



Healthier fare and speciality foods are among the top trends for business aviation caterers

by Kirby J. Harrison

Edward Taylor, a 16th-century New England Puritan not given to excess, nevertheless saw fit to describe the spiritual in terms of the flesh when he wrote of the sacraments, "It's food too fine for angels."

Food too fine for angels, indeed. Business jet passengers may not fly as high as angels, but their expectations in terms of cabin cuisine are no less lofty. And those who cater to these individuals are intent on seeing that those expectations are met, whether it's a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich for the kids or lemon chicken au bierre blanc for the more sophisticated palate.

"There is a healthy competition among caterers and the additional incentive of meeting the expectations of customers who are accustomed to dining at the Ritz-Carlton," said Paula Kraft, president and founder of Tastefully Yours in Atlanta. "The result is that caterers are constantly raising the standard in terms of quality."



Rudy's has received more requests for specialty foods.

"It's a customer-driven relationship," explained Eric Pevar, a principal in Mireilles Inflight Caterers, a family-owned and operated business based in Long Beach, Calif., and covering most of California through four kitchen locations. "Few endeavors are as service-oriented as business aviation catering," he explained, "whether it's filling an order for organic fat-free milk or providing newspapers and DVDs." Pevar said Mireilles has even begun stocking portable DVD players.

As with any other service-related industry, catering constantly faces the prospect of meeting the demands of new market trends.

The current trend toward healthier cuisine continues, say caterers, ranging from free-range chicken and organically grown vegetables and fruits to Middle Eastern cuisine and fish.

"If anybody had told me two years ago that I'd be stocking as much organic milk and yogurt as regular milk and

yogurt, I'd have told them they were crazy," said Joe Celentano, who with brother John is the owner of Rudy's Inflight Catering in Teterboro, N.J. "Specialty grocery outlet places like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's have raised the dietary consciousness of the public, and it's reflected in the orders we receive."

Joe Celentano recalled a client who not only insisted on wild salmon but also demanded to see the bill of sale confirming its origin. Now Rudy's offers smoked wild salmon from a Scottish vendor. And there is a difference between wild salmon and the farm-raised variety, mainly "taste and texture," said Celentano.

Free-range chicken is one thing, said one caterer, but an order for free-range duck left her at a loss as to how to authenticate that the bird was not raised in captivity. That's assuming the request for free-range chicken, or duck, was based on a concern for the ethical treatment of animals rather than on taste.

Pop-culture Diets Dwindle in Popularity

The trend toward pop-culture diets seems to be losing steam, but a growing number of catering customers appear to have discov-

ered the naturally healthy aspects of some ethnic foods. Middle Eastern cuisine seems to be a favorite. That's true in particular among the younger travelers, said Celentano. "They appreciate that in general, it's healthier. Hummus, for example, is a simple dish made from ground chickpeas, tahini (sesame paste), olive oil, lemon juice and a few spices."

Even in Atlanta, where Southern cooking has long held a position of prominence, customers are demanding a healthier diet. Kraft of Tastefully Yours said she is now stocking soy milk in both natural and vanilla flavors.

While a healthier diet may be a relatively recent discovery for East Coast customers, on the West Coast it has been a trend for years. According to Barry Saven, president of Air Gourmet in Los Angeles, the idea seems to have reached its peak.

"What we're seeing now is a trend toward a simpler, less complex cuisine," said Saven. East Coast caterers are starting to see the same effect. Some believe that it is the result of the influence of the large fractional ownership market that has demanded a relatively simpler menu available to its customers in any part of the country.

Menu choices and customer expectations are often regional in flavor. Southern California caterers see more "fruit and nuts and the bark of trees" customers, Texas caterers see a lot of requests for barbecue and seafood is popular in the Northeast and North-

anything," said president Brenda Paauwe-Navori. "We get lots of requests for grits, pulled pork and extra sides of cream-based gravy." As for the sports teams, "it's athletic-size helpings of starch; heavy on the protein."

