

Disney Dining Plan: Act II

by Dave Marx, PassPorter Guidebook Co-Author

Not long after the article was published, the web was abuzz with a big Disney Dining Plan story. As most folks put it, Disney "cut back" on the number of restaurants that would be offering the Dining Plan in 2007. This was deduced by comparing the preliminary Disney Dining Plan brochure for 2007 (a PDF download from Disney), with the current 2006 brochure. The list of restaurants "missing" was quite dramatic, including nearly all the restaurants around Epcot's World Showcase. As soon as I read the reports, I recalled the same thing happened in 2005 at around this time -- the new list came out, restaurants were missing, folks were concerned, but eventually, all the missing restaurants were returned to the list. I also noticed that nearly all the missing restaurants were managed by independent companies, including Epcot's L'Originale Alfredo di Roma and Chefs de France, and the restaurants at Coronado Springs Resort. My guess was that those organizations simply needed a bit more time to make a decision. Others wisely noted that, with Advance Dining Reservations now available 180 days prior, Disney needed to get some sort of list out to the public, pronto, even if it wasn't complete. As it turns out, this seems to be exactly what happened. Disney has revised the brochure several times, and now the 2007 Disney Dining list is virtually identical to the 2006 list. Crisis averted. All's well that ends well!

Some people wonder just how long Disney will continue offering the Dining Plan. After all, anything this good can't last. I'm here to predict that the Disney Dining Plan will last a very, very long time. I had one of those "Ah ha!" moments a while back, and realized the Dining Plan is very similar to Disney's pay-one-price theme park admission policy. Although we all still talk about "E-Ticket" rides, the days of individually-ticketed rides will never return to Disney, and I suspect the Dining Plan will follow the same path.

Why does pay-one-price work so well for Disney? Just like gamblers who believe they've got a system that will beat the house, many vacationers feel they'll be able to extract greater value from a pay-one-price ticket than they can by purchasing individual ride tickets (or ordering meals a la carte). We often calculate, "I can buy 10 ride tickets for the price of that pay-one-price park pass, so if I ride 11 or 12 rides, I'm ahead!" What we often don't realize is that according to the averages, we might have only ridden 8 rides under pay-as-you-go. The park operator just lured us into paying for two more rides than we usually enjoy and staying in the park longer than we might have (buying more stuff as a result)! Other vacationers are happy to pay a fixed price because we know that our

expenses are "capped." Nothing is more painful to Moms and Dads than reaching into our pockets for yet another strip of ride tickets. Pay it up front, and get the pain out of the way!

Fortunately for all of us, theme parks and restaurants aren't controlled by the same irrevocable mathematical odds as roulette wheels. With some study and planning, anyone can manage to ride a couple more rides or eat a grander meal than the average vacationer -- there are no mathematical formulas (or casino goons) standing in the way.

But as casino owners know, long-term, nobody can beat the odds. I am quite confident that Disney has analyzed their costs very carefully, and on average Disney is not losing money with the pay-one-price dining plan. They've probably succeeded in encouraging most families to spend more on dining with Disney than they would have otherwise. There are definitely more people eating at table-service restaurants, as anyone who has tried to get dining reservations lately can attest. Disney's free Dining Plan deal offered for September vacations was so popular that they temporarily converted several counter-service establishments to table-service buffets to absorb the added demand. This is in September, one of the slowest months of the Disney year. Disney managers reported that demand for reservations was greater than during peak holiday periods!

So, we're eating more grandly and feeling like we're getting more than our money's worth. As we get better at extracting value from our dining experience, I'm sure the price for the Dining Plan will simply ratchet-up, just like park admission. (Have you noticed that the added park-going "efficiency" provided by FASTPASS has resulted in higher park admission prices?) As perceived value increases, prices increase to bring that perceived value back into line. From Disney's perspective, "great value" is too generous, "fair value" is just right.

Now, here is some news, some great tips from our readers in response to the previous Dining Plan article, and one correction.

Everyone wonders whether Advance Dining Reservations (407-WDW-DINE) are really necessary during "slow" periods. Thanks to the demand generated by the dining plan, the answer is a firm, "Definitely!" Walk-up seating at the most popular spots, like Epcot's Le Cellier, is nearly impossible to get. So even if you want to keep your plans loose, make sure you have a reservation in your back pocket just in case, or plan to phone a few hours prior to meal time.

DVC Members can now purchase the Dining Plan when they are staying "on points." Contact DVC for the details.

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There are rumors that Annual Passholders will also be able to purchase the Dining Plan. Keep your eyes on Mickey Monitor, the Annual Passholder newsletter.

Correction: In the original article, I noted that all dining credits are encoded on a single Key to the World card. Actually, any card can be used to access the dining credits. Your party can split up, and everybody will still be able to eat. Disney keeps track of your credits on its central computers, so it doesn't matter which card you use -- all credits will be available and accounted for. You can request a print-out of where the credits were consumed at any time, by asking your resort lobby concierge. We recommend you do this several times during your stay, as we have encountered computer errors.

Tips: Snack credits can be used to purchase packaged Disney cookies (and other items) in resort gift shops. They're a great take-home gift item.

Since you must buy the plan for every day of your resort stay, folks who arrive in the late evening and depart in the morning may have some excess credits to use. Reader Holly H. even treated strangers to a meal, rather than let the credits go to waste. It's a great way to spread some magic!

Tanya B. suggested an alternate strategy for dining at Signature Restaurants. She and her husband spent two credits on a single adult meal, and supplemented it with a cash purchase of one entree (the cheaper one, of course). They split appetizer and dessert, stayed "on budget" for the Dining Plan, and certainly got a much better value than if they had used four credits for two full meals.

Reader S.G. reports seeing dessert coupons at counter service restaurants so that folks who wanted to get their Dining Plan dessert later had an easy way to do it. So, keep your eyes open at the cashier, and be sure to ask.

With Epcot's Food and Wine Festival nearly upon us, it's good to know that snack credits can be used for many of the snack items offered around the World Showcase. Look for the DDP icon on the menus.

Many people have asked whether sharing meals on the Dining Plan is allowed. For counter-service and a la carte restaurants, definitely yes. You cannot share buffet or family-style meals, though. Meal sharing frees-up credits that can be used to pay for Signature Dining experiences, a third meal during the day, or a treat for friends/relatives that are not on the dining plan.

And the big tip for the day… Be sure to visit the Feasting and Snacking forum at the PassPorter message boards. Disney Dining Plan is a hot topic there, so you'll find more tips and lots of expert advice.

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