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**MASS – MARKET US – CARIBBEAN CRUISE TRAVEL DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR CULINARY TOURISM**

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ABSTRACT

Culturally themed dining is a popular offering on mass-market cruises operating in the US-Caribbean market, with companies often marketing these experiences as opportunities for immersion in societies perceived as foreign. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted every aspect of cruise ship dining. As an intimate activity that brings people together through the sharing of food and culinary memories, dining on cruise ships as it was pre-pandemic is no longer feasible during a global event that asks people to stay apart. Cruise lines and authorities responsible for regulating the industry have implemented important safety measures to protect passengers and crew onboard, as well as locals at destination cruise ports. This article argues that these same safety considerations obscure advertised representations of cultural authenticity in spaces of dining, reducing the possibility that guests will view cruise dining as opportunities for culinary tourism – as immersion in the societies represented. In considering how COVID-19 restrictions

and mandates have unintendedly impacted the production of culinary tourism on cruise ships and at ports of call, this work seeks to pave the way for future research on the pandemic's implications for cultural tourism.

KEYWORDS: cruise ship; cruise industry; culinary tourism; cultural tourism; cultural encounters; COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Cruise travel is one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry. Evolving out of transatlantic passenger shipping, the modern cruise industry¹ saw consistent annual growth for much of the twenty first century, peaking at 29.7 million passengers in 2019.² Industry control is highly concentrated, with Carnival Cruise Lines (CCL), Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines (RCCL), and Norwegian Cruise Lines (NCL) holding over 80 percent of global market shares. While the US-Caribbean market dominates, Mediterranean cruises remain popular, as Asia and Australia emerge as growing destinations.³

For all the amenities and leisurely activities mass-market cruise lines such as CCL, RCCL, and NCL offer their passengers, dining is perhaps the most important. Modern cruise lines draw on a

¹ The modern cruise industry began in the late 1960s with a trend towards mass-market cruise travel, after the introduction of increasingly affordable commercial air travel among other factors forced transatlantic shipping lines to restructure the passenger shipping industry. Laura Jane Lawton and R. W. Butler, "Cruise Ship Industry—Patterns in the Caribbean 1880–1986," *Tourism Management* 8, no. 4 (1987): 329-343.

² "Number of Ocean Cruise Passengers Worldwide from 2009 to 2020," Statista, August 4, 2021, Accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/385445/number-of-passengers-of-the-cruise-industry-worldwide/>.

³ Ross Dowling and Clare Weeden, "The World of Cruising," in *Cruise Ship Tourism*, edited by Ross Dowling and Clare Weeden (Boston: CABI, 2017), 1-3.

historical tradition of offering clientele fine culinary experiences at sea. Initially emphasizing French-influenced or Europeanized fare, today's floating resorts contain an upwards of a dozen restaurants evoking cultures the world over. I have argued that culinary tourism plays a central role in the marketing and production of mass-market cruise experiences in the US-Caribbean market. Companies advertise a culturally diverse range of dining experiences as a means for passengers to metaphorically tour distant lands, while the ship itself transverses destinations marketed as foreign.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has added operational unpredictability to an industry that has spent decades honing its ability to control the logistical flows of goods and people in complex environments – in perpetually mobile ships, but also in spaces across the multiple countries that ships visit on a single voyage. This increased risk has dealt a significant economic blow to mass-market Caribbean cruising. Many cruise lines stopped operating altogether for months at a time.⁵ Capacity limits were implemented either voluntarily or to meet CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) requirements during periods of operation. Owing to the continued impact of these limits, the economies of scale central to the profitability of mass-market cruise operations can no longer be used to their full potential.⁶ Expediting the implementation of contactless technology and upgrading air filtration systems are additional economic costs tied to

⁴ Shayan S. Lallani, "Mediating Cultural Encounters at Sea: Dining in the Modern Cruise Industry," *Journal of Tourism History* 9, no. 2-3 (2017): 160-177.

⁵ Nancy Trejos, "Cruise Lines Scramble for Ports in Covid Storm," *Travel Weekly* 79, no. 12, March 2020.

⁶ While the economic impacts of the pandemic on the cruise industry were significant, even forcing some companies to consider bankruptcy, that is not the focus of this paper. For more information on the monetary cost of the global phenomenon as it pertained to cruising, see Godwell Nhamo, Kaitano Dube, and David Chikodzi, *Counting the Cost of COVID-19 on the Global Tourism Industry* (Berlin: Springer, 2020), 135-158.

the pandemic.⁷ However, the pandemic has also impacted cultural activities on cruises, central among them dining. As an intimate activity that brings people together through the sharing of food and culinary memories, dining on cruise ships as it was pre-pandemic is no longer feasible during a global event that asks people to stay apart.