While Tastefully Yours in Atlanta is seeing more and more requests for organic foods, there remain those whose tastes run to "comfort food," from meat loaf to triple-cheese macaroni and cheese. "Sometimes we provide comfort food with a twist," said Kraft, "like the addition of blue cheese to the macaroni and cheese, or green apples and brie to a turkey sandwich."

Sorry, That's No Longer on the Menu

In a world marked by concern for endangered species, the catering menu is not what it used to be.

Chilen sea bass is an example. It was originally the Patagonian toothfish, until the seafood industry decided it deserved a name more becoming of its exalted place on the menu. In truth, it is neither a bass nor unique to Chile. It became so popular that *Bon Appetit* magazine voted it the dish of the year in 2001.

But popularity led to over-fishing, and a number of watchdog organizations have had the fish added to the endangered species list. Today, U.S. Customs requires that incoming shipments include documentation that it was caught legally. As a result it is becoming both more difficult to find—in the



Clients are now requesting healthier fare, such as soy milk and yogurt or this fruit tray from Air Gourmet.

west. But there are regions, and then there are regions within regions. GoGo Jet caters to the smaller niche market.

Located in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in the fast-growing city of Charlotte, N.C., the company caters to business aviation, but with an emphasis on Nascar racing teams and NCAA sports teams. "We don't get that many requests for organic

market and on the menu—and more expensive.

"When it is available, Chilean sea bass is now more than \$20 a pound," said Air Gourmet's Saven. "We even got an e-mail from a customer who was surprised to see it on our menu."

Want caviar? Be prepared to pay premium prices. Some are calling the most expensive Russian Beluga caviar “black gold.” That might be stretching reality, but not by much. Gold is listing at about \$500 an ounce, while Beluga is more than \$200 an ounce and rising.

“I recently had an order from a client for eight ounces of Beluga, and it wasn’t available, at any price,” Saven said. He noted that Osetra caviar, the next best thing to Beluga, is now selling for what Beluga was going for a year ago. The reasons for the rising price of Beluga are simple—a U.S. embargo on Russian and Iranian Beluga caviar, and dwindling supplies.

Natural disasters can also affect the availability and price of menu items. The devastation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina last fall has resulted in an increase in the price of gulf shrimp. The series of hurricanes that devastated Florida last year affected the availability and price of oranges, tomatoes and other produce.

Member Affiliates Programs Gaining Ground

A driving force for a less complicated menu seems to be the advent of such catering entities as Air Chef and, more recently, Aviation Services Network (ASN).

Air Chef pioneered the concept of a nationwide affiliate program in 2000. Today, the Columbus, Ohio company serves 20 markets at more than 80 airports through its own kitchens and a network of catering partners. Its affiliate kitchens each offer an Air Chef menu, in addition to their own selection.

Last fall, Rudy’s Inflight Catering launched its own version known as Aviation Services Network and has already signed up 57 affiliates, among them Air Gourmet in Los Angeles.

The move, said Joe Celentano, was in response to the needs of a fractional-ownership client. “They didn’t want to change the personality and regional specialties of individual kitchens, but they wanted to ensure a common, quality menu for their customers and a consistent level of quality, no matter where they went.”

Tastefully Yours is a member of ASN, and Kraft expressed satisfaction with the vetting of her kitchen by ASN inspectors. They checked everything from her licenses, certificates and insurance to operation of the blast chillers and food-handling safeguards, she said. “They didn’t bend their standards for us, and we’ve had two more random

inspections since we became an affiliate last October.”

Prices Are Going Up

The price of everything—gas, market products, insurance, packaging materials, labor—is going up, so expect catering costs to increase as well. That’s the general consensus among those in the catering business.



Tastefully Yours believes that ‘people eat with their eyes.’ With that in mind, the company is unveiling a new picture-laden menu to interest fliers in the chef’s specialties.

If the trend is toward free-range chicken and organically grown produce, expect the cost of catering that contains those items to be higher. Not only are they more expensive at the market, but there is more waste during food preparation.

This is particularly true in California, where as Mireilles’ Pevar put it, “We have the highest food costs, the highest labor costs, the highest insurance rates, the highest energy costs and the highest taxes.”

