

*A week in the Caribbean with prominent nutrition advocates
and a team of guest chefs devoted to macrobiotic cooking.*

A Holistic Holiday at Sea

By MATT SUTHERLAND
Photography by MIKE BELLEME

The cruise industry is understandably sheepish that their all-you-can-eat midnight buffets, pasta bars, and ice cream sundae stations add up to an average passenger weight gain of eight pounds per week. But not all itineraries will super-size you with meals of questionable nutrition, as my wife and I discovered when we booked a “Holistic Holiday at Sea” aboard the *Costa Fortuna*. This cruise radically changed how we eat, how we think about food, and how we feel.

Aside from the promise of a week in the Caribbean, what sold us on the trip was the company of prominent nutrition and health advocates like T. Colin Campbell and Neal Barnard. The Italian ancestry of the *Fortuna* also appealed — we knew the ship would take their food and wine offerings seriously. The one thing that made us hesitate was a “special dining plan,” featuring a team of guest chefs devoted to macrobiotic cooking. We expected to escape to more palate-friendly fare from the seven other dining rooms and room service.

Flash forward to the Thursday of cruise week, and we are giddy with happiness, bouncing around the ship like two helium-filled Disney characters. The meals have been superb. Beans, greens, rice, and stewed fruit, mostly prepared in Asian-inspired dishes and always five courses, whether breakfast, lunch, or dinner. We’ve been having a fantastic time pairing the meals with interesting Italian whites and reds from underappreciated regions like Friuli, Sardinia, and Collio, priced reasonably. The ship has already made call at Key West, Grand Cayman, and Roatan, Honduras, with the next day’s stop at Cozumel and our winter-white upper-Midwestern skin is starting to gain some color.

But mostly, the cruise has won us over with a “Why didn’t I know this?” variety of knowledge — especially on the subject of animal protein. Dr. Campbell, professor emeritus of nutritional research at Cornell and author of *The China Study*, explained the misunderstanding between high-quality and low-quality protein. Animal flesh has all the efficient, eight essential amino





acids necessary to promote growth, but Campbell realized this quality didn't equal the greatest health benefits to humans. His classic research shows that low-quality plant proteins are preferable because they encourage slow, consistent synthesis of new proteins in our bodies. Very small amounts of animal flesh and milk will do you no harm, but you should not exceed 5 to 7 percent of your overall food intake. Cancer cells, present in everybody, are triggered awake in diets where animal- and dairy-based protein exceeds 12 percent total. Researchers found they could turn cancer on and off by adjusting protein intake above and below that threshold. As Campbell stated emphatically, "Eat a plant-based diet, and you will live longer and healthier."

Neal Barnard, M.D., went on to detail the environmentally disastrous farming practices used to grow the cows, pigs, chickens, and farm-raised fish we eat — practices responsible for the nearby 8000-square-mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. And Will Tuttle, Ph.D., who trained in Korea as a Buddhist

monk and wrote *The World Peace Diet*, explained the "sphere of compassion" mind-set built into the Buddha's five precepts of sin. Suffice it to say, what happens in America's factory farms is unconscionable if you subscribe to the notion of "showing compassion to all living things," as the Buddha instructed.

That final night at dinner, steaming past the coast of Cuba to our east, with a wonderful glass of Brunello di Montalcino, we shook our heads in disbelief at the radical food changes we were making. We can do this, we realized. Maybe not 100 percent vegan but nearly, and we'll still have plenty of fun in the kitchen, working with new Indian and Asian dishes. In the simplest terms, we realized there are serious ramifications for the food we eat, and to deny it is irresponsible.

The 2010 cruise is March 21–28. For info, go to atasteofhealth.org.

Matt Sutherland is freelance writer and co-founder of the Epicurean Classic, an annual food and wine event held in St. Joseph, Michigan.

