

Rockers, rare wines & the '11-mile-high club': days of decadence on the Concorde

By MICHAEL KAPLAN

IT SHOULD come as no surprise that the Concorde had to have a special place to store the mink and sable coats passengers wore on the plane.

But those fliers probably had no idea that the staff of the famed jet was secretly trying on the furs.

"If a really beautiful coat came through, we occasionally slipped it on before placing it on the hanger," former flight attendant Sally Armstrong, author of "Vintage Champagne on the Edge of Space," told The Post. "It was getting in touch with how the super rich live. If money had a smell, you could smell it on the Concorde."

From 1976 to 2003, it was the world's most expensive high-tech form of air travel: \$1,500 for a round trip the first year and \$12,000 by the last. Jet-setters — who included Princess Diana, Henry Kissinger and Steven Spielberg — quaffed from \$200 bottles of Dom Perignon and ate blue lobster. Masters of the universe Henry Kravis and George Soros seat-hopped. Dolly Parton flirted with the pilots and Cindy Crawford has recalled how she once fell asleep before take-off and "[woke] up an hour later to find Mick Jagger sitting next to me."

Photographer Christopher Makos frequently traveled via Concorde with pals Calvin Klein and Andy Warhol. During one flight with Warhol, he managed a bit of deal-making for the artist. "I bumped into the head of Perrier," Makos recalled. "He asked if Andy would do a label for them. I negotiated the deal on the Concorde. It was like a flying boardroom where everyone was happy."

The Concorde, primarily flown by British Airways and Air France, even had exclusive routes: mainly JFK to Heathrow in London and JFK to Paris' Charles de Gaulle. (Before the plane was cleared for New York airspace, flights went from Paris to Rio and London to

Bahrain or Washington, DC.) Its first supersonic test flight — clocking in at 23 miles per minute and surpassing the speed of sound by 11 miles per minute — took place in 1969.

In order to achieve its speed, the Concorde needed to fly at some 60,000 feet — an altitude so high that the Earth's curvature was visible and, reportedly, once led to a frisky couple being congratulated from the flight-deck for joining the "11-mile-high club."

It was also a place where even the famous got starstruck. Michael Jackson signed autographs from his seat, and Whitney Houston's dad would hand out tickets to her shows. Warhol routinely left with pieces of the plane's specially designed Raymond Loewy silverware. Paul McCartney often brought his guitar on board. According to Lawrence Azerrad, author of "Supersonic: The Design and Lifestyle of Concorde," "There was a special perk when [McCartney] flew. He would take out his guitar and play songs."

THE development of the Concorde was kicked off by American accomplishment. In 1947, future astronaut Chuck



HIGH LIFE: Queen Elizabeth's official dressmaker, Hardy Amies (above left), created the Concorde's first staff uniforms (above). Wine expert Mark Oldman (right) recently hosted an event celebrating the wines served on the supersonic jet.

A SUPER SONIC BOOM!



50 YEARS SINCE 1969

SKY'S THE LIMIT: The Concorde flew its first test flight in 1969, going on to become the world's most exclusive form of travel. During the jet's heyday, passengers were served fine wine — such as a 1996 Margaux Grand Cru Bordeaux — and food that was sometimes prepared on board by Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse.



NYU. "It's a big loss."

However, there was a side benefit to the lofty elevation, as thin air stabilized meal service. "Flight attendants could balance trays with 15 glasses and walk along the 16-inch-wide aisle without a ripple," said Clay. "You flew on the edge of space and there was no turbulence."

What finally brought the Concorde down to Earth were two disasters. The first was at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris on July 25, 2000. During take off, an Air France Concorde's tire struck a piece of metal debris, causing a wing full of fuel to explode. The plane, bound for JFK, burst into flames and all 100 passengers and nine crew members perished. (Additionally, four people on the ground were killed.) That freak tragedy led Air France and British Airways to ground Concorde until November 2001. When service resumed, said Clay, "the tanks were lined with Kevlar to make them bulletproof."

The final blow came when Airbus, the manufacturer of Concorde replacement parts, deemed operations unprofitable unless it raised costs to untenable prices. As a result, by November 2003 both airlines had ceased operation of Concorde. The final run was a British Airways flight from JFK to Heathrow and loaded with celebrities including Sting, Joan Collins and Christie Brinkley.

"It was like a party," said Bannister who piloted the aircraft. (Today, that one and the other 12 remaining Concorde, plus six test airplanes, are all in museums.) "We wanted it to be a celebration, not a wake."

