

SPECIALTY RESTAURANT REVIEW:

THE TODD ENGLISH RESTAURANT ON QUEEN MARY 2

by

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I had been to the Todd English specialty restaurant four or five times before during my 20 previous voyages on Queen Mary 2 but I had not become a regular patron. My overall impression was that it was a nice alternative venue but not sufficiently attractive to lure me away from dining in the ship's main dining room, the Britannia Restaurant, on a regular basis. The Britannia is a grand room with good food and good service done in an elegant traditional style. In addition, it is a surprisingly friendly place. Guests who sit down at a table together as strangers frequently arise as friends. Consequently, my previous visits to the Todd English had been mostly at the behest of friends who wanted to try something different.

Now that I am writing about passenger ship specialty restaurants, I felt that I should go back to the Todd English and give it the same type of evaluation that I would give the specialty restaurant on any other ship. Thus, I approached this experience with a blank slate rather than try to compare the restaurant to how it had been on previous cruises.

I did, however, start off with some basic knowledge of the restaurant. I understood that the point of the

Todd English Restaurant on QM2 is to be different from, not superior to, QM2's other dining venues. The restaurant's distinctiveness comes from preparing the meals according to the style of celebrity chef Todd English.

In order to become a celebrity chef, a chef must have a distinctive style. It sets him or her apart from people who simply cook food. It is what earns them awards. It also means that his or her cooking will not be to everyone's taste. Thus, in order to report on this restaurant I would have to come to understand Chef English's style.

To help me with this quest, QM2 Executive Chef Mark Oldroyd selected and prepared four appetizers, four main courses, and three desserts from the Todd English Menu (See accompanying article "The Chef's Choice"). While the primary purpose of this preparation was so I could photograph the dishes, I was also given the opportunity to sample each dish. This gave me a broad understanding of the restaurant and Chef English's style. I found each item to be excellent. Indeed, some were more than excellent.

Still, the basis for this review was to be a lunch

and a dinner. The lunch and dinner menus in the Todd English are significantly different and thus should yield different experiences. Would the meals provided under real world conditions be as good as the dishes prepared under the direct supervision of QM2's top chef?

The Restaurant

Located at the aft end of the superstructure on Deck 8, the Todd English is decorated in a way that is both sophisticated and whimsical at the same time. One enters through a circular foyer that is reminiscent of an Arabian tent. The walls are grey and have amphora that look as if they were recovered from some ancient ship wreck hanging in frames. In the center of the room is a deep red circular cushion.

After passing the maitre d's podium at the door, one comes to an oval shaped bar. Here, guests can enjoy tappas along with glass of champagne or a drink while waiting to be seated.

To the right of the bar is a small group of tables with a window looking out over the starboard side of the ship. Although the restaurant is several decks below the top of QM2's superstructure, the ship is so tall that even Deck 8 offers good views.

On the left side of the bar is the main dining area. This too is done in light grey punctuated by deep red cushioned benches and gauzy drapes. On the walls, large gold frames hold small works of art or else oversized mirrors. It is contemporary but playful.

The aft end of the room has floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto a pool area. This is not a great view but the windows do serve to allow plenty of natural light into the room at lunchtime.

The Lunch

The Todd English is open for lunch on sea days. There is a \$20 cover charge for lunch and reservations are required.

Chef English is an American and is best known in America. As a result, the restaurant becomes quite busy during American cruises and this was no exception. However, a large team of waiters and assistant waiters were on hand to ensure that things moved smoothly and there was no delay in ordering or in the service.

In general the service was professional and



Todd's Pizza

reserved. However, the staff would pause for a bit of friendly conversation if the guests indicated that they would appreciate a bit of familiarity.

The first item to arrive was the basket of breads. These were fresh baked and included a tasty onion bread. Instead of butter, a dish with two spreads appeared - - one made with green olives and garlic, the other with black olives and garlic. This was a first manifestation of Chef English's style - - not the everyday; combinations of different flavors flowing from fresh ingredients.

A sommelier appeared. The restaurant serves Veuve Clicquot champagne by the glass - - something one does not often see. It is an excellent brand and the non-vintage brut and the rose that are on offer are good (but expensive - - \$16.50 a glass) accompaniments to any meal.

For the appetizer, I selected the scallops with celeriac puree and warm grapefruit. This is a light dish in which the flavors of the tangy fruit heighten the subtle taste of the sea food. It is an intriguing combination of flavors although I thought more of the flavor would have been brought out if the scallops had been warmer.

The main course had no such distractions. Cooked in a stone bake oven, the pizza was piping hot when it arrived. Pizza is not usually associated with fine dining but lunch in the Todd English is intended to be somewhat more relaxed and home style than dinner. Moreover, one must keep in mind that Chef English is an American who developed his style in Italy and so it is



Surf and turf

only natural that he would turn his hand to a dish that is a favorite in both countries. His pizza featured a flavorful thick crust, plenty of mozzarella and slices of fresh tomato. On top for contrast was a small pile of fresh greens. Thoroughly enjoyable.

Staying with the home style approach, I had the selection of ice creams for desserts. While the flavors were the familiar vanilla, strawberry and chocolate, I knew by now that I could count on Chef English to do something different. The chocolate was a deep dark brown more flavorful and rich than the pale versions that typically are sold at ice cream palaces. Furthermore, the ice cream is made onboard and one could taste the freshness of the ingredients.

The Dinner

For dinner, the Todd English took on a different character. The natural light which floods the room during the day was gone. Outside, beyond the lights of the pool area, the sky was black. Inside, the lighting was low with the aura of a candle-lit metropolitan venue

The cover charge for dinner is \$30 and reservations are required..

To begin the meal, I selected the sautéed garlic shrimp. The shrimp are coated in corn meal and are accompanied by a Parmesan-crusted beef steak tomato. The juxtaposition of the flavors enhances the overall dish. Again, this is the hallmark of Chef English's style -- the combination of contrasting flavors.

Next, I ordered the venison loin. Venison is a difficult dish to prepare. It can easily become dry, tough and gamey. Todd English's venison rests on a bed of barley. It is accompanied by red cabbage and is adorned with a tasty brown sauce. The meat was amazingly tender, cutting like butter and melting in the mouth.

Of all the dishes that Chef Oldroyd had prepared for the photo session, the one that I could not get out of my mind was the surf and turf. When I am at home, I rarely eat meat but the flavor of the beef and the sauce combined with the lobster ragout compelled me to order one as a second main course.

To finish the evening, I had the date and white chocolate pudding. This dish comes with a scoop of ice cream but the subtle flavors of the pudding are the key to this item.

In sum, I was impressed by the Todd English Restaurant on Queen Mary 2. I was particularly impressed by the depth of the menu -- there were so many memorable items. The dishes are often not what you would expect them to be, combining ingredients in surprising ways. Yet, it all comes together and works amazingly well. It is not your typical onboard specialty restaurant and because it is different, it works as an alternative venue on a ship known for its fine dining.