Airlines serve up new fare for fliers

From flying tuck shop to restaurant in the sky – we look at how airlines are changing the way they feed their passengers

Feeding hot meals to around 400 people at an altitude of 30,000 feet is not easy. In the 90 minutes that a Boeing 747 is being prepared for a long-haul flight, airport staff will load 45,000 or so items that the passengers will eat, drink or use during the flight. 'The fact that passengers are fed at all is remarkable,' says Peter Jones, Professor of Production and Operations Management at the University of Surrey.

We look at how airline food is changing, what you need to know about eating at altitude, and the debate about whether you can trust the quality of food on planes.

The big players

Two catering suppliers dominate the business of feeding airline passengers – Gate Gourmet, which is the biggest in the UK, and LSG Sky Chefs. Worldwide, Gate Gourmet makes more than half a million in-flight meals every day, around 100,000 of those in the UK. It hit the headlines last year when its staff took strike action at Heathrow airport – the site of its largest UK unit, where it employs 1,000 people and makes 36,000 meals a day for 70 flights. The strike grounded a number of British Airways flights for several days.

Experts estimate that an economy meal costs about £3 to produce

Gate Gourmet, LSG Sky Chefs and other caterers are hired by airlines to provide meals according to strict contracts, and competition for these is intense. Details are closely guarded commercial secrets but industry experts estimate that an economy-class meal costs about £3 to produce and a first-class meal about £25.

Industry trends

While a complimentary hot meal used to be a standard part of an airline's service, even on short-haul routes, these days you may not know what to expect.

Some traditional airlines, for instance, now charge for the food they offer on some routes. Other carriers offer only sandwiches or snacks for free on some of their short-haul services.

But industry insiders argue that passengers' expectations are changing and that these strategies aren't keeping pace. 'Passengers are becoming very critical when they are still paying increased air fares and taxes and are being fed just café sandwiches and snacks,' says Colin Banks, Director of the industry consultancy International Food Safety.

These rising expectations are driving some traditional airlines to see food as critical to their marketing strategies. Air New Zealand, for example, has revamped its menus: economy-class passengers can now expect dishes such as roast chicken on garlic-braised Swiss chard with tapenade. Emirates has won several awards in the last few years for its food and service, serving first-class passengers with dishes such as braised beef in coconut milk and sevruga caviar.

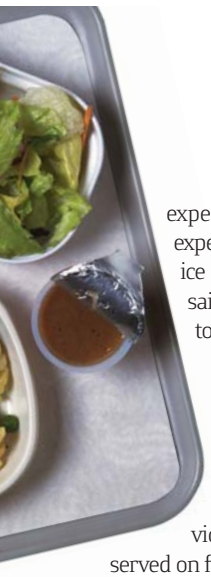
British Airways told us it is also responding to 'dramatic' changes in customer

meal planner

1 Storage Meal components, including ingredients for main dishes, are stored until needed. A large flight kitchen may typically use 67 tonnes of fresh salmon, six tonnes of caviar and just less than three million cans of Coca-Cola every year.

3 Assembly Meal trays are assembled on conveyor belts and then stacked on aircraft trolleys. Dishes to be reheated are put into oven containers. The trolleys and containers are kept chilled.

2 Preparation Food that has to be cooked is prepared, then 'blast-chilled' or frozen. Frozen economy-class dishes can be stored for up to eight weeks. First- and business-class dishes are usually just chilled and used within two or three days.



expectations. 'Customers now expect a restaurant-style service onboard,' a spokeswoman said. The airline had no plans to stop complimentary meals.

British Airways set up a 'culinary council' of chefs and food and wine experts six years ago to help it develop its menus. Chef Vineet Bhartia now provides 'inspiration' for dishes served on flights to and from India.

So why are some airlines so focused on in-flight meals? Professor Jones says it helps them stand out from the crowd.

