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# Taste of Health Holistic Holiday at Sea IV

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The luxury cruise ship “Costa Magica” is a small floating city—a kind of ocean-going mini-Miami Beach. Fourteen stories high and a thousand feet long, it accommodates about 2,700 guests and 1,000 crew members. The ship contains a 1,500-seat theatre, three restaurants including one that seats 950 people, a health spa and gym with sauna and steam room, three swimming pools, a casino, and numerous shops, bars, and nightclubs.

To the newly arrived guest, the ship can be overwhelming—a bewildering Escher-like maze of stairways, passageways, decks, and dead-ends. I spent much of my first hours on board trying to figure out where exactly I was, how to get to where I wanted to go, and on several occasions, whether it was in fact possible to get “from here to there.”

Unashamedly devoted to high-end vacationing, the Costa Magica seems an unlikely venue for Macrobiotic study and practice. Since the introduction of macrobiotics into North America almost fifty years ago, there has been a tradition of educational camps and conferences. The first summer camps—attended by George and Lima Ohsawa—were held on Long



DINING ON THE COSTA MAGICA—PHOTO © MIKE BELLEME

Island and in the Catskill Mountains in the early 1960s. Today, the Kushi Institute holds an annual summer conference—usually on a New England college campus—and George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation has its annual high-in-the-mountains, camp-out-under-the-stars French Meadows gathering. One expects, therefore, a simple, *vivere parvo* ambiance, not white tablecloths and elegant table settings, and such atten-

tive waiter service that, if you are not watchful, your dish of soba-with-carrot-sauce will be whisked away by a white-coated Filipino waiter before you are done with it.

Nevertheless, the Costa Magica proved to be an excellent venue for the fourth annual Taste of Health cruise. Over seven hundred guests sailed the Caribbean for a week in early March, enjoying three gourmet macrobiotic-vegan meals (or the Kushi-Institute

approved healing diet) a day, attending a variety of food- and health-related classes offered by some thirty teachers, relaxing in the sun and sea air, and partying and socializing with old friends and making new ones.

For this cruise, Taste of Health founders, Sandy Pukel and John Belleme, enlisted *Vegetarian Times* as a co-sponsor, and ads in that magazine and elsewhere attracted many people who knew little or nothing about macrobiotics. Balancing the ample numbers of macrobiotic faithful were vegans, raw food vegans, ovo-lacto vegetarians, as well as some people with no particular dietetic orientation. One achievement of the cruise was to introduce a large number of people to the macrobiotic philosophy and way of eating.

The food was excellent as planned and prepared by master chef Mark Hannah and his assistants. Breakfast included miso soup, a cooked grain, greens, as well as a buffet of fresh fruit, cold cereal, toast, and jam. Each lunch and dinner included an appetizer, soup, salad, entrée, and dessert served by a bustling army of waiters. The meals were of gourmet quality



**COOKING WITH MASTER CHEF MARK HANNA—PHOTO © MIKE BELLEME**



**HEALING TOUCH WITH OHASHI (FAR RIGHT)—PHOTO © MIKE BELLEME**

and bespoke the elegant surroundings. A new cookbook, *Grains and Greens on the Deep Blue Sea*, co-authored by Mark and Sandy provides recipes for many of the dishes served on the cruise. At each meal one could replace or supplement the A Taste of Health offering with selections from the ship's standard menu. This included very good vegetarian and fish dishes.

The educational menu was also large and varied. It included exercise, yoga, meditation, Pilates, and massage classes; twelve cooking classes and demonstrations; and lectures on macrobiotics and on broader issues of diet and health. On board were familiar macrobiotic teachers and counselors such as Lino Stanchich, Denny Waxman, Christine Pirello, and Warren Kramer as well as vegan advocates Dr. Neal Barnard and Dr. Colin Campbell. Yogi Amrit Desai, Venerable Henepla Gunaratana (Bhante G), and Rabbi Loring Frank offered spiritual perspectives from, respectively, the Yogic, Buddhist, and Jewish traditions.

Haruo Kushi, who holds a doctoral degree (Sc.D.) from the Harvard School of Public Health, gave very interesting talks on his research into the relationship between diet and health.

Haruo is a senior researcher at Kaiser Permanente and is recognized as a leader in the field of nutritional epidemiology. He has been instrumental in helping to change the dietary guidelines of organizations like the American Cancer Society. Haruo's work has demonstrated the validity of many of the principles of macrobiotics—the correlation between dairy food and breast cancer, for example—set forth by his father and others literally decades ago.