This article outlines some of the shifts that Royal Caribbean Cruise Line (RCCL) has implemented to its dining operations and food-themed shore excursions in the US-Caribbean industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While its key competitors Carnival and Norwegian have also incorporated stringent measures to meet CDC guidelines – for instance requiring eligible guests to be fully vaccinated and mandating face coverings for indoor spaces –⁸ this article focuses on RCCL because that company has elaborated the most on how the pandemic impacted their approach to dining. Initial research shows that the risk of contracting COVID-19, as well as mitigation measures that companies take to safeguard passengers, influences how some guests experienced cruise ship dining and the social aspects surrounding it.⁹ However, given the emphasis that mass-market cruise lines place on geographically and ethnically themed dining, the pandemic limits how companies convey those cultural representations and how passengers in turn receive them. In considering how restrictions and mandates have impacted the production of culinary tourism on cruise ships and at ports of call,

⁷ Johanna Jainchill, "Cruise Lines' Contactless Technology: Once Novelty, Now Covid-Era Necessity," *Travel Weekly* 79, no. 49, December 7, 2020; Johanna Jainchill, "In Covid Fight, Cruise Lines are Focusing on Clearing the Air," *Travel Weekly* 80, no. 2, January 11, 2021.

⁸ Some of these measures were mandated by the CDC, "Cruise Ship Guidance," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 9, 2022, Accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/cruise/index.html>.

⁹ Aleksandar Radic, Michael Lück, Amr Al-Ansi, Bee-Lia Chua, Sabrina Seeler, António Raposo, Jinkyung Jenny Kim, and Heesup Han, "To Dine, or not to Dine on a Cruise Ship in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Tripartite Approach Towards an Understanding of Behavioral Intentions Among Female Passengers," *Sustainability* 13, no. 5 (2021): 2516.

this work seeks to pave the way for future research on the pandemic's implications for cultural tourism.

CRUISE SHIP DINING & COVID-19

The theming of food, built environment, and labor are central to cultivating opportunities for culinary tourism on cruise ships. As previously argued, through the replication of these commodified themes across onboard restaurants symbolizing different cultures, guests are made to feel as though they can experience the world on a ship.¹⁰ However, while Royal Caribbean continues to advertise culturally themed dining using references to authenticity and traditionality,¹¹ safety mandates related to the COVID-19 pandemic hinder the production of these experiences in practice. Studying RCCL's portrayal of its Izumi Hibachi & Sushi Japanese restaurant demonstrates this gap between marketing and reality. Royal Caribbean promises diners in its sushi restaurant "incredible flavors from Tohoku to Tokyo."¹² Marketing its hibachi as "A Far East Feast" and "an exotic Asian-inspired dining experience," it appears that a central tenet of Izumi is to transport guests to the heart of Japan.¹³ Built environment and labor are also themed to augment the supposed traditionality of this "authentic Japanese offering,"¹⁴ for instance through the strategic placement of artwork around dining rooms and symbolism on

¹⁰ Shayan S. Lallani, "The World on a Ship: Producing Cosmopolitan Dining on Mass-Market Cruises," *Food, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2019): 485-504.

¹¹ This article's use of "authentic," "traditional," or "immersive" to describe cultural practices are not meant to evaluate the authenticity, traditionality or immersion of onboard dining; rather, these terms are used to describe how cruise lines advertised their experiences and how passengers may have in turn perceived them.

¹² "Izumi," Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/cruise-dining/izumi>.

¹³ "Izumi Hibachi and Sushi," Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/cruise-dining/izumi-hibachi-sushi>.

