



GET RAID MAX[®] BUG BARRIER
DEFENSE MARKER™

START WITH A COUPON



AdChoices
Raid
Johnson
A Family Company

Travel Home

Slideshows

In 5 Guides

GOURMET

Fine dining at 30,000 feet: More airlines pairing with celebrity chefs

By **Blane Bachelor** · Published October 10, 2014 · FoxNews.com



40



108



2



In an industry where complaints routinely outweigh praise, airplane food still manages to garner some of the biggest gripes among travelers.

But with the help of celebrity chefs, a growing number of airlines around the world are writing a whole new recipe for their on-board dining experience.

“We feel that in-flight dining is an important part of a distinctive travel experience and want to offer that to all of our customers.”

- Maarit Keränen, head of Finnair's service concept

Carriers including Delta, Finnair, South African Airways, British Airways and Air France have partnered with star chefs to create signature, upscale dishes that represent regional flavors, accompanied by local wines. The idea is to create a distinct, fine-dining experience that will keep passengers buying business and first-class seats – the priciest and most profitable.

And there's a growing appetite for such luxury. According to the International Air Transport Association, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that tracks flight data, premium travel grew by 3.8 percent in the first half of 2014, compared to the same period in 2013. Although that's a small increase, consider that premium revenues comprise up to a 47 percent share on long-haul flights in the North Atlantic market.

One way airlines are hoping to woo those deep-pocketed passengers is with a cache of star chefs. The names behind Delta's revamped culinary program, for example, read like a who's who of some of the industry's top talent: Michael Chiarello, owner of the critically acclaimed Napa Valley restaurant Bottega and *Esquire* Chef of the Year in 2013; Food Network host Michelle Bernstein, who oversees a culinary empire in South Florida; New York star restaurateur Danny Meyer; the Atlanta-based James Beard Award winner Linton Hopkins; and master sommelier and three-time James Beard Award winner Andrea Robinson.

Bernstein was the first to partner with Delta in 2007, and since then the airline has expanded its program to include new routes, seasonal menus and new aspects of the whole dining experience, such as Robinson's California Winemaker program, which showcases various vintners from the state.

“When passengers are on the plane and they see the menu, there's a real sense of excitement because there's such a high-profile identity of these chefs and a real authenticity about what they are doing,” Robinson told Foxnews.com.

Qantas Airways helped kick off the trend of celebrity chef involvement in 1997 when it invited Neil Perry, one of Australia's most celebrated chefs, to be a “guest chef” for its airline. But Perry was hesitant to send his meals to third-party caterers to prepare.

Instead, Perry created Rockpool Consulting, which is named after his seven-restaurant empire and partners with seven consultants to oversee meal creation for Qantas.

The move transformed the airline's on-board dining program. "We have altered the way we cook on board and now we cook using fresh produce," reads a statement from Perry on the Rockpool Consulting website. "We literally cook and blanch mid-flight and don't simply reheat like other airlines."

Since then, other carriers have jumped on board. In 2008, South African Airways hired Reuben Riffel, one of the country's most beloved star chefs, to custom design some of its dishes. Indicated on the in-flight menu with his signature, Riffel's current creations include lime and garlic kingklip, a traditionally South African fish, with roasted potato wedges, Parisienne mixed vegetables and fish veloute.

An SAA representative said customers have responded "very well" to Riffel's influence and that demand for his dishes has steadily increased.

Similarly, Air France has a single celebrity chef associated with its culinary program: triple Michelin-starred Régis Marcon. In 2011, the airline introduced three renowned French chefs – Joël Robuchon, Guy Martin and Thibaut Ruggeri – to its culinary program, but it handed the reins to Marcon for a six-month stint that began in April of this year.

Regardless of how many chefs are in the kitchen, food service at 30,000 feet presents challenges. For one, there's the issue of compressed, recycled air, whose lack of humidity dulls the senses of taste and smell. That means chefs must choose ingredients and flavors that hold up to those conditions.

"Your palate requirements are 25 to 30 percent higher at 30,000 feet. The highs have to be higher, the lows have to be lower [in the flavors of the food]," explained Chiarello, who designs Delta's Western menu for flights from the West Coast to Japan, as well as dishes for its transcontinental flights. "If you make pasta that has five ingredients, it's like putting that pasta into a vise and squeezing it. You have to be really careful about how you're building a recipe on the ground."

Sommeliers also have to account for the altitude when selecting wines. Robinson says the pressurized air causes a higher speed of evaporation, which "cheats your olfactory sense of the usual concentration of aromatics you'd have on land."

Robinson evaluates a wine's in-flight performance on a regular basis as she updates Delta's wine list. During a flight this year from Atlanta to Los Angeles,

she brought aboard several cases of potential selections to taste (and even let lucky passengers in on the fun, getting feedback about what they liked and what they didn't).

"There can be an Italian Pinot Grigio that's utterly charming and refreshing on the ground, but when you smell it at 30,000 feet, you don't get anything," she said. "It's great for summertime in Atlanta, but not at altitude. That's the kind of thing we discovered."

But how well a dish or wine tastes in-flight is just part of the process of how celebrity chef-inspired meals evolve from concept to tray table. Chefs must work closely with airline staff to finalize menus, carefully develop recipes for catering teams, get feedback from customers and train flight attendants on the intricacies of fine dining, such as being able to describe wine selections.

It's a constantly evolving process, and it doesn't work for every airline. American Airlines has worked with chefs including Marcus Samuelsson, Richard Sandoval and Sam Choy, but the airline ended its Chef's Conclave program 13 months ago as part of its integration with US Airways. (A representative said the airline may consider reintroducing a celebrity-helmed program in the future.) Similarly, United Airlines, which has used celebrity chefs in the past and merged with Continental in 2010, has discontinued its program while it continues to evaluate in-flight offerings, an airline rep said.

Finally, a bit of consolation for passengers in economy class who are salivating over the delicious smells wafting from the other side of the curtain: Not all airlines focus their celeb-chef influence solely on the front of the plane.

Economy passengers on Finnair will get a taste of the airline's recently announced partnership with Royal Restaurants, which includes some of Finland's top dining establishments. On long-haul routes, traditional Finnish dishes like minced meat, macaroni casserole and lamb meatballs, designed by well-known chefs including Ari Ruoho, Matti Jämsén and Kari Aihinen, will be served.

"We feel that in-flight dining is an important part of a distinctive travel experience and want to offer that to all of our customers, [including] economy class," Maarit Keränen, Finnair's head of service concept, wrote in an email.

Which is news the average air traveler can easily digest.