

STOWAWAY

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Culture and cuisine with Silversea



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Culture, cuisine and a pinch of SALT

Chef Nicole Ponseca is showing us the right way to eat rice with our fingers. “Pick up a little, squeeze it into shape and pop it into your mouth.” As someone who doesn’t even like to peel oranges with my hands, I hesitate. What is wrong with knives and forks anyway?

By Jane Archer

The answer is simple. Culture and tradition. I am at a Kamayan buffet, a favourite Filipino gathering where diners eat with their hands. Before me, the table is strewn with rice topped with crustaceans, while squid-like creatures from the deep are impaled on sticks.

My eyes alight on a whole roasted chicken within reaching distance; when we’re given the green light to tuck in, I’m there first, tearing off a drumstick

with my bare hands. Not the done thing in Mayfair (or even on a cruise ship!) but quite OK here.

I’m in Coron Island in the Philippines, on day two of a Silversea cruise from Manila to Singapore, trialling a new initiative they have developed called Sea and Land Taste (SALT). The aim, as the name suggests, is to encourage cruisers to take a fresh look at cuisine as they travel the oceans, taste it of course, but more importantly learn how it has influenced different cultures around the world.

It’s certainly different. It might only be our second day but so far I’ve tasted a tuber that can kill you unless it’s properly prepared (clearly I’m still here, but I didn’t like it), eaten chicken liver mixed with burnt corn (odd mix of textures but rather nice) and tried a strange tomato meringue with a pickle concoction (yummy!).

SALT doesn’t launch until next year – it will debut on new ship Silver Moon when that enters service in August 2020 – but because it is such a unique

concept, Silversea wanted to test it on real people. And that’s where myself and few other ‘guinea pigs’ came in.

The programme is being put together by Adam Sachs, an award-winning food journalist chosen because the company wanted someone to bring diversity to the role - a story-teller rather than a celebrity. “SALT is not just about food but also understanding it,” Barbara Muckermann, Silversea’s chief marketing officer, told me.

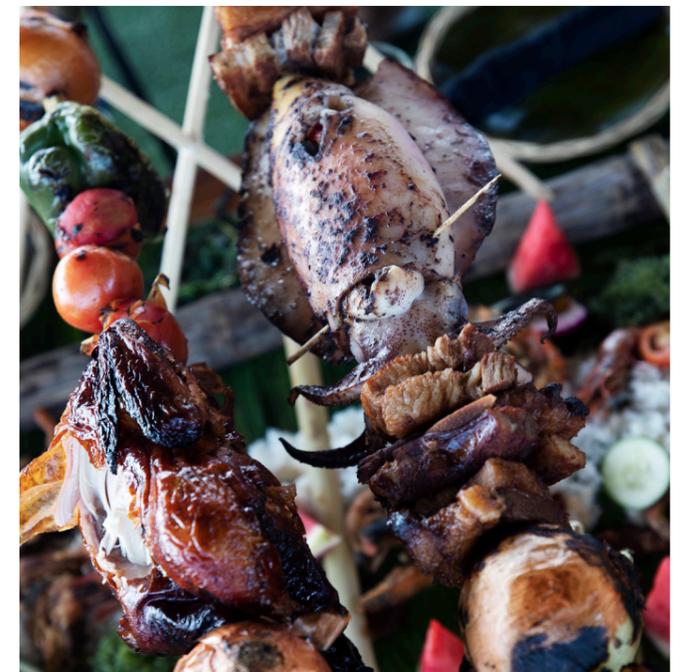
It has been carefully created to allow cruisers to dip in as much or as little as they wish. They can join excursions and see first-hand how food has impacted on and contributed to the culture of the countries they are visiting. They can attend on-board talks and cooking demonstrations by local food experts and chefs. Those who just want to taste some local food can head to a new SALT Kitchen restaurant. If they want to try their hand at cooking local dishes, the new SALT Lab is the place to be.

