising experience. But the world of cruise travelling has come a long way, having shifted dramatically from providing endless buffets and portside burgers and fries, to more exclusive fine dining and speciality-themed offerings. Cruise companies are in furious competition with each other, each trying to steer ahead of the pack through novel culinary programmes, whether it's offering speciality restaurants on board, interactive cooking classes, celebrity chef appearances, and offshore wine and market tours.

## Embracing the locavore creed

As well-heeled cruising passengers are getting younger, the demand for a more diverse range of cuisines on board has also increased, and the foods that you are accustomed to eating on land are now readily available at sea. For example, in addition to their already comprehensive selection of vegetarian, gluten-free and kosher meals, and being the only fleet to offer

cold-pressed raw juice and vegan smoothie bars while out at sea, **Oceania Cruises** ([www.oceaniacruises.com](http://www.oceaniacruises.com)) has recently introduced their most expansive vegan menu on selected ships. The menu boasts more than 250 new dishes to cater to vegan and health-conscious voyagers.

Likewise, in line with the increasing trend towards a more locavore approach of cultural immersion, seafaring epicureans aboard **Silversea Cruises** ([www.silversea.cruises.com](http://www.silversea.cruises.com)) have access to bespoke French menus at La Dame by



Relais & Châteaux and Le Champagne, the latter being the only Relais & Châteaux restaurant at sea. With a focus on using only the freshest, locally sourced ingredients, Le Champagne delivers a menu that changes to

reflect the voyage destinations and regional flavours. Silversea is currently the only cruise line in the world to partner with the 'Grand Chefs' of Relais & Châteaux, offering budding oenophiles unique Wine Series Voyages with onboard vintner lectures, intimate tastings and optional private tours to renowned vineyards and wineries en route. Alternatively, the Culinary Arts Voyages is designed to impress gourmet enthusiasts with cooking demonstrations, local market tours and even an onboard cooking school.

## A new territory of speciality restaurants

It's not just Michelin-starred restaurants that can offer diners a multi-sensory

Aqua Expeditions' Amazon Queso de bufala al Carbón





Dining aboard  
Silversea  
Cruises



Smoked Sriracha Eggs  
aboard Royal Caribbean

experience. Passengers aboard **Royal Caribbean International's** ([www.royalcaribbean.com](http://www.royalcaribbean.com)) fleet of Quantum Class ships are also in for a similar treat. Designed around a Wonderland theme, diners are treated to amorphous mirrors, mystery and sensory surprises, each with a selection of small or shareable fantasies. Baby vegetables sit in a garden of soil and pebbles; crispy caviar mingles with Arctic Equator chocolate; and smoked salmon eggs appear in a plume of smoke.

For the full frills, **The Regent Seven Seas Explorer** ([www.rssc.com](http://www.rssc.com)) (regarded as the most luxurious boutique vessel ever built, with its US\$450 million tag), offers personal butlers and in-suite caviar service to its sailing elite. The elegant fine dining **Compass Rose** signature restaurant is the largest speciality restaurant across the fleet, amid custom-designed Versace place settings, crystal chandeliers and flawless service, inviting passengers to leisurely sip Champagne and nibble on Siberian caviar profiteroles with vodka and lemon cream canapés.

But it's not just all about dining only on the high seas. River cruising is fast gaining its own following too. For instance, you can visit France on a nonpareil 15-day Paris-to-Bordeaux cruise on the river Seine aboard the brand new S.S. Joie de Vivre, the latest super ship addition to the **Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection** ([www.uniworld.com](http://www.uniworld.com)) fleet. Decked with classic design elements inspired by 20th century Paris, polished wood finishes, luxurious fabrics and plush carpets, it's easy to forget that

you're on water rather than in a historic castle. The ship's itinerary is especially tailored for oenophiles and gastronomes, packed with wine tastings and gourmet epicurean experiences with handpicked farm-to-table cuisine and exalted local wines. Says Ellen Bettridge, president & chief executive officer of Uniworld, "We focus on providing guests with special opportunities to savour delectable culinary traditions both on and off shore. Working with a palette of the freshest and highest quality ingredients from local regions, our chefs continually redefine authentic cuisine through a true farm-to-table approach, as they serve regional specialties to guests."

