

Inflight appetite

From menu planning to logistics, we look at the behind-the-scenes process of catering onboard meals

It's rush hour when I arrive at Gate Gourmet's airline catering centre near Heathrow airport. A number of transatlantic flights have just landed and it's time to offload the equipment. Cars are replaced by bumper-to-bumper aluminium carts, while beeping horns are substituted by the cacophonous clattering of crockery. Trolleys are wheeled towards industrial-sized dishwashers, where containers of all shapes, sizes and materials are deposited onto conveyor belts, not dissimilar to those at airport security. Within five minutes, they roll out spick and span (if only I could have one of these appliances at home). This might sound like the end of a story, but it's just the beginning. Washed and ready, these containers are about to embark on their next journey, carried in carts labelled with airport codes TLV (Tel Aviv), JFK (New York) and PVG (Shanghai).

Gate Gourmet, a subsidiary of Swiss company gategroup, looks after clients such as Virgin Atlantic and joint venture partner Delta and caters to several visiting long-haul carriers. Outbound and inbound meals are often produced by different companies, as most airlines prefer to stock fresh produce rather than load an additional set of meals (and excess weight) for the return leg. Unbeknownst to me, I had already experienced Gate Gourmet's meals on board a Korean Air flight to Seoul, (ironically, on a visit to the Korean Air



Catering facility – which in turn caters for 22 visiting airlines). In addition to food and alcohol, airline catering companies also take care of everything from toilet paper and amenity kits to pillows and blankets, with their facilities resembling a hybrid of Costco and Ikea.

Kitchen consistency

In the kitchens, there's an equally industrious air. Staff dressed head-to-toe in scrubs work across several assembly lines to prepare the food, adhering to a 'golden sample', which is a visual representation of what the dish should look like. I watched as staff accessed meal specs on an iPad and followed the guidelines to the letter, using weighing scales to measure the food and plate them accordingly. It's a hypnotic, geometric

At Gate Gourmet, staff access meal specs on an iPad and follow the guidelines to the letter

FROM LEFT: Gate Gourmet staff at Heathrow; the spring menu aboard Virgin Atlantic



WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER



process, with identical meals laid out en masse.

Once cooked in the hot kitchen, the meals are blast chilled and transported in refrigerated vans to the cold kitchen. It is here that the meals are portioned, labelled, and once again chilled before they are transported to the aircraft in refrigerated vans, ready for heating in the ovens onboard.

Airlines must abide by strict food safety standards to avoid instances of food poisoning at 35,000 feet. These are developed by the International Flight Services Association (IFSA) and dictate that meals must be created and consumed within 72 hours. The gold standard, however, is 48 hours. This means that everything must run like clockwork. If one cog is out of place, the whole operation would fall apart.

It's always been a mystery to me how meals make their way to the inflight tray table. Perhaps you've also sneaked a glance into the galley, watching as cabin crew complete the preparation like a choreographed troupe, opening and closing identical-looking trolley doors in the narrow space before they

transform into waiters along the aisle.

As it turns out, the behind-the-scenes action in the air is similar – albeit on a much smaller scale – to the ground. Onboard crew have heating and plating guidelines to ensure consistency across the network. In this social media age, the look is equally as important as the taste, with passengers sharing photos during their journey. “It drives the level of passion and consistency that we want to see onboard the aircraft,” explains Antony McNeil, global food and beverage director at Singapore Airlines (SIA), adding that the “food must be Insta-worthy”. Plus, airlines can freely keep an eye on competitors’ service and find out who’s at the top of their game. In the most recent *Business Traveller* awards, Qatar Airways took home the prize for best inflight food and beverage – but it’s all to play for this year.

Flavour profiles

Caterers generally develop menus a year in advance and run presentations for clients, laying banquet tables with a range of dishes to sample. The challenge is creating dishes that work in a pressurised cabin environment, where passengers’ senses are dulled. Times are changing, however, with cabins on Boeing 787s, A350s and A380s pressurised to a lower altitude and kinder to our taste buds. “It allows us to inject more moisture into the cabin space so you’re having a more realistic dining experience – as you would in a restaurant,” says McNeil.

The main trend now is local and seasonal produce that offers a sense of place, from laksa to tacos



“Your sinuses and body aren’t dehydrating as quickly, and the effect of altitude isn’t as severe,” he adds.

Air conditioning is another helpful improvement, as it prevents unwanted smells from permeating throughout the cabin. We’ve all rolled our eyes upon discovering that our neighbour has packed an egg sandwich for the flight, but thankfully such odours are less noticeable in modern cabins. “In the old days people would say that salmon, garlic and onion were off limits,” agrees McNeil.

