

FOOD & WINE

Cruising the Mediterranean with Jacques Pépin.

In the fall of 2007, Food & Wine Trails was asked to create a series of special food and wine experiences in the Mediterranean for Jacques Pépin's cruise in the following Spring to the Mediterranean. Food & Wine contributing editor Jane Sigal and a staff photographer accompanied the group and her account is below.

Larry Martin, President, Food & Wine Trails.

On a sailing of the luxurious M/S Regatta, the star chef croons in a karaoke contest, plucks wild bay laurel from a roadside bush, eats flaky Greek pastry and teaches spectacular recipes inspired by his Italian shore excursions.

By Jane Sigal

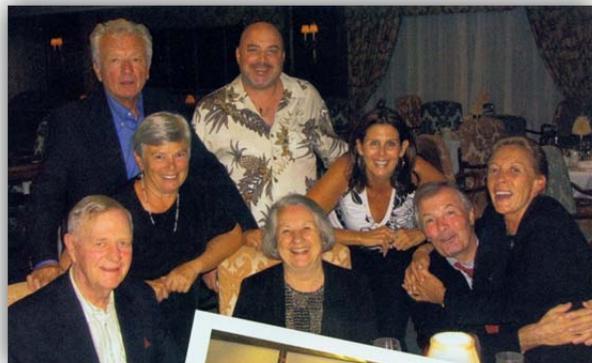
It was karaoke night aboard Oceania Cruises' M/S Regatta, midway through its spring sailing from Barcelona to Athens. Up on Deck 10 Forward, the French chef Jacques Pépin and his posse—lifelong pal and pastry wizard Jean-Claude Szurdak and Jean-Michel Gammariello, the general manager of New Haven, Connecticut's Union League Café—were cracking each other up. In a delightful tenor, Pépin gamely crooned along to "My Way"—the American version of "Comme d'Habitude."

"You should sing at the karaoke contest," said a fan in the small crowd of onlookers.

"I would do 'Autumn Leaves,'" Pépin replied.

"That's one of my wife's favorite songs."

"I know that one," said the fan. "It's from that movie with Joan Crawford."



"No, no," said Pépin. "It's called 'Les Feuilles Mortes,' by the French poet Jacques Prévert. Americans think all songs were written by Americans."

Pépin is the executive culinary director of Oceania, the three-ship luxury cruise line founded in 2002. For the first few days of this sailing, however, he traveled like any of the Regatta's 684 other passengers—working out in the ship's fitness center, lounging on his private stateroom balcony, eating his way through the four restaurants (even sampling an interpretation of his signature roast chicken served on Versace plates) and doing karaoke. But by the fourth day, it was time for the chef to get to work.

When the Regatta anchored off the Italian Riviera, in the Ligurian province of La Spezia, the chef stepped back into the role of cooking celebrity to lead the first of several culinary excursions, a visit to the small village of Portovenere. I joined Pépin and 30 passengers on a tender that took us to shore, then on a bus that passed bright pastel houses overlooking the water. Our destination was Ristorante Le Bocche, owned by Gianrico Massa. Standing under a white market umbrella on Le Bocche's terrace, Pépin gave a lesson on *crudo*. The sun glinted off the Bay of Poets as Pépin deftly filleted then sliced a shiny branzino. He seasoned the paper-thin slivers with salt, drizzled them with lemon juice and olive oil, then topped them with a piquant mix of basil leaves, capers, lemon zest, pine nuts and scallions. "In the time it takes for the salt to melt, the fish is cured," he said.



Pépin's *crudo* made for a delicious lunch starter. Then Le Bocche's chef, Francesco Cutrì, served a warm seafood salad with a fabulously briny pistachio, anchovy and caper sauce. The pasta course featured *trofie*, Liguria's squiggly rolled pasta, along with green beans and sliced potatoes tossed in the region's famous emerald pesto.



For the rest of the afternoon, the group climbed the town's steep, winding streets, taking in the magnificent bay views before circling back to food as word spread of a quayside pesto vending machine. Most picked up a 10-euro jar—later confiscated at the airport as a potentially dangerous liquid greater than three ounces.