These traditional airlines may be right to focus on catering – recent research by the University of Surrey shows that 60 per cent of passengers cite the food and drink as the first thing they recall about their last flight.

Professor Jones says the surge in popularity of the no-frills airlines means the traditional carriers have to offer a significantly better service to justify their higher prices. Complimentary meals are key to this.

The humble sandwich takes off

However, some of the industry is turning away from complimentary food. In-flight meals can be an 'extra' when you book package holidays and most no-frills airlines have abandoned them altogether.

Flybe, for example, says its decision to charge for food means passengers get better quality and more choice. The airline's General Manager for Retail Sales, Raymond Kiersey, told us it couldn't get the right quality of food from the large in-flight caterers so it set up its own catering unit.

Flybe has now teamed up with celebrity chef Brian Turner, who is endorsing a range of sandwiches produced on the same day for all of its flights.

'You can eat a cold product whenever you want and we don't have to rely on the traditional caterers to provide a hot meal,' Raymond Kiersey said. He added that hot meals are much harder for the crew to prepare and serve and difficult for passengers because they have to be eaten at once.

He predicts that hot meals on short-haul flights will soon be a thing of the past.

Change is in the air

As Flybe has made its in-flight catering profitable, some of the larger traditional caterers are struggling to adapt to changes that include increasing competition from ready-meal manufacturers.

Caterers such as LSG Sky Chefs and Alpha remain profitable in the face of all these changes, but Gate Gourmet lost £22 million in the UK in 2004 and expected to lose another £25 million last year.

Managing Director of Gate Gourmet UK & Ireland, Eric Born confirms: 'The aviation industry remains a tough marketplace. Gate Gourmet has restructured from top to bottom to make itself profitable after five years of sustained losses.'

And Heathrow-based ICL, which supplied meals to three traditional carriers, was sold for just £1 earlier this year after making a loss in 2005.

While some in the industry say this shows that the large caterers have had their day, Colin Banks blames the airlines: 'They constantly ask the caterers to reduce costs yet expect to get the best-quality food items that were previously available at a higher cost.'

The first thing that 60 per cent of airline passengers remember about their last flight is the food and drink

Setting food standards

But are passengers actually being served 'the best-quality food items'? Airline catering boss Erica Sheward says they're not and the industry must radically improve its food safety and hygiene standards (see p28).

Her claims that passengers and crew are put at risk by contaminated in-flight food and water are rebuffed by others within the industry, and there seems to be no clear conclusion to the debate.

What is clear, however, is that change is the dish of the day as airlines increasingly take one of two routes: charging for cold food or offering lavish hot meals for free.

WHAT DOES ALTITUDE DO TO FOOD?

Flying at altitude affects the way we eat and drink in surprising ways.

The low air pressure makes our digestion sluggish – so it's best to avoid heavy meals.

The very low humidity in aircraft dulls our sense of taste and leads to dehydration. To counter this, airlines often serve dishes that have stronger flavours and encourage us to drink water. If you drink alcohol or caffeine on a plane, it can have a much bigger impact than usual because you may not have eaten and you could be dehydrated.

Some foods can't be served on aircraft. It is very hard to reheat deep-fried foods, which is why you never see chips on planes. Coffee doesn't taste the same as at ground level because it is served at a lower temperature.

4 Boarding Trolleys and containers are then stored in a flight assembly area, where everything for the flight is loaded on to high-lift trucks and transported to the aircraft. Caterers must never let food reach the 'danger zone' of temperatures between 5°C and 65°C, as this is when bacteria are most likely to grow.

5 Serving Food is stowed in galleys until it's needed. Cooked dishes are reheated and then served on meal trays. Enough food for a return journey can be flown out of the UK (called 'back catering').

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

We'd like to hear about your experiences of airline food. Please email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at *Which?*, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH.

'If the galley is filthy, the plane won't be delayed. It's preposterous'

Are airline food and water safe?