In a class called, "Bone Voyage to Osteoporosis," Robert Pirello shared his experience of being diagnosed with osteoporosis after almost thirty years of standard macrobiotic eating. An active marathon runner, Robert broke his foot while hiking and it took six months to heal. The doctor told him he had the bones of an eighty-four year old man. This revelation propelled Robert into a study of the relationship between bone health and diet. He concluded that the macrobiotic diet he had been following did not have enough oil, fat, and protein for a physically active man. Robert adjusted his diet and was able to regain bone health. His new book, *B.O.N.E.S. — Beating Osteoporosis Naturally*, describes this recovery experience and the lessons he learned



**MORNING JOG ON DECK—PHOTO © MIKE BELLEME**

from it.

Stops at ports provided sightseeing and shopping opportunities that balanced the educational activities of the cruise. The first was in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The *Costa Magica* docked right at the downtown area, and many people went to sample the local restaurants and nightlife.

The next morning, we were at St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, home of the oldest Jewish synagogue in the Western Hemisphere and of some very beautiful beaches. I took a bus to famed Magen's Beach, but it was only partially visible due to a thick covering of tourists. A flock of pelicans diving for fish in the shallows provided a memorable spectacle.

La Romana in the Dominican Republic was a hot, run-down, somewhat depressing town with a sugar factory and lots of unemployed young men sitting on and riding around on motorcycles. Venturing in on foot, I was soon happy to return to the ship.

Our final stop was on Grand Turks Island, a slender atoll seven miles long and the home to 4000 people, almost all of whom are descendants of slaves brought from Africa centuries ago. The island used to produce salt, and there are still many large

sea water evaporation ponds. At the dock is a huge cluster of luxury shops selling the usual array of duty-free liquor, cigarettes, watches, jewelry, and designer clothes and accessories. Past that though are long stretches of beautiful sandy beach where one can walk in quiet and swim in the warm turquoise Caribbean waters.

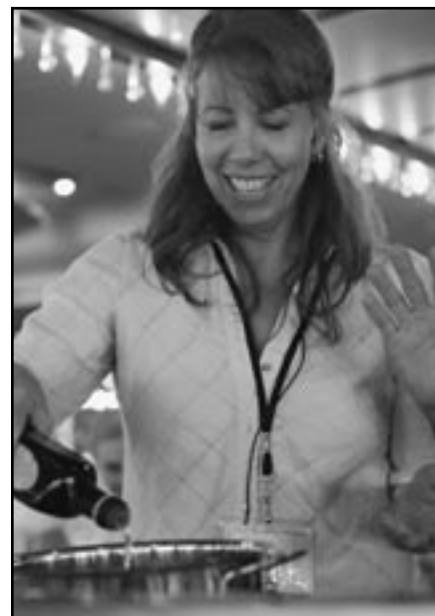
The dominant experience of the week, however, was of the cruise culture of the *Costa Magica* and of the Taste of Health subculture within that. As with any cultural excursion there were a variety of experiences. Most were pleasant, some "interesting" rather than pleasant, and a few not-so-pleasant ones. The food, the wide variety of classes—on cooking, exercise, macrobiotic theory and practice, et al.—the socializing, the parties, the sea, the sun, and the night sky were all great. On the other hand, the ship's glitzy décor, the occasional whiff of second-hand cigarette smoke, the loud ambiance of the casino and the bars, and the thought that the ship was burning thousands of gallons of diesel fuel to ferry us around in a circle were disconcerting. It should be noted though that the *Costa Magica* has the highest rating possible for environmental protection measures for

cruise ships. All trash and sewerage is processed on board and back in port. Nothing is discharged into the sea and the ships engines have advanced pollution control devices.

Sandy Pukel, John Belleme, and their co-workers at Taste of Health are doing macrobiotics and the broader holistic health movement a service. They are providing a vacation and educational opportunity for macrobiotic people and for anyone interested in wholesome food and a healthy lifestyle.

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*Ronald E. Koetzsch, PhD has been involved in macrobiotics since 1967. He was a longtime teacher at the Kushi Institute and writer for East West Journal. Ronald currently teaches at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California and is editor of Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education. He is also a professional standup comedian, and on the cruise gave performances of his one-man show, "Any Idiot Can Make You Laugh and I Can Prove It." Ronald also taught a class on "Macrobiotics Beyond Food" and gave a workshop on humor called "You are Funnier Than You Look."*



**CHRISTINA PIRELLO TEACHING—  
PHOTO © MIKE BELLEME**