When the *Regatta* anchored the next morning in Civitavecchia, Pépin led a class to the Castello delle Regine estate in the Umbrian town of Amelia. Wild fennel the size of small trees brushed the side of the bus; parasol pines lined the crests of hills beyond fields of artichokes. Castello delle Regine comprises almost 1,000 acres, including vineyards, olive groves, a hunting reserve and lodgings. The Castello's chef, Andrea Goracci, greeted the group with crates of vegetables from the property's garden: sweet peas, zucchinis, purple artichokes, leeks, fava beans, radicchio. But Pépin saw ingredients growing all around him. "Smell this," he said to Szurdak, breaking off the branch of a shrub and sticking it under his friend's nose. "It's bay laurel. I put it in the microwave and dry it." The warm air was fragrant with the sweet, dusty smell of acacia trees. "These flowers make great fritters," Pépin said, pointing to the white blooms overhead. Estate manager Maurizio Ghiori and owner Livia Colantonio took the group on a tour. They strolled past vineyards of Sangiovese, Montepulciano and Syrah, varieties in the estate's Rosso di Podernovo blend, to see the farm's most famous tenants, the rare white Chianina cattle. One of the largest cows in the world, the Chianina breed is also ancient—it may date as far back as the Etruscan era. Italians favor its tender, lean meat for dishes like *bistecca alla fiorentina*, a thick grilled T-bone steak. "Fifteen-hundred pounds of muscle," Pépin declared, visibly impressed.



In the Castello's airy cooking-demonstration room, Pépin held up a piece of Chianina beef. "This is the shoulder," he said, grabbing Szurdak as a stand-in. "In Italy they often use the fillet to make carpaccio, but the shoulder has a better taste. Here, Claude, you chop it—but don't eat it." "In Paris he cooked for three presidents, and they're all dead," Szurdak deadpanned, making quick work of the chopping by using two chef's knives at once.

The students loved the steak tartare, which Pépin seasoned with hot sauce, mustard, lemon juice, fresh green onions from the garden and the estate's own spicy olive oil. "We put in a raw egg yolk, but it's OK," Pépin assured everyone. "I know the chicken."

Pépin abdicated his teaching role for the third expedition, a Sunday lunch at the Montevetrano winery in the Southern Italian region of Campania. The estate, owned by Silvia and Anna Imperato, is famed for its concentrated red, a spicy blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and

Aglianico grapes. Critic Robert M. Parker, Jr. praised the first vintages—with the result that it is now almost impossible to buy a bottle.

Silvia's spirited sister Anna took charge of the meal. With Pépin, Szurdak and Gammariello as her assistants, she prepared Neapolitan *polpettone*, a pork-and-beef meat loaf enriched with grated provolone cheese. "You have to understand with your hands," she explained, in charmingly imperfect English. "Would you like to understand?" she asked one student, inviting him to knead the mixture.



Pépin's last cooking class took place onboard the *Regatta*, using ingredients gathered from a profitable shore excursion to Messina, Sicily. Pépin, Szurdak and Gammariello went ashore with Oceania corporate chefs Eric Barale and Franck Garanger to explore the city's rough-hewn produce market. They sampled Sicily's small, sweet Ganzirri mussels and Messina's specialty, a nearly black smoked *ricotta salata*. "You could make a super risotto with this," Barale said. Garanger picked up purple eggplants nearly the size of footballs and received a present of a bunch of basil from the market gardener. Pépin imagined serving the gorgeous albacore tuna with an oregano, caper and shallot salad. Szurdak tucked baskets of strawberries under his arm.

It was chilly that evening as guests gathered on the pool deck for dinner, starting with cocktails and canapés. Pépin stepped behind the demonstration stove to prepare the first course, a kind of mussels *marinière* flavored with fennel and tomatoes purchased at the market. For the second course, a risotto, Garanger sautéed eggplant until it was so smooth it melted on the tongue. After Pépin served his pan-seared tuna steaks, Szurdak whisked Marsala, egg yolks and sugar to make a frothy sabayon for his strawberry dessert. As a memento of the dinner, Pépin presented each of the guests with a watercolor menu he had painted that afternoon of a seascape filled with keeling sailboats.

When the *Regatta* docked the following day in the port of Katakolon in Greece's Peloponnese, Pépin slipped back into the role of anonymous tourist—almost. In Monemvasía, a fortified town on the southeastern tip of the Peloponnese, a few Oceania passengers spotted him and lured him to Marianthi tavern. They made a late breakfast of the restaurant's superlative hand pies stuffed with wild greens, dill, mint and feta cheese.

That night, Pépin sang again. At the ship's karaoke contest, before serving as judge, he finally performed "Autumn Leaves." In French, of course.