

Will. Cruise For Food

Acclaimed chefs are now making waves on the water, so you may have a food-cation without leaving the comfort of your luxury liner, writes CHARUKESI RAMADURAI



PICTURE THIS: YOU have a free evening in California's Bay Area and want to eat at a lauded fine-dining restaurant. Everyone suggests The French Laundry. However, chef Thomas Keller's three-Michelin-star French restaurant is so popular, reservations run out a month in advance. And no walk-in guests are accepted.

The same is true for chef Nobu Matsuhisa's restaurants pretty much anywhere in the world, from New York to Perth. But on a vacation to Alaska on Crystal Cruises, you get to eat at Silk Road — the renowned chef's only formal restaurant on the seas — or grab a bite at his Sushi Bar. Nobu has been rocking the at-sea dining scene with the cruise company since 2003.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
NOBU'S BLACK COD; NOBU
MATSUHISA NOW HAS
EATERIES AT SEA; ONE OF
MARK BEST'S CONTEMPORARY
WESTERN DISHES; FINE
SCENERY AND FRENCH
CUISINE ON OCEANIA CRUISES

Welcome to the water world where you'll set sail with gourmet food and fine wines.

If you're still keen on an up close and personal experience with Keller's signature traditional steakhouse-style Lobster Thermidor and creamed spinach, then it's a Seabourn cruise for you.

Eating well at sea doesn't always have to be formal fine dining. If you crave a good old burger with fries, there's American chef-author Guy Fieri's Guy's Burger Joint on ships from the Carnival Cruise Line. After all, few can resist a "Donkey Sauce" or "Brown Sugar Barbeque Sauce" burger to be eaten by the poolside on a balmy evening.

Other big names in the cruise cuisine space

include Mark Best of Marque restaurant — which has recently closed for good — that was considered, well, one of the best in Sydney. In his new Bistro on Dream Cruises ship *Genting Dream*, he promises fresh Australian produce sourced from small artisanal sellers. And all of this presented with an Asian twist to please the palate of its clientele.

Another Aussie, Curtis Stone, has recently introduced his concept restaurant Share for "food that creates happiness around the table" onto Princess Cruises.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:
CURTIS STONE SHARES HAPPINESS
AT SEA; ENJOY GUY'S BURGER
JOINT BY AN ONBOARD POOL;
JAMIE'S ITALIAN ON THE WAVES



Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar promises Indian food beyond chicken tikka masala on Sindhu, the Asian restaurant on P&O's cruises from Britain, his home ground, while another Michelin chef Marco Pierre White is associated with P&O's Café Jardin. P&O clearly takes the importance of gourmet experiences seriously, with BBC-

famed James Martin lending his name to The Cookery Club, for guests to cook and eat with celebrity chefs.

Fine French cuisine has come to the seas with Jacques on Oceania cruises, headed by James Beard Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award winner Jacques Pépin. As culinary director, he oversees training of all his executive chefs and occasionally leads cruises, but makes sure that his signature dishes are always available — Poulet Rôti, anyone?

And Jamie's Italian is as popular on water as it is on land, with Jamie Oliver's restaurant on Royal Caribbean International cruises.

Sometimes, the chefs are not high profile and Michelin-starred, but popular in their own way, as on Celebrity Cruises.

For instance, on Celebrity Constellation, contestants and judges from the *Top Chef* TV show come aboard for cooking workshops and interaction with guests. And Holland America even has a special MasterChef cruise to the Caribbean, where stars from this popular reality show sweat it out in the ship's kitchens, instead of the studio's. And guests get to enjoy the show live, take selfies with their favourite contestants and learn some tips and tricks of the trade.

Most of the time, celebrity chefs simply lend their name to a restaurant and expertise in planning the menu, without actually being on board. And while their restaurants are open at all sailings, there are also special chef-led food cruises offered sometimes, where guests get to enjoy the star's company and cooking.

This sailing could also include cooking classes conducted by the chef, which begin with visits to local markets for fresh and native ingredients. Nobu himself occasionally gets on board for cooking workshops, book signings and premium sake tasting events.

Some cruises are also themed entirely around gourmet food — this includes chocolate, cheese, fine wines and beer. Some of the ships from Flavours of Europe have as many as 15 speciality restaurants, including a couple that offer bespoke menus from Relais & Châteaux.

Apart from on-board dining, many companies also now

offer food excursions at various ports of call. When you sail with Azamara Club Cruises, you get to "Cruise Global, Eat Local" in over two dozen European ports: Think paella in Spain and duck confit in France.

Cruises from Regent Seven Seas have a similar concept, where shore excursions include wine tasting in Monte Carlo and cheese making in Sorrento. Other kinds of offshore excursions offered by cruise companies include visits to vineyards, chocolate makers and artisanal bakers. **E**



JACQUES PEPIN HIMSELF
OCCASIONALLY LEADS CRUISES

SHIPS AND BITES

If gourmet food floats your boat (instead of liner), get on to a smaller vessel for a memorable culinary experience



Given that Peruvian food has been making waves across the world, it is not surprising that Peru-based Aqua Expeditions (which runs river cruises on locations such as the Amazon and the Mekong) has roped in Pedro Miguel Schiaffino (right) as consulting chef. His restaurant, Malabar, in Lima is on San Pellegrino's list of World's 100 best restaurants. Schiaffino himself sometimes sails on limited edition cruises on the Amazon, with market tours, cooking classes and Q&As thrown in.



In Asia, Michelin-starred David Thompson is consulting chef on Aqua Mekong (above). Also on the Mekong is Vietnamese chef Luke Nguyen's cruise for AP Touring, who offers "a look at the region through his eyes" and a banquet personally designed by him.

Down in Tasmania, ecotourism pioneer Robert Pennicott runs gourmet day cruises for small groups. On the Seafood Seduction tour, expect local delights such as oysters, abalone and rock lobster — fresh from the water — washed down with wines and beers. And if you want to celebrate your holiday with a six-course meal, then his Bruny Island

Traveller tour goes all the way from cheese and fudge, to oysters and whisky — all locally sourced.

Speaking of drinks, the Canadian Maple Leaf Adventures tugboat *MV Swell* also has craft beer and culinary cruises around British Columbia. They take on board renowned beer historian and micro-brew expert Paul Hadfield, making stops at 50 top microbreweries along the way.

European Waterways has a fleet of luxury barges, where the inland cruises promise an immersive gastronomy experience and also culinary themed specialty ones — think wine tasting and truffle hunting in France.