Philippines

From Manila, we cruised to Coron, then took a local boat to Lajala Island, home to the Tagbanua people. The island is not far from Coron but a million miles off the tourist trail and just the kind of place Silversea is looking to take people on its SALT tours as rather than visiting temples or souvenir shops (there were none of either anyway) we were here to meet the villagers, learn about their way of life and taste the fruit and veg grown here.

They had prepared a magnificent spread. Cassava, bananas, mango, cashew nuts. So far so delicious. But we all hesitated when the kurot came around. It’s a poisonous tuber that’s safe to eat only if soaked in sea water for three days. I was expecting it to be salty but it was tasteless. The village ladies said they fry it and then refry it, which I guess gives it some flavour; personally I’d stick to the cashews!

Back on Coron, it was time for more food – this time the aforementioned Kamayan buffet. Eating with your fingers, and especially squishing rice, does seem very alien to those of us brought up on the niceties of a knife and fork, but it really does bring everyone together and makes dining something of a celebration, which is what it is all about.



Kamayan buffet, Coron Island

US-born Filipino chef Nicole Ponseca was our SALT expert for this half of the cruise. She started out in advertising but moved into the restaurant world just over 10 years ago and set out on a mission to ‘take back’ her culture by introducing Filipino food to the world.

She’s been a great success. She has two Filipino restaurants in New York, Jeepney and Maharlika, cook books and TV appearances to her name. Joining us for SALT, was another opportunity to spread the word about her homeland’s cuisine.

As well as talking about the way Filipino food has developed over the centuries (“Spain brought us pork and spices, the Americans introduced government and spam”), Ponseca cooked us Kinilaw na hipon (cured shrimp with shallots and ginger) and Adobong manok (chicken with vinegar, soy sauce and black peppercorns), which was yummy.

The fermented fish was less appetising. The fish is mixed with salt and rice, and then left in a cool place for up to three weeks. I’m afraid I passed.



Malaysia

From Coron we sailed to Kota Kinabalu, where we started the day with breakfast in a local café. Not your usual eggs and porridge, of course, but oodles of noodles. The super spicy ones were my favourite, but there were also Tuaran mee lihing (fried noodles in rice wine), Sabah tom yam (prawns) and Kon lau mee (noodles with pork).

Breakfast over, Grace, our local guide, took us around Central Market, where shoppers were snapping up everything from live crabs and chickens (they are slaughtered when you buy them, which is tough for western sensibilities but the meat is certainly fresh) to squid and dried anchovies.

Then we were off to Kokol Haven, a resort in the hills above the city, for a cooking class with chef Mona Correem (chicken curry since you ask) before rolling up our sleeves and preparing a few Malaysian dishes of our own.

This was a day of eating because we not only tucked into a buffet lunch the resort had prepared for us – chicken soup with bamboo shoots, stir fried vegetables, beef with spices, Mona’s chicken curry, various fish and shrimp dishes – but that evening we were whisked off by speedboat to Manukan Island for a barbecue banquet on the beach. Such a treat.



Nicola Ponseca cooking demo, top; Kamayan Buffet, Coron Island, left; Fruit in a Kota Kinabalu market, below.



