

What's cooking?

In the battle of the skies, airlines are using their in-flight food to stand out from the competition. Rose Dykins reports on what's being served up



Only a few years ago, the food served on many airlines was a private affair. Now, with onboard wifi becoming more widely available, people are instantly able to share what they're eating in the air via Twitter with #nofilter. It means airlines are increasingly being held to account for insipid curries or rubbery omelettes, and there is unprecedented pressure to deliver high-quality food.

Certain carriers are embracing the challenges and opportunities that social media presents, and are even allowing it to influence what is served in their cabins. In 2013, ANA began its annual "general election" for economy class in-flight meals. This allows passengers to vote via Facebook, Twitter and Chinese microblogging site Sina Weibo to choose which meals will be served on international flights from Japan the following year. More than 12,000 people voted last year, with the chicken leg and minced meat in yakitori soy sauce and the cheese hamburger steak securing a place on the 2015 menu.

The rising cost of air travel, society's fixation with healthy living and the trend for switching to organic or carefully sourced ingredients in our homes mean that we are expecting more from our plane food.

'People now expect to see things on a plane that they would see in restaurants'

"The race is on to keep pace with demand within the limitations that we have of preparing food at 30,000 feet," says Joost Heymeijer, senior vice-president of in-flight catering for Emirates. "People now expect to see things on a plane that they would see in restaurants. On top of that, it needs to be healthy, trendy, look good, and served by people who know what they're talking about."

CREATIVE COOKING

An airline's onboard offering is also a key portal for communicating value to its customers, which is why carriers keep conjuring up inventive ways to entice us with what's in their kitchen.

Last November, Qantas introduced a new dining concept for its economy class cabin, offering meals that were 50 per cent larger than before, and double the number of choices, including a healthy option – typically grilled fish or a salad.

How did it offset the cost of doing this? Kylie Morris, the airline's head of international creative development and customer experience, says: "Our catering team has worked hard to streamline our processes

Left from top: ANA's tonkotsu ramen; Cathay Pacific chocolate and goat's cheese swirl, and foie gras, mushrooms and pickled blackberries; Qantas's casarecce pasta, barramundi curry, beef fillet; SAA's panna cotta **Right from top:** Air France grilled cod and slow-roasted veal; BA's pulled pork; Qantas lamb koftas, SAA smoked salmon; Qatar Airways feta baklava; SAA cheese



behind-the-scenes, allowing us to invest 40 per cent more time and money into the meals and service we provide customers.”

These changes include eliminating butter sachets in favour of “garlic butter-infused rolls”, and introducing new plates that won’t require serving trays, allowing crew to serve and clear dishes up to 30 minutes faster.

Airlines are also getting more creative when it comes to showcasing their dishes. In November, BA launched its Sound Bite soundtrack. Available on its in-flight entertainment system, the 13-track playlist offers the best songs to listen to while eating certain dishes, based on findings about how music influences our tastebuds. Apparently Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* is the perfect accompaniment to a roast dinner, while Madonna’s *Ray of Light* boosts the sweetness of dessert.

Partnerships with restaurants and hotels are becoming more widespread

Following the trend for attempting to offer restaurant-standard cuisine, BA now provides pulled-pork sandwiches in First. The meat is slow-cooked for 14 hours, then hand-pulled and seasoned with sage and onions before being served with apple, ginger and sultana chutney, and a side of beetroot and purple crisps.

Meanwhile, ANA, which has a partnership with Japanese restaurant chain Hakata Ippudo, has introduced a new healthy miso-based *daichi ramen* noodle dish for first and business class passengers on its Jakarta route and North American services. The dish is meat-free, and features signature noodles created specifically for the airline.

Another example is Singapore Airlines’ lobster thermidor, which has become an institution. The lobster tail sautéed in butter, flambéed in brandy, sprinkled with cheese and served with creamy mushroom sauce, garlic, spicy mustard and buttered asparagus is served in business and first class.

JOINING FORCES

Partnerships with restaurants and hotel brands are also becoming more widespread. Last year, ANA began a collaboration with the Kowloon Shangri-La, Hong Kong, to offer special Cantonese meals for its business class passengers departing from the city – such as pineapple barbecued pork buns and kung pao prawn and asparagus with fried rice and conpoy (dried scallop).

