

INSIDE VIEW:

AN UNPRECEDENTED FINE DINING VENUE

Talking with Chef Maureen "Molly" Brandt
about 150 Central Park on
Allure of the Seas

by

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1 50 Central Park is the top specialty restaurant on Allure of the Seas. It is a fine dining venue. However, unlike the fine dining venues on other ships - - indeed, unlike the other venues on Allure - - the menus are not created by the line's corporate headquarters. Rather, Royal Caribbean has extended Chef de Cuisine Molly Brandt unprecedented freedom to develop the restaurant.

"It is a great position to be in where I really have carte blanche to come up with my own menus and be creative," Chef Brandt confided when I spoke with her in 150's elegant dining room.

Creativity is the linchpin of 150 Central Park.

Whereas there is room for artistry in the execution of menus designed by others, the freedom offered Chef Brandt allows for the full spectrum of culinary creativity. By allowing a young, talented chef to express her creativity in a venue where everything is top quality, Royal Caribbean is giving its guests an experience akin to dining in a celebrity chef's first restaurant - - the one that everyone recalls as having made his or her reputation.

"The food is a six course set tasting menu. I actually offer two different menus for each cruise. I offer one for the first three days and the other for the last four. Maybe the first menu is more appealing to you

than the second or the second more appealing than the first." Thus, the two menu system gives guests a choice.

Within each menu, there is not a variety of items for the diners to select from. Rather, there is one item offered for each course. "It is my choice. Basically, we are leaving the thinking out of it. You just sit down and enjoy. There is not really the option to get this or that."

Chef Brandt envisions that the menus will change over the course of her tenure at 150 Central Park. "I want it to be somewhat seasonal. In December, do I really want to put an artichoke on? Not really. It is a Spring kind of vegetable. That is why I want to change it and it is nice to change things."

"It is actually a fairly international menu. While I do have a very strong influence from French fine dining; ultimately, I am pulling from all over the place. If I were to put a label on it, I would say 'modern American' but there is an international feel to it. I have saffron; I have influences of Spain, Italy, France - - all of that."

"You are never going to find anything [on the menus] that is really way out in left field. I love rabbit but I am never going to be able to put rabbit on the menus here. They need to be accessible, easy-to-think-about items presented in an elegant fashion."

Chef Brandt designs the menus not just to present a series of tasty items but with the interrelationship of each item on the menu to every other item on the menu very much in mind. "The cooking philosophy here is balance. I am always looking for the second item to follow the first so there is a balance throughout the menu. Like if the first item is going to be bright and acidic, the next is going to be rich and luxurious so that there is a good flow all the way through the menus."

"I do not want people to get palate fatigue. I do not want them to be bored. So if I am going to use a tomato at the beginning of the menu, you are not going to see a tomato for the rest of the menu. It is always



Chef Maureen "Molly" Brandt

going to be something different; there will be different flavors."

While six courses may sound like a great deal of food, keep in mind that this is a tasting menu. The portions are not large; rather, they are designed to emphasize flavor over quantity.

Chef Brandt's role at 150 Central Park is not confined to designing the menus. Instead, she is intimately involved in their execution. The recipes are her own. She spends the morning preparing and in the evenings, she is in charge of her own kitchen, which is separate from the galleys used by Allure's other dining venues. At the end of the evening, she enters the dining room and talks with the guests. She is onboard for at



of every cruise that Allure does. "It is kind of a labor of love."

The success of a fine dining venue depends upon other things beyond just the food. "When we think about the restaurant, we really want to think about it as a whole. It is the total experience."

Accordingly, Chef Brandt has worked with Allure's sommeliers and its food and beverage management to find wines that pair with each dish on the menus. The result is embodied in the "Royal Wine Pairing," which guests can order for an additional fee. There is also an ala carte wine list that has been developed for 150 Central Park.

Another key element is the service. "The front of the house makes the biggest difference. You can have poor service in a restaurant and the guests will comment negatively about the food as well."

"I am very fortunate that they have given me the best servers here. They know I am very serious about how I want things presented; what they are talking about when they set [the dishes] down; what they need to highlight. Whenever I go and dine at a fine dining restaurant, a Michelin star restaurant, I am looking for those little details. People feel pampered when there is saucing tableside or they are adding this little thing tableside. I really think about that and incorporate that into what I am doing."

Also key is the physical environment of the restaurant. The foundation of 150 Central Park's style is Old World luxury but there are also over-sized, high-backed chairs giving it a touch of whimsy. "It is a small

venue. It is very elegant. It is well-appointed. It is kind of modern with classical influences so I want to make sure that the plate reflects that."