While there is more room to manoeuvre with whiffy ingredients these days, choices

FROM LEFT: Korean Air’s airline meal assembly lines and new regional vegan meals; Turkish Airlines’ new menu sources most of its ingredients locally



are still affected by the market. Salmon, for instance, is currently an expensive commodity in the UK, so you may see white fish onboard instead. Brexit, too, has complicated matters. “The food supply chain no longer operates as one,” explains Mark Turner, managing director for gategroup, UK and Ireland. “There are additional checks with much more paperwork, which adds time, cost and complexity,” he adds.

Farm-to-flight

Despite such complexities, caterers are far more adventurous than they once were. The main trend at the moment is local and seasonal produce that offers a sense of place. “There’s nothing like taking your seat in the cabin and experiencing local flavours,” says McNeil, with SIA offering the likes of laksa and chicken satay on board. Since the flight kickstarts your travels, the dining experience in the air ought to introduce you to the destination – or conversely, provide your last taste of the cuisine en route home.

On recent trips with Virgin Atlantic I got into the Texan spirit by indulging in butternut squash tacos en route to Austin, and continued my South African journey →

Gate Gourmet’s monthly consumption numbers at LHR:

2,000
salmon fillets

9,000
beef steaks

11,000
chicken thighs

18,000
chicken breasts

20,000
meals produced daily

42,000
yoghurt portions

210,700
individually wrapped
bread rolls

6,500 kg
tomatoes

10,000 kg
of compound salads

AVIATION



THE WOW FACTOR

Cast your mind back to the golden days of travel, when joints of roast beef ready to be hand-carved made their way down the aisle, along with Champagne and caviar. While this full-scale glamour belongs to another era, some airlines are still injecting a sense of occasion into the inflight dining experience.

The cherry on top

Delta is keeping its passengers cool with the return of its Delta One dessert cart on international flights where customers can build their own ice cream sundaes, choosing from toppings such as whipped cream, cookie crumble, fruit compote and chocolate chips. United Airlines also offers this service to its business class passengers on long-haul routes.

Serviceware is also being overhauled, with lighter and reusable packaging materials favoured

with malva pudding on the way home from Cape Town. “[There is] no question that airlines are opting for more route-specific ingredients,” states Turner. Indeed, Turkish Airlines has launched a new inflight menu for economy and business cabins, which sources 80 per cent of ingredients from local farmers and producers – dishes include Adana kebab and *lahmacun*, a pizza-style flatbread topped with spiced mincemeat.

Requests for special meals have also increased, with airlines debuting plant-based options in recent months. Korean Air went the extra mile this year, producing a vegan menu that is also regional. The airline’s Korean-style vegan meals are served across all cabins on international routes departing South Korea. I experienced the meals firsthand in April (see businessstraveller.com/features/experiencing-korean-air-vegan-meals) with flavour-packed dishes that held up well in the cabin setting. My favourite was the roasted shiitake mushrooms, which had a crispy consistency.

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as whipped cream, cookie crumble, fruit compote and chocolate chips. United Airlines also offers this service to its business class passengers on long-haul routes.

Sky-high tea

You might be heading overseas, but Virgin Atlantic will cure any homesickness with its Mile High Tea, served in Upper Class and Premium. Passengers are offered three finger sandwiches along with a warm scone with cream and jam and mini patisseries, including a red, white and blue Battenburg, naturally.

Custom cuisine

JetBlue has partnered with New York’s restaurant group Dig to provide its economy passengers on transatlantic services with a “build-your-own menu”. Customers can pick one of three main courses, including a veggie option, along with two out of three sides.

Starry chefs

Passengers onboard Singapore Airlines flights can reserve a meal designed by the carrier’s International Culinary Panel via its “Book the Cook” service, featuring the likes of Matt Moran in Australia and Georges Blanc in France. SIA is not alone in partnering with chefs for its offerings in premium cabins – see our feature ‘Smart Traveller: our guide to famous chef partnerships in the air’

Etiquette lessons

Not sure how to eat *bibimbap*? Korean Air has your back. The carrier has installed a series of dining videos on the IFE on how to best enjoy local cuisine. You’ll be a master by the time the plane lands in Seoul.



Heathrow Express turns 25

This summer Heathrow Express celebrates 25 years of connecting London with the world



The preferred choice for business travellers

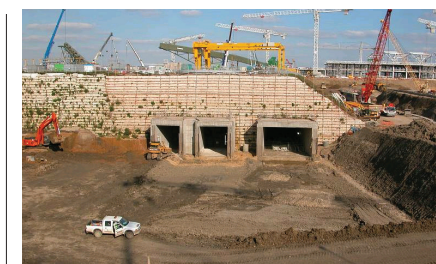
e-tickets. Heathrow Express has retained a lot of loyal customers as a result of continual enhancements to the customer experience, including a dedicated onboard service team.