This year, Cathay Pacific has partnered with Mandarin Oriental’s leading chefs to create a series of menus on rotation between different routes. This month, the airline ►

Left: Lorraine Pascale’s Thai beef salad, Virgin Atlantic



will feature dishes by Uwe Opocensky, the Michelin-starred executive chef at Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong, in first class on flights from Hong Kong to London, New York and Boston.

Celebrity chefs are also getting in on the action. Virgin Atlantic has teamed up with Lorraine Pascale to create dishes for Upper Class passengers – including Thai beef salad with roasted pine nuts and chilli dressing, and warm salmon and lentils with chorizo, asparagus and balsamic dressing.

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Qatar Airways, meanwhile, selected four international “master chefs” to develop a special menu for its B787 Dreamliner’s premium classes. Nobu Matsuhisa, Tom Aikens, Ramzi Choueiri and Vineet Bhatia adapted their distinct culinary styles to conjure up dishes such as an Iranian mixed grill with lamb chops and kofta, and chicken tikka with broad bean saffron rice.

Air France has an ongoing collaboration with Joel Robuchon, who has the most Michelin stars in the world. The airline’s first class menu features dishes such as stuffed chicken breast served with slow-cooked green cabbage lardons and foie gras. Since February, a dish by three-Michelin starred chef Anne-Sophie Pic has been available on Air France’s business class menu on flights leaving Paris. Pic introduces a new meal twice a month, and past dishes have included roasted veal and royal quinoa with red peppers and pineapple. The carrier has also reintroduced caviar for its top customers.

NUMBERS GAME

On the whole, carriers are finding ways to present passengers with more choice. This is no mean feat when you consider the logistical challenges they face to feed us.

“With in-flight catering, logistics accounts for about 70 per cent of our costs, manpower and effort,” Heymeijer says. “Thousands upon thousands of the items that go on board are often there just in case of demand because, as an airline, we hate to be in a position where we have to say ‘no’. From originally having a choice of two or three special meals, we now have more than 20.”

One option, then, is to at least make sure passengers can eat their first choice from the menu. Singapore Airlines (SIA) was the first to introduce a pre-order meal service in 1998. “Book the Cook” allows premium passengers to secure their preferred main course for their flight up to 24 hours before they travel. When the

Left: Anne-Sophie Pic’s salmon and sweet spiced lentils, Air France



carrier debuts its premium economy class in August, it will introduce a special version of Book the Cook.

“We are considering dishes such as seafood thermidor, beef fillet and maybe a full English breakfast,” says Subhas Menon, SIA’s regional vice-president in Europe. Free champagne will be served throughout the flight.

At the same time, BA is planning to extend its pre-order meal service – guaranteeing First, Club World and World Traveller Plus passengers their first choice of main – across its entire long-haul network out of Heathrow by the end of the year. Gatwick will follow soon after.

Similarly, the Qantas Select on Q-Eat service enables premium economy and business passengers from Heathrow to select their preferred meal up to 12 hours before departure. The service is being progressively rolled out across its network to economy passengers.

As a society, we are becoming more aware of the processes behind our food and seeking ethically sourced ingredients where possible. This presents a challenge for airlines with larger networks such as Emirates, which prepares 165,000 in-flight meals every day, and doesn’t have an advantageous location for “growing its own”.

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“Dubai has the challenge of where we’re at geographically – we’re not in the heart of Europe where everything grows within a couple of hundred kilometres,” Heymeijer says. “We source what we can locally, but a large percentage is imported. When we have discussions on sustainable or free-range ingredients, it’s not that we’re against it, but for the volumes we procure, nine times out of ten, those items are not available.”

KLM now serves Beter Leven-approved chicken (from ex-laying hens) on all flights out of Amsterdam. It also dishes up “cage-free” omelettes on flights out of the US (see klmtakescare.com). South African Airways, meanwhile, has teamed up with DO and CO Event and Airline Catering to create meals made from “the freshest, locally sourced ingredients”, including cod approved by the Marine Stewardship Council in business class.

Airlines have a tough job on their hands to serve up ethically-sourced, calorie-controlled, attractive dishes that surprise and delight us, that can be prepared in a galley kitchen and with ingredients that come in a quantity large enough to feed tens of millions of passengers each year. Nonetheless, they know how much food means to us, and it looks as though the days of grey, stodgy, vacuum-packed plane food are on the way out. ■

Left: Japanese cuisine, ANA