In sum, "the whole concept is a fine dining experience. Everything is pointed toward a pampered experience. That's what we want people to feel like when they walk in here - - from being greeted; to having their names on the menus; to the beautiful Limoge China and Riedel stemware. Top to bottom - - décor, service and, of course, the food."

Focus on the Chef

Lisa Bauer, Royal Caribbean's Senior Vice President for Hotel Operations has said: "The whole idea behind 150 Central Park is for the restaurant to take on the personality of the chef." That being the case, the question becomes who is Chef Molly Brandt and how did she become the chef de cuisine at 150 Central Park?

Chef Brandt did not plan on becoming a chef. Rather, she grew up planning to follow her parents into the medical profession. However, her life took an abrupt turn as a result of a decision to throw a birthday party for her college roommate. She did not want to have the usual undergraduate type of party and so she thought it might be interesting to have a dinner party. "I never really was much of a cook but I went out and bought all of these food magazines and started flipping through them. It was all way above my head."

Nonetheless, Brandt preserved, buying all of the ingredients and skipping classes to prepare. She followed the recipes and "low and behold they really turned out. [At the party,] everybody was smiling and happy to be there. I thought: 'Wow, this is awesome.'"

Her friends' reaction spurred her on to prepare Thanksgiving dinner a few weeks later. "After that I was hooked. It really satisfied me. It was where I was supposed to be. It was like I had been just missing something all along."

After graduating from college, Brandt attended the prestigious Culinary Institute of America, eventually becoming a teaching assistant in the Institute's French fine dining restaurant. "The Culinary Institute is what you make of it. I really threw myself into it. It never felt like school. It never felt like work so I loved it."

Part of the program was an internship, a requirement which most of the students fulfilled at a restaurant. Brandt, however, did her internship at the Food Network, preparing food for television productions such as "Iron Chef America" and "Emeril Live." "I got to do something different every day, which really expands your repertoire pretty quickly."

After her time at the Culinary Institute, Brandt worked in Beijing, Shanghai and in Italy. "Then after that I worked in Manhattan for Daniel Boulud at Café Boulud" - - a Michelin-starred restaurant.

In her spare time, Brandt dined in other fine dining establishments. "It is research and development. You really get ideas from that sort of thing."

The next step was to go into business for herself and so she returned home to Minnesota where she started her own catering firm. Maintaining the international path her career had taken thus far, she also co-founded a company that offers intimate, culinary-focused vacations in Northern Tuscany.

"I had a great business and I loved being my own boss." However, one day she received an e-mail from the Culinary Institute alumni association informing her that Royal Caribbean was holding a contest to select a chef for a fine dining restaurant on Allure of the Seas. It said: 'Win the job of a lifetime' and they laid the job out in very appealing terms. Fine dining is really where my heart is. So when I opened up the e-mail and it said you get your own fine dining restaurant [I thought] I may as well try this."

The first step was to send in a resume along with a video of a dish that the contestant would like to feature in the restaurant. "When I found out I [had been selected as] a finalist, I made it my job to win the competition."

Next, there was a two-week period during which the general public could vote for their favorite. "I

campaigned like a politician to get people to vote for me." Brandt won as "fan favorite."

"We had a month to plan a three course meal for the [final] competition. I would hold practice sessions and I made all of the food that I would make for the judges within the allotted timeframe. It really gave me an edge going into the competition because I knew exactly what I was going to delegate to my assistant. He had a very precise list and we had photos of how I wanted each dish to be plated."

"Royal Caribbean flew all of the candidates to the Culinary Institute of America." Each candidate did an interview and then prepared a meal for a panel of judges including Royal Caribbean executives and master chefs from the Culinary Institute. "I even brought my own dishes. I wasn't kidding around. Fortunately, it worked out."

Upon becoming a Royal Caribbean employee, Brandt was sent to Oasis of the Seas for a "crash course" in working on a cruise ship. Her first assignment was to cook all of the dishes that she envisioned featuring on Allure. "It was a really good lesson because it forced me to find out what was onboard and where I can find things. It was a steep learning curve but necessary so that when I got on the Allure, it was a lot easier for me. They threw me right in there but I would not really have it any other way."

After spending six weeks on Oasis, Chef Brandt flew to Finland where Allure of the Seas was in the final stages of construction. Her contract calls for her to be Chef de Cuisine of 150 Central Park for one year. "It is a unique and amazing opportunity and I am so very, very fortunate to be afforded it."