

## Munching With Mickey: Character Dining at Walt Disney World

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Characters have always been a huge attraction for kids of all ages at Disney parks around the world. The sight of children and adults lining up for a precious few minutes with Mickey, Minnie and the rest of the gang is something that always brings a smile to my face. But sometimes those lines can be tedious and can eat into your park time, so Disney came up with the perfect solution - the opportunity to dine with your favorite Disney friends.

It's an idea that's proved to be exceptionally popular, as many people who've tried to get reservations at places like Cinderella's Royal Table in the castle at the Magic Kingdom will tell you. However, recently it seems character dining is undergoing some major changes, with the announcement that the dinner at the Liberty Tree Tavern in the Magic Kingdom, a staple for many years, will be ending at the start of 2009. Add to that the fact that lunch will no longer be served at the Garden Grill in Epcot and suddenly character dining seems to be on the decline.

As with many changes Disney announces, it's impossible to know why the changes are being made and whether these meals may be replaced by others, either at the same restaurants or different ones, perhaps featuring different characters. As I write, however, the options available for character dining have certainly been reduced.

The Magic Kingdom was always the park with the most choices for character dining and even after the Liberty Tree Tavern dinner bites the dust you'll still be able to enjoy breakfast or lunch in the castle with Cinderella and some of the other princesses. However, there are some drawbacks to meals here. The first is that if you have boys in your party, they may not be too keen to dine amongst princesses. The second is the cost.

Eating here isn't cheap. Breakfast will set you back \$33.99 for adults and \$22.99 for children, while lunch will cost you \$35.99 if you're a grown up and \$23.99 if you're aged between 3 and 9. If you're on any of Disney's Dining Plans, this will cost you two Table Service credits, as it's classed as Signature Dining. OK, so a photo package is included with your meal, but in these days of economic downturns, it's perhaps not within everyone's budgets.

A cheaper princess option can be found over at Akerhaus in Norway,

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Epcot. It's a great opportunity to enjoy some slightly more unusual food and, as we love Norwegian cuisine, it's a real treat for us to eat here. Having said that, we also know from our various visits here that the menu doesn't meet with everyone's approval and, if you have fussy eaters in your group, it's worth checking out the menu first, before making a booking here.

Although Cinderella can occasionally be found at Akerhaus, there's no guarantee of that. If seeing her is a must, then dinner at 1900 Park Fare at the Grand Floridian is your best bet. She'll be there, usually with her prince and her ugly sisters, which can make for some great fun, especially if you're prepared to play up to the characters where you see them. This also gets a big thumbs up from us for the wonderfully unusual strawberry soup, which is a must every time we visit. Breakfast here brings slightly more unusual characters, with the likes of Alice in Wonderland, the Mad Hatter, and Mary Poppins usually on patrol.

Perhaps that's one of the biggest criticisms of character dining at Disney. You do seem to see the same characters at a variety of different restaurants and, for many years, there have been calls for a bigger selection of characters. This was perhaps partially answered by the introduction a couple of years ago of character dining at breakfast and lunch at Hollywood and Vine at Disney's Hollywood Studios. This is very much something for the youngest members of the family, with the hosting duties falling to characters from Playhouse Disney - Jojo, Goliath and the Little Einsteins.

Pooh and his friends also still hold court at the Crystal Palace in the Magic Kingdom for breakfast, lunch and dinner, although sadly, the character breakfast that once delighted us at Artist Point at the Wilderness Lodge is now a dim and distant memory.

Of the other options on Disney property, the main "gang of five" put in a lot of appearances. Understandably, you'll find Mickey at the restaurant named after him, Chef Mickey's at the Contemporary, for breakfast and dinner. His pals there usually include Minnie, Goofy and Pluto. We've always found this offers consistently good food and character interaction and of course there's the added bonus of napkin waving every so often, which younger members of your family will love!

Mickey also holds court at the Tusker House breakfast in Animal Kingdom, the newest addition to character dining, but it's Donald who takes center stage here, along with appearances from Daisy and Goofy. We were particularly impressed by the food on offer, with some very unusual breads, but found the characters to be lacking here, as they didn't seem to have much time to spend at each table or sadly much

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enthusiasm.

The same can't be said for the 'Ohana breakfast at the Polynesian Resort, where Stitch and Lilo are the main draws, along with Pluto and Mickey. The little blue alien seems to have a mischievous streak all the time and that's definitely been our experience here. This is another place that always seems to deliver good food and lots of it -- you won't leave hungry!

You won't find Mickey at the Cape May Cafe breakfast in the Beach Club Resort, but you will find his faithful companion Minnie in all her beach gear, along with those mischievous chipmunks, Chip and Dale; and Goofy. It's interesting, because Chip and Dale used to be characters you could easily find at meals, but with the loss of the Liberty Tree Tavern dinner and the cutting back of meals at Epcot's Garden Grill, they're the biggest casualty. You're now likely to only find them here or at dinner at the Garden Grill. That's a great shame, as for adults who like to have fun with the characters, these are two that always seem to deliver on entertainment.

Other perhaps lesser known character dining options can be found at the Swan, where Gulliver's Grill at the Garden Grove offers dinner every night and breakfast at weekends with appearances by Goofy and Timon.

The Grand Floridian has the Wonderland Tea Party with Alice on weekday afternoons, while for the ultimate princess experience -- and the ultimate price -- you can always try out My Disney Girl's Perfectly Princess Tea Party in the same resort's Garden View Lounge. Held on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday mornings, this 90 minute treat will set you back a hefty \$200 for you and your little girl, but for that, you do get a five-part party, including team brunch, dessert, and an appearance from Princess Aurora.

It's true that there are still lots of places to head for to enjoy dining with the characters, but it'll be interesting to see what happens over the next few weeks and months to see if any plans are announced to replace the character meals that we'll be losing shortly.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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