¹⁴ "The Wonders of Hibachi - At Sea: Royal Caribbean's Authentic Japanese Offering Feeds and Delights," Royal Caribbean International, April 19, 2017, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/blog/the-wonders-of-hibachi-at-sea/>.

menus.¹⁵ Before the pandemic, Royal Caribbean focused its marketing heavily on the conviviality of the experience. The company's video for Izumi from 2016 begins by showcasing a chef dazzling guests around a communal table with spectacle. He spins utensils on his fingers as guests look on in awe. "The good thing about hibachi or teppanyaki," attested Michael Gilligan, Director of Culinary, "it's dinner and a show." The chef, he tells us, needs to know how to cook but also to entertain. Travis Kamiyama, Executive Sushi Chef and Consultant for Izumi, states that guests engage with the chef and get a live cooking demonstration here, though the entertainment aspects are balanced with "authentic flavors of Japan." Thus, Royal Caribbean hoped that this experience would serve as a tour of Japan through intimate interactions with the chef, surrounded by both loved ones and strangers at communal tables of eight.¹⁶

Requirements around guest safety and comfort related to the COVID-19 pose challenges to the interactive experience Izumi promised. Royal Caribbean continues to emphasize some interaction between chefs and guests, stating that "an expert chef works right at your table."¹⁷

However, the evidence suggests that this interaction has been reduced. Chefs continue to perform to the gaze of diners, but one video from October 2021 shows that those chefs are now masked.¹⁸ Another passenger video from July 16, 2021 depicts barriers between communal benches in front of the sushi bar and the sushi preparation area, while most guests present at that time sat at individual, socially distanced tables, served by masked waiters.¹⁹ Even so, it is important to note that chefs were not masked in other videos, for instance one from April 2021 onboard *Allure of*

¹⁵ Lallani, "The World on a Ship," 494-96.

¹⁶ "Cooking Up A Storm: Hibachi Chefs Delight Izumi Guests on Royal Caribbean," Royal Caribbean International, December 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCYfVA1DWS0&t=83s&ab_channel=RoyalCaribbean.

¹⁷ "Izumi Hibachi and Sushi."

¹⁸ "Oasis of the Seas | Izumi Hibachi Experience Dinner and Entertainment | Royal Caribbean," Cruising With JT, October 10, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t97Rfo0f4eE&ab_channel=CruisingWithJT.

¹⁹ "SEA DAY #2 | Izumi Review, Room Tour, COVID Test | Adventure of the Seas | Solo Cruise," Zach the Traveling Man, July 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HItBRgxsUBE&ab_channel=ZachtheTravelingMan.

the Seas.²⁰ These discrepancies speak to the quickly shifting requirements imposed by the pandemic and by that same token the relative unpredictability of cultural experiences that guests could expect. As Royal Caribbean outlined on its website, “Health and safety protocols, guest conduct rules, and regional travel restrictions vary by ship and destination, and are subject to change without notice.” For those reasons, Royal Caribbean disclaimed that “imagery and messaging” on its website “may not accurately reflect onboard and destination experiences, offerings, features, or itineraries.”²¹ Thus, though chefs tossed food into the mouths of passengers before the pandemic in a show of personalized engagement, such intimate experiences are no longer as feasible.

While crucial to passenger and crew wellbeing, safety measures imposed by the pandemic undercut the cultural immersion that themed restaurant environments are advertised as supposedly offering. Take for instance Royal Caribbean’s Samba Grill Brazilian restaurant, where “succulent slow-roasted meats are carved tableside in the tradition of southern Brazil’s gauchos.”²² Royal Caribbean portrays the tableside meat-cutting experience as an expression of Brazilian culture. Such culturally themed activities are central to producing opportunities for culinary tourism, which – through dining – encourages patrons to metaphorically leave home and tour societies perceived as foreign. However, the company’s promise to regularly disinfect high-touch surfaces as well as requirements mandating masks for staff members can disenchant Samba of the iterations of Brazilian culture that Royal Caribbean imbued into the built

²⁰ "ROYAL CARIBBEAN CRUISE VLOG: Allure of the Seas Izumi Hibachi Unlimited Dining & Best Sunset at Sea," Bucation, April 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHIBjwFNCLQ&ab_channel=Bucation.

²¹ "Getting Ready to Cruise," Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/the-healthy-sail-center/getting-ready-to-cruise>.

²² "Samba Grill," Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/cruise-dining/samba-grill-brazilian-steakhouse>.

environment – however appropriated or invented these representations were in the first place – thus severing cultural immersion.²³ Witnessing the disinfection of a nearby table, scanning a QR code to access the menu, and being attended to by masked and gloved crew members gives pause to the process of immersion so important to the production of culinary tourism, instead reminding passengers that they are not so distanced from the realities of the pandemic that they perhaps hoped to leave at home when they boarded the cruise ship.