To mark its 25th anniversary, Heathrow Express has launched a series of campaigns to commemorate the milestone.

Passengers can travel in a newly wrapped Class 387 train, with a specially designed carriage boasting a shower of vibrant confetti, bold signature brand colours and a large “25” displayed on

the body of the carriage, capturing viewers’ attention while it zips through London.

Mark Eastwood, commercial strategy lead, said: “Since 1998, we have been committed to providing a fast and reliable service dedicated to ensuring passengers arriving or departing Heathrow Airport can easily connect to central London. Our talented onboard team are experts in ensuring each passenger has a great experience when travelling with us. With the pandemic now behind us, Heathrow Express is excited to welcome thousands of people each day onboard our trains, a testament to our outstanding reputation.” heathrowexpress.com



ABOVE: New Class 387 train; construction of rail tunnels

Heathrow Express, the only direct express rail link between Heathrow Airport and Paddington station in central London, proudly celebrates its 25th anniversary this summer. Since the launch of its service in June 1998, over 100 million passengers have travelled on the 15-minute direct train, revolutionising the commute between London and the UK’s busiest airport.

Heathrow Express has become the preferred choice for business and leisure travellers seeking a comfortable, swift, and relaxed transit option. With amenities including complimentary wifi, onboard digital entertainment, spacious seating, ample luggage space, and more, passengers can rest and unwind during their journey. Business First ticket holders can also take advantage of Fast Track at Heathrow Airport security.

Since 1998 Heathrow Express has been a pioneer in adapting and integrating advanced technologies and industry-leading solutions. In December 2009, Heathrow Express made London Paddington the first UK railway station to offer flight information display screens and was the first UK train company to launch a fully functional train ticketing app, enabling passengers to use





20 per cent of inflight food and drink is untouched, either binned or incinerated

materials favoured on the sustainability front. “Every airline and food service business around the world is looking at opportunities to draw down on single-use plastics,” McNeil explains. Across the industry, airlines are swapping out plastic for bamboo, kraft paper and reusable trays. SIA has introduced serviceware made from Forest Stewardship Council-certified paper for its economy cabins on flights under three and a half hours, while Virgin Atlantic has crafted its hot meal container in economy class from plant material that remains after the extraction of juice from sugar cane.

Waste not, want not

One issue with creating huge volumes of food within tight timeframes is waste. According to trade body IATA passengers generate six million tonnes of waste per year – 20 per cent of which is untouched food and drink. I grimaced as entire trays of untouched food with clingfilm still intact were tipped into an industrial-sized bin at

Gate Gourmet’s facility. At home you would save it for the following day, add it to compost or donate it to a foodbank. Airlines unfortunately don’t have this luxury, as the waste has to be handled in accordance with EU legislation, meaning that it is binned or incinerated.

Smart technology, however, has promising potential. “Better data insights can enable you to predict sooner what the demand is, so you can adjust the load accordingly,” explains Turner. Emirates Flight Catering, for instance, partnered with AI technology provider Winnow in 2020 to record and analyse food waste, and better estimate food production.

Some airlines are instead putting the onus on customers. Japan Airlines’ ‘Meal Skip Option’ enables passengers to opt out of the main meal on all international routes 25 hours prior to departure. The initiative, however, may not appeal to those flying from Europe to Japan, with stomachs undoubtedly set to rumble during the 14-hour trip.

ABOVE: Singapore Airlines’ inflight dining experience in business class on an A350 aircraft

Indeed, 78 per cent of our readers said they would not skip an inflight meal to help reduce food waste in an online poll carried out by *Business Traveller* in May.

Another solution is pre-ordering, which informs caterers of the demand on-board and reduces the amount loaded onto the aircraft. This option has become more popular since the pandemic, with Gate Gourmet seeing pre-ordering double over the past two to three months. Air France has also recently introduced a meal pre-selection option, available up to two weeks before departure.

Few people get to peek behind the curtain of the airline catering process and grasp the logistics, scale and skill involved. As McNeil says: “A lot of people will step back and say, ‘I had no idea, I didn’t realise it was that difficult!’” Perhaps next time you’re having an inflight bite (or seasoning your home-cooked meal with the salt and pepper shakers you unashamedly pinched from a Virgin Atlantic flight!) you’ll savour the moment even more with a greater appreciation of the complexities involved. **BT**

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