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Hooray for haute cuisine! by Jennifer Cou tts Clay

January 8, 2015 in [Blogs](#), [Catering](#)

by: [Jennifer Cou tts Clay](#)

The legacy-style 'wining and dining in the sky' made famous by Pan Am still lives on in the movies and in the hearts and minds of premium-fare passengers. The arrival of lavishly arrayed aisle carts signalled a memorable, communal, interactive experience. In the starring role, the chief flight attendant carved the file t de boeuf, carefully extracting rare slices from the middle of the joint and relatively well-done parts from the edges. Assortments of vegetables were presented on large silver salvers, and the 'runner' attendant dashed to the galley for replenishments whenever necessary. The dilemma always seemed to be whether to start discreetly at the back row of the cabin and work forward, or to start at the front row and turn the meal service into a gastronomic parade. In the case of ethnic or 'mysterious' food-and-beverage presentations – for example, the Arabic-style coffee service, rijsttafel (Indonesian rice dishes), toad-in-the-hole (sausages baked in batter) and feijoada (Brazilian black beans) – passengers enjoyed watching the rituals associated with the serving process.

In the premium cabins of many major airlines, the introduction of lie-flat sleeper beds in chevron or herringbone configuration put an end to the elegant trolley service and the gastronomic glories of yesteryear: there is no longer sufficient suitable space for the old-style trolleys. For this reason, the focus has had to change to serving food that is already pre-plated in a form that can be presented directly to individual passengers. In order to demonstrate their commitment to putting the customer first, many airlines dispensed with fixed times for meal services, offering instead such alternatives as 'Eat-When-You-Like', 'Sky Snacks', 'Raid the Larder', 'Express Meal', 'Executive Options', 'All-Day-Deli' and 'Quick Cuisine'. When Virgin Atlantic introduced its Upper Class 'Freedom' menu, the invitation stated unequivocally: 'Treat this service as though you are in a restaurant. Order what you like, when you want. Our cabin crew will let you know the latest ordering time for hot food'.



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The trend toward this type of service means that menu options have to be capable of being reheated, bistro style, at any time during the flight, as opposed to the traditional cooking process where a particular combination of food items – parboiled or otherwise – was brought to a collective ‘ready status’ at a defined time. Single-portion servings of pub food, pies, pizzas and pastas have become very popular, even in the premium cabins. Some flight attendants say that the on-board atmosphere is now closer to that of a fast-food deli than to that of an exclusive restaurant, and that their work programmes, consequently, have become less predictable.

To make a grand statement, airlines sometimes fly ‘on-board chefs’, or they might arrange for a chef from the flight kitchen to circulate in the premium cabins prior to take off or in the VIP airport lounges when passengers are waiting to board the aircraft. The aim is to acquaint passengers with the menu of the day, and to explain the range of house wines on offer. The white toque can have a miraculous effect on even the most dyspeptic traveller. And to add distinction to their marketing positioning, airlines proudly display their relationships with celebrity restaurateurs – for example, the Chefs’ Conclave, the Masters of the Culinary Art, the Congress of Chefs, the International Association of Culinary Professionals and La Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs.

International airlines have to cater to the tastes of passengers from all parts of the world, who are accustomed to the finest five-star restaurant, hotel and dining services. To delight the eye and brain before engaging the palate demands perfection in planning, presentation and delivery. Over the next decade, with huge passenger numbers on new-generation aircraft and flight durations of around 15 hours, premium-class food-and-beverage arrangements will require more imaginative and meticulous handling than ever before. Aviation catering chiefs might care to contemplate a piece of sage advice proffered by the eminent French epicure and gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, in his *Physiology of Taste* (published in 1825): “The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of humanity than the discovery of a new star.”

And yet more food for thought for everyone in the catering and hospitality business, Monsieur Brillat-Savarin’s most famous aphorism: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are!”

*Details of aerial dining delights are provided in the Passenger Experience section and the Picture Galleries of the APP **Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation** by Jennifer Coutts Clay.*

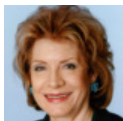
*Jennifer Coutts Clay is the author of the APP **Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation**. More information is provided in www.jetlinercabins.com*

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Jennifer Coutts Clay

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Jennifer Coutts Clay is a consultant providing technical advice and marketing support to aviation industry companies. She is the author of *Jetliner Cabins*, first published in 2003 and updated in 2006. The third Edition, *Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation*, published in 2014, is digitally formatted as an APP for Apple, Kindle and Android-based mobile devices. Jennifer’s career spans 35+ years,

including senior management positions at British Airways and Pan Am; and she was a certified consultant to the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey. Based in New York City, Jennifer is a member of The Wings Club (Golden Eagle Status), The Chartered Institute of Logistics & Transportation, and The Institute of Directors.

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