As cruise ships operating in the Caribbean tour an upwards of four countries weekly, COVID-19 regulations imposed by those nations pose another layer of complexity around the production of cultural encounters and the representation of these experiences by cruise lines. In advertising its local shore excursions, Royal Caribbean asks guests to “Discover Your Own Immersive Experience.” Its repertoire includes “locally-taught culinary classes and land tours infused with culture and history.”²⁴ So important are food-centric shore excursions that Royal Caribbean dedicates an entire section to “Culinary Delights.” While mass-market cruise lines have even historically retained a significant degree of influence in mediating these short trips for their passengers,²⁵ they could not hope to control every aspect of experiences that ultimately took place in other countries (the exception being company-controlled enclaves such as private islands). However, owing to safety procedures crucial to managing the pandemic that have been implemented by different Caribbean nations across different levels of government, there may

²³ For Royal Caribbean’s requirements on mandatory crew masking, as well as the use of gloves in some circumstances, see “Royal Caribbean FAQs: How are crew member areas and rooms cleaned?,” Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/faq/questions/how-are-crew-member-areas-and-rooms-cleaned>. For the company’s disinfection practices pertaining to high-touch surfaces, consult “Royal Caribbean FAQs: What are your health and sanitization standards on the ship?,” Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/faq/questions/what-are-your-health-and-sanitization-standards>.

²⁴ “Shore Excursions & Cruise Guided Tours,” Royal Caribbean International, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.royalcaribbean.com/booked/shore-excursions>.

²⁵ Lallani, “Mediating Cultural Encounters at Sea,” 173-75.

now be significant discrepancies between the levels of cultural immersion promised in shore excursion advertisements at the time of booking, and the activity as passengers experience it in reality. This is especially true considering that COVID-19 regulations differ in each country visited, in some cases even locally. Though these regulations are important to protecting locals, passengers, and crew, they can impact the perceived authenticity of shoreside culinary experiences. For instance, feeling a genuine connection with local inhabitants is a key motivator for cultural tourists.²⁶ Mass-market cruise passengers on Caribbean itineraries consistently suggested that desires for meaningful engagement with locals motivated their searches for the most ‘authentic’ fare at ports.²⁷ Masks and social distancing obscure these culturally intimate connections, as does the removal of material culture used to theme built spaces to make room for social distancing. Thus, as was the case onboard ships, safety procedures designed to protect guests, local entrepreneurs, and seafarers alike have the unintended consequence of limiting the perceived immersion of culinary shore excursions, additionally generating unpredictable cultural experiences because local laws pertaining to the pandemic can and do change between the time of booking and sailing (sometimes a discrepancy of one year). In these ways, shore excursions rendered unpredictable owing to the pandemic impact transmissions of local cultures, and by that same token the cultural representations that guests take back home with them. These unpredictable experiences can also reduce profit margins for cruise lines and entrepreneurs alike owing to refund requests from dissatisfied tourists.

²⁶ Dean MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3 (1973): 589-603.

²⁷ Consulting the “Cruise Foodies” forum on the website Cruise Critic reveals hundreds of users asking one another about “authentic” eateries at Caribbean ports, as well as “traditional” dishes one should try during their visits and how to procure those foods. Many of these individuals suggested that they searched for such experiences out of a desire to connect with locals, or to live as the locals do, if only for a few hours. Some even specifically sought to dine at the same eateries that local inhabitants frequented, Cruise Foodies, Cruise Critic, Accessed February 9, 2022, <https://boards.cruisecritic.com/forum/125-cruise-foodies/>.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted how mass-market cruise lines operating in the Caribbean produce cultural encounters vis-à-vis dining for their clientele, as well as how passengers interpret the meanings that companies attempt to discursively convey through these experiences. Shifting safety measures implemented by cruise lines and external actors (including the CDC and officials in Caribbean nations) lend a degree of unpredictability to the production of opportunities for culinary tourism specifically, and to the passenger cruise experience more generally. As this article has suggested, mandates central to the continuation of cruising safely negatively impact the immersive aspects of culturally themed dining.

It is too early to determine whether these unintended cultural consequences will detract prospective cruisers from booking cruise vacations. Further research along this avenue should explore the importance of perceived cultural immersion to passengers dining at themed restaurants, and ultimately the emphasis guests place on such experiences in the overall context of the cruise vacation. On the other hand, it is equally crucial for any such study to consider whether passengers would be comfortable dining onboard or at ports if those safety measures did not exist. As mass-market cruise lines continue to address pandemic-related challenges with adaptive business models, they must also consider the above questions and respond with dining safety protocols that satisfy guest comfort if the industry is to remain profitable.

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