

HEIGHT CUISINE

Gone are the days of stodgy sandwiches, oily parathas and bland, saltless meals. Mile-high grub takes on a sophisticated avatar as airlines woo passengers with sophisticated service and posh nosh. **Fareeda Kanga** checks in to sample the flavours. Welcome to the world of in-flight dining.



We're cruising at 35,000 feet en route for a foodie travel adventure through Europe. However, more than the fancy restaurants in Paris, I'm looking forward to the food on the aircraft! As airlines compete for passengers in the cut-throat aviation world, flying is no longer about transporting people from point A to B. It is also marketed as an experiential journey. Thus food plays an integral role...

Airlines today invest millions not only by signing up Michelin star chefs but also pump funds into research and development so that food stays fresher and purer at these great heights. With thousands of passengers travelling daily, each with varied tastes and palates, the business of in-flight catering is a delicate and tricky one requiring a different set of skills from a chef on terra firma.

For example, Singapore Airlines' roster of acclaimed chefs on their International Culinary Panel (ICP) includes names like Georges Blanc from France, Alfred Portale from the USA, Matt Moran from Australia, Yoshihiro Murata from Japan, Sanjeev Kapoor from India, Suzanne Goin from the USA, Carlo Cracco from Italy and Zhu Jun from China. "In their respective restaurants and areas of business, the chief expertise of our ICP chefs lies in keeping up with culinary trends and satisfying the palates of increasingly

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sophisticated customers all over the world—challenges that Singapore Airlines faces as well. Therefore, their expertise serves us well and their creations form a major component of the menu database. Furthermore, the ICP keeps us updated on what is en vogue in their respective culinary fields," says Hermann Freidanck, Food and Beverage Manager, Singapore Airlines.

Therefore you can dine in the skies almost as if you were in a Michelin star restaurant on land.

A slice of history

In 1927, British Airways' predecessor, Imperial Airways, removed two seats from the Argosy aircraft it operated on the London-Paris route to allow a steward to serve food on board. It was the first in-flight meal service ever recorded. Although the fare was simple—sandwiches or biscuits, beef tea, and a choice of beer, whisky or mineral water—passengers considered the idea of being served an inflight meal to be the height of luxury and there's been no looking back since.

Today such frugal meals are a relic of the past. Guests today enjoy a mind-boggling array of cuisines and dishes at a height of 35,000 feet thanks to technological advances in this area.

Challenges in the clouds

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Things have come a long way since the sandwiches and biscuits of the Silver Wing service, but the huge advances in aircraft technology have also posed some challenges. Amongst these is the height at which modern aircrafts fly. Altitude was not a problem 85 years ago as aircrafts flew relatively low and were not pressurized. A modern jet aircraft cruises at around 35,000 feet and the cabin is pressurized to 8,000 feet. Under these conditions, one tends to lose about 30 per cent of their ability to taste, so the food can seem bland or insipid. It's also impossible to make a hot cup of tea or coffee because at the reduced atmospheric pressure, water boils at 91 degrees rather than 100. Boiling the water longer will only create more steam and will not make the drink any hotter.

Science has entered airlines' kitchens and a lot of research has been done to determine what food flies well and what should be avoided. Also a lot of research has been conducted in terms of food chilling process to improve it and preserve the quality of food from the



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time it is cooked to the time it is served to customers on-board. Some dishes simply don't reheat well on board, for example, meat dishes such as lamb loin, pork loin or duck breast—because they dry out very quickly and the reheating process tends to toughen the meat.

With ample evidence indicating that the meal service can materially affect the enjoyment of a flight, it is no surprise that catering forms part of British Airways' five-year, five billion pounds investment in products and customer services. "The airline calls the approach it has adopted to counter the effects of altitude, lower humidity and other sensory inhibitors in aircraft cabins, Height Cuisine. It uses ingredients which are high in umami—a savoury flavour known as the 'fifth taste', which occurs naturally in foods such as seaweed, tomatoes, mackerel and parmesan cheese and works particularly well in catering at altitude," says Christopher Cole, F&B in-flight product change manager, British Airways.

It's not just the in-cabin conditions that have to be taken into account. Preparing

and serving tasty food for a few hundred people above the clouds is not an easy task. Because of food safety standards, all meals must be cooked on the ground. There the food is packed, blast-chilled, refrigerated, and finally must survive re-heating in the air. All of this would modify the flavour even if it was served at sea level. To re-heat food on board, for safety reasons nearly all airlines use convection ovens, which blow hot, dry air over the food. Microwaves and open flames are not allowed, although the first induction ovens are now in the market.

Culture in the clouds

With western palates getting accustomed to (and enjoying) regional delicacies from around the world, airlines are not afraid to serve their national dishes on board. "Another development has been the trend towards traditional ethnic cuisines, which now constitute a major feature of our inflight meal services. Some examples include Shahi Thali on our Indian routes and Kyo-Kaiseki (available in First Class and Suites) and Hanakoireki (in Business Class) on our

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The Singapore Airlines Culinary Panel chefs—Sanjeev Kapoor, Carlo Cracco, Alfred Portale, Georges Blanc, Yoshihiro Murata, Suzanne Goin, Matt Moran, Zhu Jun

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Japanese routes. We also offer comfort food, or familiar local favourites from the point of departure," says Hermann Freidanck, Food and Beverage Manager, Singapore Airlines.

On Malaysian Airlines we sample some local favourites such as nasi lemak, hainanese chicken rice and Indian curries which have made their way firmly into

their in-flight menus. "And why not end your meal with a glass of Malaysian teh tarik, or frothy pulled milk tea!" says Azahar Hamid, Regional Senior Vice President, South Asia and Middle East, Malaysia Airlines.

Finnair's reindeer meat sandwiches and Qatar Airways amazing Arabic mezze platter and lamb chops are another

example of regional food available on board. Closer home on local airlines like Jet Airways and Go Air, tangy tandoori flavoured sandwiches and lassi are big draws on domestic sectors—proving that although taste buds get altered high in the sky it is always comforting to relish a taste of 'asli khana' wherever in the world you might be!



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