Average menu price hikes this year, say most caterers, will probably be in the 5-percent range.

Kraft suggests that those who want to save some money on their catering create their own stock locker with items that can be easily picked up from any supermarket—condiments, soft drinks, juices, bottled water. “And I tell flight attendants and crews, ‘Save some money and make a stop at a local market on the way to the airport for newspapers and coffee and milk.’” The cost to a caterer of sending an employee to shop for these items typically means a 100-percent markup.

FBO handling charges also contribute to the rising cost of catering. Most FBOs have a catering handling charge as a matter of policy, and in some cases it can be as much as 30 percent of the cost of the order.

Some independent FBOs have worked out exclusive agreements with a sole catering source that adds more to the catering bill.

sible for catering. More than one flight crew at one of these FBOs has been handed the competitor’s catering order over the fence, or has brought it in through the lobby in a “plain brown wrapper.”

“Some of us take a different approach,” said one flight attendant, who preferred anonymity. “We just don’t go to those FBOs when we can avoid it.”

The fact is that many FBOs consider catering a profit center, warranted or not. Kraft said one FBO charges a cooler fee for each direct-bill order that is placed in the FBO cooler for pickup. For such orders, Kraft notes the cooler charge in her billing. And she added that when she receives an order, she always informs the customer if there is going to be such a fee or a handling charge.

Expanding and Shifting To Meet Market Demand

For the past several years the economy and business aviation have been steadily improving, and the catering industry has followed suit. According to mid-Atlantic private equity firm Meridian Venture Partners, an investor last year in Air Chef, business aviation catering is now a \$150 million-a-year industry.

“The last year was a great year for us,” said Pevar. Mireilles has four locations between Long Beach at the center of the Los Angeles basin and San Francisco to the north. He added that the family-run business is considering “two or three possibilities for serious business growth.”

Amanda Kraft, Paula’s daughter and business partner at Tastefully Yours, described business last year as “absolutely fabulous. I think we’re probably up at least 20 percent in terms of revenue.”

While the company has no plans for expansion in terms of another kitchen, the Kraft family, including Amanda’s sister Jacquelyn Glasser, expects to see an increase in business that will demand full use of the large facilities at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport. When Tastefully Yours consolidated its two Atlanta kitchens in 2004, the result was a much larger and better-equipped facility than necessary at the time. Now, said Amanda Kraft, “I think we’re going to be glad we have all that room.”

Last year, Rudy’s Inflight Catering celebrated the one-year anniversary of the opening of its Westchester County Airport kitchen in White Plains, N.Y., by announcing plans for its expansion. According to Joe Celentano, the kitchen has been providing meals for 80 to 100 flights a day.

In January last year, Rudy’s opened a 7,000-sq-ft Northern Virginia kitchen at Chantilly, Va., five miles from Dulles International Airport and 30 minutes from Washington, D.C. “It’s worked out very well and growth has been steady,” said Celentano.

GoGo Jet had planned to expand last year and open another kitchen in the Raleigh-Durham area but decided that the area was more efficiently serviced by transporting orders there from its Charlotte facility. On the other hand, said Paauwe-Navori, “We’ve had huge growth and we now have 8,000 square feet at Charlotte Douglas Airport with 14 employees.”

Both GoGo Jet and Tastefully Yours were planning to unveil new menus at last month’s NBAA Scheduler’s & Dispatcher’s Conference. The companies’ menus include 160 photographs. “I think people also ‘eat’ with their eyes,” said Kraft. “Eye appeal is very important.” She told of an incident that involved a dish of

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Gourmet Goes Frozen

Private Jet Gourmet in Miami has come up with a unique variation on traditional catering—an assortment of gourmet frozen entrees, side dishes and desserts, from beef roulade and Moroccan lamb chops to garlic mashed potatoes and four-cheese ravioli to chocolate soufflé and key lime pie.

According to company president Alisa McGowan, the meals are packaged and frozen using a relatively new European method and retain their texture and flavor for up to a year. Packed in dry ice, they can be shipped anywhere in the U.S. by overnight courier. From frozen to service, the meals require from 10 to 15 minutes.