Catering experts are at loggerheads over recent claims that the industry must put more effort into making its food safer

Erica Sheward: airline guidelines are too lax

Professor PeterJones: no evidence of danger

The claims are made by Erica Sheward (right), Technical Director of Castle Kitchens, which makes meals for airlines and supermarkets, in her recent book *Aviation Food Safety*.

Lax safety rules

She argues that the industry's safety guidelines are too lax because companies follow catering safety protocols, not the more stringent ones for manufacturers. For example, she says manufacturers must follow strict rules about product labelling and assessing a product's shelflife. Those rules don't apply to caterers.

But Professor Peter Jones (top, far right) – whose University of Surrey job is sponsored by the International Travel Catering Association – rejects her claims. 'The case that the regulatory regime should be changed would be much stronger if she had evidence that the kitchens were producing dangerous food,' he says.

BA says it is governed by the same legislation as the food retail industry. Gate Gourmet's Eric Born said: 'A big part of our business is just-in-time assembly and delivery to the aircraft. So we really are a catering and logistics company rather than a manufacturer of food.'

No inspections

Ms Sheward is also concerned about the way caterers and planes are inspected. Last year, the new Food Law Code of Practice for England and Wales was released, giving environmental health officers (EHOs) powers to inspect aircraft galleys for the first time. Even where inspections are carried out, Ms Sheward says EHOs don't have the power to delay take-off. 'So if the galley is filthy and none of the food is at the right temperature, the plane won't be delayed. It's preposterous,' she said.

We put that to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health. It confirmed that EHOs don't have the power to delay planes but they can stop food being served. We've found, however, that the environmental health teams responsible for Gatwick and Heathrow have not yet used their new powers. The Food Standards Agency, which assesses the way the code is enforced, told us it is aware that no on-board inspections have yet been made at Gatwick and Heathrow but it is for EHOs to apply the code.

Professor Jones says EHOs frequently issue strict 'improvement notices' to restaurants and other caterers but he doesn't know of any being sent to an in-flight catering company.

In fact, Hillingdon Borough Council issued one to Gate Gourmet at Heathrow in 2001, due to a 'cockroach infestation'. Gate Gourmet in the US was also given a formal warning over a range of hygiene problems, including vermin infestation in one of its kitchens, last year.

Onboard illness

Judging the safety of airline food is difficult, says Ms Sheward, because people disperse after a flight and it may be impossible to establish the exact cause of food poisoning. But she also claims that more than 40 food-poisoning outbreaks, involving thousands of people, have been linked to airline meals since 1947.

She also cites Civil Aviation Authority data on 'pilot incapacitation', from between 1990 and 1999, showing when pilots fall ill at the controls. She says it shows that more than half of all these incidents are caused by gastro-intestinal symptoms and that 'a fair proportion' can probably be blamed on poor airline food.

But Professor Jones says we'd already know whether food poisoning was a widespread problem. He says that significant outbreaks are rare and are bound to be reported in the press.

Contaminated water

Water, too, Ms Sheward says, can be a risk. The US Environmental Protection Agency and the UK's Public Health Laboratory Service have both taken more than 300 water samples on board planes.

The US study in 2004 found that 15 per cent of all the samples failed contamination tests. As a result, all passengers in the US with suppressed immune systems, such as those who had recently had a serious illness or operation, were advised not to drink aircraft water, tea and coffee.

The 2003 UK study found that more than 15 per cent of samples taken from 38 drinking fountains on planes were contaminated.

Crawley Borough Council told us that it samples water from the tanks used by the aircraft at Gatwick – but it doesn't test the water on board planes.

Unjustified criticism

Other industry experts also reject Ms Sheward's claims. International Food Safety's Colin Banks, who also acts as a consultant to the ITCA, said the industry guidelines on food safety took five years to develop and will be upgraded this year.

'What we are seeing is unjustified criticism of a well-established food-safety management process,' he added.

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