### Celebrity chef cuisine

Forget TV and MasterChef. You can actually rub shoulders with your favourite toque aboard a cruise now, as celebrity chefs are increasingly being engaged by cruise companies to serve as culinary consultants, make special guest appearances on a particular route, lend their names to at-sea restaurants and even host cooking demonstrations on the ship. Case in point: Marco Pierre White graces P&O Cruises with



Aqua Expeditions' Amazon Spicy River Snails with Tapioca and Turmeric Sofrito



Royal Caribbean's Wonderland

his presence, and Jacques Pépin serves as executive culinary director aboard Norwegian Oceania Cruises.

Interestingly, Francesco Galli-Zugaro (founder of Aqua Expeditions), was one of the first to leverage the power of the palate to create travel memories and to enhance guest experiences. "Our philosophy has always been to bring world-



UniWorld France's winemaker taking samples

class cuisine with authentic local flavours and ingredients to our guests. That's why today Aqua Expeditions is synonymous with the highest dining experience of any hospitality product," says Galli-Zugaro. Hence, consulting chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (known for his Amazon influenced cuisine at Lima's Malabar and Amaz restaurants) guides the culinary team along the Amazon river; while David Thompson is the consulting chef for Aqua Mekong's culinary programme spanning Khmer (Cambodia) and Vietnam. For the latter, diners are treated to a shared, family-style culinary experience, reflective of how meals are predominantly eaten in Southeast Asia, along the shores of the Mekong River. Ingredients such as rice noodles, local herbs, spices and chillies are locally sourced, while the ship's team of Khmer chefs also stop at local markets en route to handpick indigenous produce like banana blossoms, wild ginger, galangal, dragon fruit and kaffir lime leaves.



Norwegian Oceania Cruises' executive culinary director Jacques Pépin



S.S. Maria Theresa's Baroque Restaurant

## Offshore epicurean adventures

The pampering continues once passengers reach their port of call, with the plethora of attractive offshore food-oriented programmes on offer. Silversea Cruises arranges private tastings in some of the world's most distinguished wine regions and market-to-plate tours, while the comprehensive Gourmet Explorer Tours available on the Seven Seas Explorer are specially designed by the fleet's executive chef, local culinary experts and an impressive network of top chefs. Adding to the authentic locavore flavour are Oceania Cruises' Culinary Discovery Tours, which are destination-focused, offering visits to local markets for fresh produce and exotic spices used in traditional recipes. Accompanied by a master chef, guests can also visit wineries and fish markets to taste the region's authentic delicacies.

And it's hard to beat a sailing visit to some of Europe's most famed wine estates as part of an eight-day journey through Bordeaux aboard Uniworld. Notable highlights include Médoc vintage tastings, Saint-Émilion Premier Grand Cru cellar visits, and studying Sauternes with the winemakers themselves, culminating in a wine-paired lunch at the elegant Château de



The Regent Seven Seas Explorer's pool deck

Cazeneuve. "We have a Connoisseur Collection for those who enjoy specialised culinary experiences. Passengers can indulge in anything from a Valrhona chocolate tasting and wine pairing, to a cooking demonstration and tea party at Institut Paul Bocuse. Other highlights include tasting apples, cheese, cider and calvados at a local apple farm; Cognac tasting at the Rémy Martin Estate; truffle hunting at a truffle farm; and visiting La Couronne, where Julia Child had her first meal," adds Bettridge.

One thing is for sure, luxury cruising is rapidly becoming synonymous with higher dining expectations, and why not, since your palate travels with you. **e**