McGowan said three FBOs are already carrying an assortment of the frozen meals, and at the NBAA Convention last fall one flight department bought 100 meals.—K.J.H.



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scrambled eggs and stuffed potato skins that had not been a hot item on the menu, until they included a photograph. “We added a photograph, and suddenly it was selling like crazy.”

GoGo Jet’s new menu will also include a new logo design. The Tastefully Yours menu will feature what Amanda Kraft described as “southern cuisine with flair.”

Some Markets Slump

Chef in the Sky is located at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, and according to president Marc Raymond, the growth in the industry doesn’t apply to business in the Motor City, where the automotive industry is suffering. “I’m in a different zone,” said Raymond. “In other parts of the country they’re talking about the real-estate bubble breaking, and here, we never had a bubble to burst.”

On the other hand, he said the dwindling business aviation traffic has given him the time to put more effort into his food safety and security business. Raymond has been developing a line of food safety and security products for some years and introduced it at the Schedulers & Dispatchers Conference last year.

If business is slow in Detroit, Super Bowl XL promises to give it at least a temporary boost this month, and the expected increased demand resulted in an agreement by Chef in the Sky and Fivestar Gourmet to offer a Super Bowl menu available to business aircraft at any of the Detroit region airports. “We decided to join our two kitchens to meet the higher demand for catering during Super Bowl weekend,” said Kris Mayle, v-p of operations at Pentastar Aviation, the parent company of Fivestar Gourmet.

The two caterers are also combining efforts to present a special training seminar at the NBAA Flight Attendants Conference this summer. Considering the relationship, Mayle added, “I think we will continue to have a much closer working relationship going forward.”

Air Chef, which has risen to a position of influence in business aviation catering,

appears intent on continuing and expanding that position.

Last February the company received a fresh infusion of capital from Meridian Venture Partners when the mid-Atlantic region private equity firm announced it has “provided acquisition financing for Air Chef.” Air Chef wasted no time in making use of the additional resources. In June it acquired East Coast caterer Air Culinaire of Arlington, Va., and UK-based Majestic Catering at Luton Airport near London.

The addition of Air Culinaire adds six facilities to the Air Chef chain of owned kitchens. The six original Air Culinaire facilities—Dallas; Denver; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Little Ferry, N.J.; the Bahamas; and Washington, D.C.—continue to operate under the Air Culinaire banner but as Air Chef affiliates. Also as part of the deal, the Air Chef kitchen in Chicago assumed the Air Culinaire brand name and was integrated into that business entity.

As for Majestic, it is now being operated by Biggin Hill Airport caterer Thinking Food under its brand name. Thinking Food became an Air Chef affiliate last year.

The two acquisitions, according to Meridian, roughly doubled the market Air Chef serves.

In July, Air Chef acquired Rita’s In-flight Catering of Boston, one of the country’s oldest names in business aviation catering. Also last year it acquired Corporate Air Services kitchens at Teterboro and Islip on Long Island and is considering whether to continue operating them as separate entities or consolidate them into a single kitchen.

Added to its list of affiliates is Gourmet Goose of Jacksonville, Fla. Last year Air Chef also realized a long-coveted presence on the West Coast by adding J/R Catering of Oakland as an affiliate. According to Air Chef CEO Scott Liston, J/R is part of a larger West Coast strategy.

Air Chef has also signed an agreement with the well known El Matador restaurant

The staff at Miami-based Private Jet Gourmet offer an alternative to traditional catering. The prepackaged frozen meals can be defrosted and served in 10 to 15 minutes.



in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. The deal will place Air Chef personnel in the restaurant kitchen to oversee business aviation catering.

Affiliate Programs Criticized

Some in the industry have been sharply critical of the catering affiliate programs such as ASN and Air Chef, claiming that they have resulted in a “dumbing down” of catering quality.

Air Chef’s Liston vehemently disagrees. He notes that in the last quarter of last year, Air Chef signed a contract with the prestigious Culinary Institute of America (CIA) for its support in future menu development and training. It includes:



Some dishes, such as lobster, must be prepared and served differently in an aircraft than on the ground.

