

**SPECIALTY RESTAURANT REVIEW:**

# PORTOFINO

on Royal Caribbean's  
Explorer of the Seas

by

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**T**here is a Portofino specialty restaurant on most of the ships in the Royal Caribbean fleet (notable exceptions being the giants Oasis of the Seas and Allure of the Seas as well as the relatively small Majesty of the Seas). While I have enjoyed my visits to Portofino on other ships, I was very impressed by my experience at the one on Explorer of the Seas.

The odds makers probably would not have given Explorer's specialty restaurant much of a chance of prevailing the evening that I visited. We had encountered a storm after leaving Bermuda and the seas were rough. In addition, I had had lunch that day at Bermuda's renown Elbow Beach Club and that meal had lived up to the resort's reputation. Finally, the food and service in Explorer's main dining room had been very good during the cruise and thus the ship's specialty restaurant would have to be more than very good in order to stand out.

Portofino on Explorer is located in approxi-

mately the same location as the Portofinos on RCI's Freedom class ships - - on Deck 11, starboard side, next to the Windjammer buffet restaurant. However, unlike the Freedom class ships, the entrance to Portofino is not inside the Windjammer but rather at the forward end of the specialty restaurant. This helps to give the venue more of a separate identity and less of a feeling that it is part of the casual buffet restaurant.

Inside, the room is a cheery yellow with white trim. A series of long arches frame the floor to ceiling windows on the starboard side. Italian Renaissance decorations enhance the other walls and combined with the patterned red and gold carpet, give the room an elegant air.

Portofino serves upscale Italian cuisine. Casual favorites such as pizza and lasagna do not appear on the menu. Familiar names such as prosciutto, minestrone, ossobuco and saltimbocca will be found there.



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But be ready for them to surprise you as they often are not made in the typical way.

Soon after being seated, the server arrived with a basket of various types of bread. These were not a perfunctory afterthought but rather a flavorful beginning to the meal, especially when combined with the bell pepper and mushroom toppings and the premium olive oils that were served with the bread.

The server also made a number of recommendations with regard to the menu. Rather than merely state a series of conclusions, she explained the reasons why she recommended each item and gave alternative suggestions. Such a reasoned presentation shows that the server is actually interested in the guest's experience in the restaurant and is not merely reciting a speech. In this case, it was also a sign of the friendly and attentive service that was to follow throughout the meal.

Portofino's menu is divided into appetizers, main courses and desserts.

Guests can select from a wide variety of items for the first course including soups, salads, and appetizers. The Risotto ai Gamberetti consists of three large shrimp presented on a bed of rice with a saffron sauce. The shrimp were tender, not rubbery, and mildly spicy. The rice gave the shrimp support but did not intrude upon or overpower the flavor of the shrimp.

The minestrone soup is done Genovese style. Rather than the familiar red minestrone, this is a clear soup with fresh vegetables and Parmesan cheese. It had a delightful flavor and was not heavy.

My server recommended three main courses:

First, the Spiedino di Mare, a seafood combination with skewers of lobster, scallops and salmon; Second, the Filetto di Manzo, essentially a filet mignon, which she recommended for the tenderness of the beef; and finally, for meat-lovers, the Bistecca alla Fiorentina.

I was quite pleased with the third recommendation. It was a 16 ounce T-bone steak, cooked exactly to order, tender and tasty. To accompany it I had a dish of freshly-made Fettunici Alfredo that was also excellent.

The leading dessert at Portofino is not surprisingly Tiramisu. This is a nice light cake punctuated with marinated raspberries.

Another featured dessert is Tartufo al Cioccolato. If the name Tartufo conjures up images of globes of dark chocolate covered ice cream, Portofino will surprise. The Portofino version is made up of chocolate mousse covered in a rich creamy chocolate. It is good but heavy and quite rich.

The restaurant was full throughout the night, which was particularly impressive considering the storm. I was told that such attendance is typical, particularly on shorter cruises. Most people were dressed in a smart casual style but there were also several dressed more formally.

The cover charge at Portofino is \$20 per person.