Over the Moon

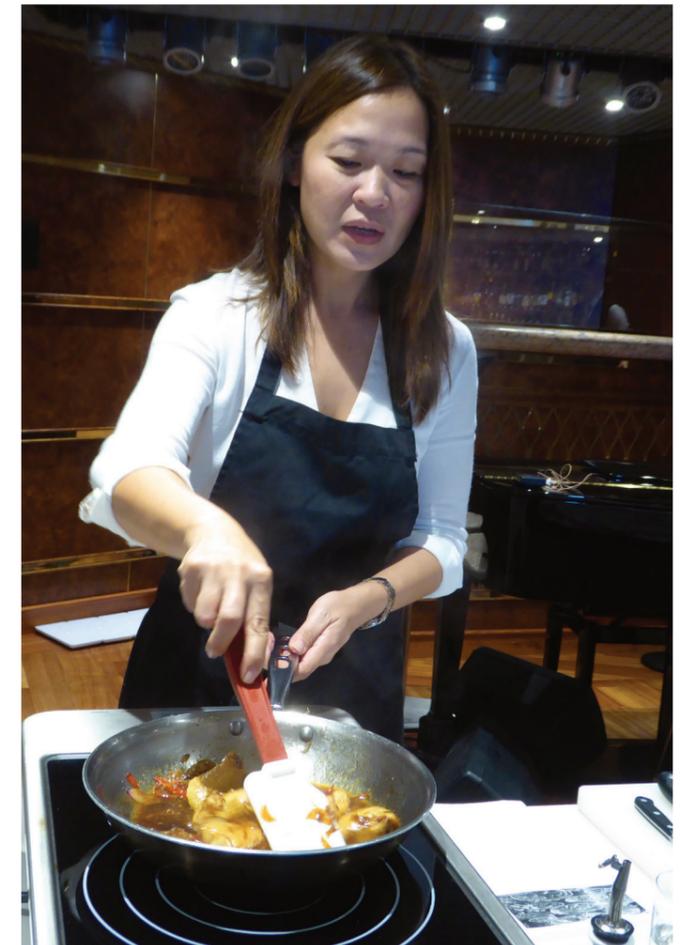
A new restaurant and cooking school are being added to Silver Moon as part of the new Sea and Land Taste initiative.

The vessel, launching in August 2020, will be the same size as Silver Muse (596 passengers) and have the same décor, but several venues are changing to accommodate the SALT experience.

Most notably, a SALT Kitchen restaurant will serve dishes linked to the destinations being visited, while a SALT Lab offers hands-on cookery classes for up to 20 people. These venues replace Indochine and La Dame on Silver Muse. A new SALT bar is being added between the Kitchen and Lab.

La Dame, a French fine dining restaurant, moves to a new, bigger location on deck eight, while the Connoisseurs Club is relocated to deck nine and gets its own outside area.

Silver Moon makes its debut in the Mediterranean with an inaugural 11-day cruise from Trieste to Civitavecchia (Rome) departing August 6 2020. Subsequent sailings will go to Barcelona, Lisbon, Piraeus (Athens) and Venice. Details of the SALT tours and experts are currently being finalised.



A stall at a Kota Kinabalu market, left; Annette Tan gives a demo on how to cook chicken curry, above.



Singapore

That evening Singapore food writer Annette Tan joined us on board and spent the next two days whetting our appetites for our arrival in her country.

It is a fascinating place – half the size of London and a melting pot of nationalities, cultures and cuisines that all live happily together. In between cooking favourite dishes such as Ayam tempura (chicken dish with onion, chilli and soy sauce) and chicken curry served with roti jala pancake, Annette told us about the Peranakan culture, which developed from Chinese labourers who arrived in Singapore and married Malay women.

They created a unique way of life, style of dress and cuisine influenced by their own and

British traditions – can you believe high tea and shortcrust pastry? “China feels as foreign to Straits-born Chinese people as it does to a Westerner,” she explained.

She also told us about hawker centres, which are to Singaporeans what apple pie is to the Americans. They grew up from street stalls that sold food on the cheap and became so numerous the government had to step in. Instead of being shut down, hawkers had to take a pitch in a hall. It cleared the streets and of course was much more hygienic.

You can get everything from chicken rice and minced pork noodles to curries, beef rendang and more in the hawker centres. They also have tables and chairs for diners. Most importantly, the

food is still great value at £1.50 or so per dish.

Annette is concerned that young Singaporeans are losing sight of their culture because they can't be bothered to cook. With prices like that, somehow I'm not surprised.

Next Issue

The second part of Stowaway's focus on the innovation approach by cruise lines to new menus and dining options follows soon. Keep an eye on your inbox.

Keith Ellis

Editor

kmellis@btinternet.com