

INSIDE VIEW:

DINING ON THE EQUINOX

**A Conversation with Fatih Korkmaz,
Restaurant Manager, Celebrity Equinox**

By

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Celebrity Cruises' Solstice-class ships offer an array of dining options. Indeed, Celebrity Equinox, the second ship in the class, pioneered some dining options beyond those that debuted on the first ship of the class Celebrity Solstice. I asked Fatih Korkmaz, Restaurant Manager on Equinox, to tell us about the options on Equinox.

The main dining room on Equinox is the sophisticated Silhouette Dining Room. This is a grand room done in a contemporary urban style. At the aft end is a two-deck high construction that looks like a sculpture but it is actually used to store wine. "The wine tower holds 2,000 bottles of wine. We are the only cruise line in the world with a selection of wine from around the world with prices from \$30 to over \$10,000 per bottle."

The dinner menu in the Silhouette is a combination of the familiar and the more exotic. On the left side of the menu are items such as

French onion soup, broiled salmon, chicken breast and grilled New York sirloin steak that are offered each night of the cruise. On the other side, are items that change every night such as lobster mélange, grilled eggplant ratatouille Napoleon and ossobuco ala Milanese. "It is our job to create the menu, choose the items from around the world, the best items from the nations. But at the same time, we listen to our guests. That is why we always have one side of the menu that is standard for a cruise and the right side change every dinner. Thus, instead of five choices, we give ten choices [of entrée] per night in the main restaurant."

Equinox was the first ship in the Celebrity fleet to introduce a flexible dining option. Under this option, a section of the Silhouette is set aside for guests who have opted for an open seating dinner. "We are open six to 9:30 so the guests can chose their own time when they want to come to dinner. They

can come at six, seven. 8:30 - - anytime.”

Although, as will be seen below, the Solstice-class ships offer quite a few dining choices, Celebrity decided to institute a flexible dining option in Equinox’s main dining room to meet the desires of some guests. For example, some “guests prefer to go to the gym at six o’clock but they do not want to have a late dinner. They go to the gym, come back at seven or 7:30 and have dinner. This gives them the privilege to come at their own time to dinner.”

Along the same lines, some guests “have very strict timing back home. They eat dinner every night at seven o’clock sharp. We don’t change that.”

One of the merits of the traditional cruise ship dining system is that the staff can prepare better if they know when the guest will be coming to the dining room. On Equinox, they are trying to administer the flexible dining system so as to maintain this advantage of the traditional system. “Most of the guests have certain times that they like to have dinner so we try to find out exactly when they wish to have dinner during the cruise. [This way,] we do not have to have them stand on line or tell them ‘your table is not ready, give us five or 10 minutes.’ We do not want to do that. When the guest enters the dining room, we should have the table ready to serve. So, we try and contact the guests so we can have that control.”

One of the problems often associated with flexible dining systems is that too many guests come to the restaurant at the same time seeking a certain type of table, usually, a table for two. As a result, guests either have to settle for a type of table that they do not want or have to return later. Korkmaz

does not see this as a challenge for Equinox. “This ship is not like any other ship. All the tables are moveable.. On most cruise lines, the tables are stuck to the floor and cannot be moved so you have to use the amount of tables you have. Here, we can move the tables to get them together for six; we can make it for 8; we can make it a table for 20. It is the flexibility we have on Equinox.”

“In the rest of the main restaurant, we have the first and second seating respectively>” As noted above, one of the chief advantages of this system is that the certainty that flows from knowing when and where a guest will be in the dining room allows for more personalized service, which has been a hallmark of the Celebrity experience.

To illustrate, service arrangements begin to be made even before the cruise starts when the restaurant receives the passenger list. “When guests come to the dining room, let’s say they are from Turkey, and sit down, the waiter knows they are from Turkey. When the waiter goes to the table, he does not say ‘good evening’ in English, he says it in Turkish. So the first impression is welcome.”

As on Solstice, Equinox features a choice of specialty restaurants. “I have Murano, which is French cuisine. [It features] more tableside service. Many items we prepared next to the table.”

“I have the Tuscan Grille, which is an Italian steak restaurant. Everything there comes through the galley but we have tapas-like items like proscutto and cheese. When the guest sits down, we give him or her these plates right away before the orders. It is more Italian-style - - there is always something to start it.”

"I have the Silk Harvest, which is mostly Asian food. It is completely different. You can choose a little bit of everything."

Each of these specialty restaurants is extra-tariff and an additional charge applies. "Murano - cover charge \$30 per person. In the Tuscan Grille - - \$25. The Silk Harvest is \$20."

Straddling the line between a main dining room and a specialty restaurant is Blu. This modernistic venue is the assigned restaurant for guests staying in the Aqua-class staterooms, which are geared toward giving the guests a spa experience. Accordingly, Blu's menu also carries more spa-like choices. "We have 240 guests that come on as Aquaspa guests. Only the Aquaspa class can have dinner there. If they change their minds and would like to have dinner in the main restaurant, they can do that. If many [of the Aquaspa] guests move to the main restaurant, we send invitations to the suites and the penthouse."

Blu is open seating. "We open the dining room at six and close at 8:30. The [guests] chose their timing. We have different menus from the main restaurant. We have items that are more light and healthy."

In addition to the specialty restaurants, Equinox offers several choices for casual dining. The largest of these venues is the Oceanview Café, which is a buffet restaurant located high atop the ship on Deck 14. It is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The stations are arranged in islands to reduce the amount of standing on line, which is often the case in buffet restaurants.

Also, there are no trays, just plates, which cuts down on the temptation to take more food than one really wants.

"In the evening, we always have a grill, pasta and pizza. You create your own pizza and you create your own pasta. We have a sushi bar, a salad bar and a cheese bar. We have a grill where you can have the meal cooked ala minute. Beside it we have food from different nations."

"[Here, you can] sit down, nice and relaxed. Coming from shore, you don't have to dress up. If you like, you can have a glass of wine. There is a beautiful view all around. In addition, we have an outside [area] where you will be able to smoke and enjoy the sunset."

Forward on the same deck is another casual venue, the Aquaspa Café. "It is open for breakfast and lunch only. [The menu is oriented toward] the light and healthy. When a guest wakes up and wants something light - - fresh orange juice, fresh grapefruit juice - - they can find that over there." The Aquaspa Café is open to all guests.

Down on Deck Five amidst the ship's public rooms is the Bistro on Five, which specializes in crepes, sandwiches and other light items. "The Bistro is open from six in the morning until two at night. It is open 20 hours. You do not need a reservation, you can just show up at the moment."

"All of the restaurants follow the same dress code. We have two formal nights and the rest are smart casual. For example, on this particular cruise, the first two days are sea days and the last two days are sea days. The first sea day we have a formal night. The second night we have smart casual as in all the ports. On the third sea day, we have the second formal night."

“On Celebrity, we are very strict with the dress codes. At the same time, we have areas for dining [for guests who] do not want to dress up [i.e., The Oceanview Café and the Bistro]. So if they do not want to dress up, they have a choice.”

Adherence to high standards “makes Celebrity different than any other cruise line.” For example, luxury

line Crystal Cruises has “two ships. Each week, they sail with a total of 600 guests. At Celebrity we sail with 15 to 20 thousand a week. Yet, the standards are the same.”