- CIA participation in future Air Chef menu development.
- A special three-day curriculum at a CIA campus during which certified master chefs will educate Air Chef associates on world culinary trends and direct them in bringing new ideas and menu items to life in the kitchen.
- A placement program that will bring CIA graduates into Air Chef kitchens.
- Air Chef access to the Napa, Calif., and Hyde Park, N.Y. campuses for customer events.

Also last year, Air Chef signed contracts with five flight-scheduling software providers that will create an online link to the Air Chef order desk.

At press time, ASN and a number of partners were putting the final touches on an instructional DVD, planning to make it available at no cost to those attending last month’s NBAA Schedulers & Dispatchers Conference. In addition to ASN, participants in the production included Waterford, Mich.-based Fivestar Gourmet, Rudy’s In-flight Catering, Tastefully Yours, the Georgia State Health Authority on food handling and the Marietta Wine Warehouse in Atlanta.

The hour-long DVD is available free to any flight attendant and any scheduler or dispatcher by calling Rudy’s Inflight Catering. It will also be distributed at the NBAA Flight Attendant Conference this summer.

The Adventurous Flight Attendant

While good catering begins in the market and is created in the kitchen, it ends in the aircraft cabin where the crew, usually the flight attendant, is responsible for reheating, re-plating and serving the meal.

Fortunately, said Kraft, today’s flight attendants are less intimidated by the challenge of catered meals and are becoming more adventurous in terms of trying something new or different.

On the other hand, flight attendants continue to voice some of the same complaints. “Get rid of those high-domed lids,” said Jewel Miller, a five-year veteran contract flight attendant. “There isn’t room to store those big things in a business jet galley, and I’m not going to store them in the lavatory,” she explained. “So I end up spending time repacking everything in baggies.”

Some items on the menu, she went on, are marvelous but not for an aircraft cabin. Among them are vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower, which leave an objectionable odor that lingers well past mealtime.

“I have one client who refuses to have fish in any form as the result of a previous bad experience. And I avoid hot lobster dishes,” she said. “Not because of the odor, but when it’s reheated, it turns to rubber.”

Roger Leeman, v-p of culinary operations for Air Chef, chuckles when the subject of lobster is mentioned. He points out that the sense of smell is critical in terms of emotional response and recommends a simple test as proof. “Hold your nose and try a taste test of cold lobster, crab and shrimp, and you’ll find it’s extremely difficult to tell the difference.”

For that reason, he says, cold seafood is best served with a sauce—cocktail or mustard. The seafood is for texture and the sauce is for taste.

Miller suggests that caterers label each item, particularly the more exotic ones, and that they include specific instructions with regard to reheating, plating and serving.

Kraft recalls getting an in-flight phone call from a puzzled flight attendant who was returning from Europe with a catering order and an item she couldn’t identify. “She described it for me and I realized it was a dessert sauce for figs.”

Catering Community

Kraft and others are part of a caterers mentoring group free service that can be accessed via www.corporateflyer.net. “We just had a flight attendant who signed up and spent a day touring our kitchen,” said Kraft.

A chief flight attendant for a major corporate flight department reported a corporate culture in which catered flights were the exception rather than the rule. The flight attendants, she said, are given considerable leeway in selecting and preparing meals and most of the items come from local markets, Dean & DeLuca and Whole Foods.

She recalled one trip that required outside catering and when she asked the caterer for a cost estimate, “he absolutely refused and said he wasn’t interested in doing business with us.

“So I said, ‘Fine, we won’t be calling you again.’”

Not all passengers are so difficult to please in terms of onboard meals. One West Coast principal insists on Domino’s Pizza. Another, a comedian, typically orders Kentucky Fried Chicken “with all the fixins.”

“It makes catering a lot easier,” said one flight attendant. “But it seems a little strange to be serving Popeyes Chicken on Villeroy & Boch china in the cabin of a \$40 million dollar business jet en route to Paris.” □