Makos was not on board for that final take-off. But for him, the passing of Concorde had a funeral tinge.

"It was one more element from the world of chic exclusivity coming to an end," said Makos, grouping it with the closing of Studio 54 and the death of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. "I miss that ride. It was among the all-time cool ones."

Yeager flew an experimental plane that broke the speed of sound and, subsequently, raised the possibility of commercial applications. But it was the French and British governments — said to be smarting from not participating in the space race — that became most devoted to developing commercial airplanes that could travel at supersonic speeds.

By 1961, both governments had come up with similar designs, via airplane producers Sud-Aviation and British Aircraft Corporation, and eventually signed an international treaty agreeing to work in tandem.

It took 14 years for the project to become certified for airworthiness, and there were plenty of near-misses. "A clause [in the treaty] said that one country could not back out without the other's permission," explained Mike Bannister, formerly British Airways' chief Concorde pilot. "There were times when the British wanted to leave and times when the French wanted to leave — but never at the same time."

In 1976, 14 Concorde planes were completed. They cost \$50 million each and had the most powerful pure jet engines seen in commercial aviation before or since.

"Initially, there were more than 200 orders from

airlines around the world interested in getting Concorde of their own," said Bannister. But the fuel crisis of the era soured everyone. Even "Air France and British Airways did not want to fly the Concorde," he added. "But the companies were owned by their governments and were told that they had to."

No frictions were evident to Concorde passengers, however. The flight experience began with expedited check-in and a private lounge where champagne flowed and secretarial services were on tap. According to author Azerrad, the lounge furnishings "provided a history of design. There were Eames lounge chairs, lamps from Bauhaus and chairs by Corbusier."

Passengers were addressed by name and personally escorted to their seats — the most coveted of which were I-A and I-D. Those were farthest from the plane's engines, allowed for boarding last and exiting first and, according to Armstrong, had a seal of approval: "Royalty always sat in those seats. They were the most private on the aircraft." Once airborne, Iranian caviar came out in sealed pots. (The unopened leftovers were often snagged by crew members.) Before the in-flight smoking ban in 1997, Cuban cigars were doled out for flights outside of the US, since the smokes were contraband in America. Passengers were also gifted ritzy takeaways including, at various times, Waterford crystal paperweights, Smythson stationery and leather-bound flasks — all custom made for the airline. Recently, a Concorde letter-opener giveaway had an asking price of nearly \$200 on eBay.

ACCORDING to wine expert Mark Oldman, the vino selection on the Concorde was top-notch.

"A lot of people drank better on the Concorde than they did on the ground," said Oldman. A British Airways menu from the 1990s lists Dom Perignon champagne, a 1997 Grand Cru Chablis and 1996 Margaux Grand Cru Bordeaux, all chosen from a 12,000-bottle wine cellar and retailing for between \$75 and \$250 per bottle (in 2019 dollars).

"The staff served dozens of bottles per flight," said Jennifer Coultts Clay, author of "Jetliner Cabins: Evolution & Innovation" and a consultant on the Concorde's design. "Passengers liked to sample."

Oldman recently hosted a tasting,

"Wine for Quadrillionaires: Drink Back the Concorde," at the Aspen Food & Wine Classic, complete with some of the wines served on the flights. He said that if the jet were still around, the best wines from Australia and California would be served on it. "But in the days of the Concorde, only French wines were considered worthy for its flights."

Top chefs designed menus and sometimes even prepared food in-flight. Air France had Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse and Anton Mosimann (who cooked for four generations of British royals in their homes) represented British Airways. With national pride on the line, culinary maestros went all out.

Ducasse reportedly had a budget of \$90 per passenger. A menu might include steak

with truffle sauce, braised breasts of young grouse and fresh peach poached in champagne. And it was not easy to pull off, thanks to the Concorde's high speeds.

"We had a flower made out of tomato, fresh herbs and chicken liver terrine," said Mosimann. "It looked like a picture on the plate. Then things would move around, the [elements] would get jumbled and you would have to do it again."

The irony? All the fuss may have been moot. "Lower oxygen and lower humidity, which you have in airplanes, change the way taste and smell work," said Marion Nestle, professor emerita of nutrition, food studies and public health at

Some of the Concorde's celebrity regulars



ANDY WARHOL: The artist would pocket the jet's Raymond Loewy-designed silverware.



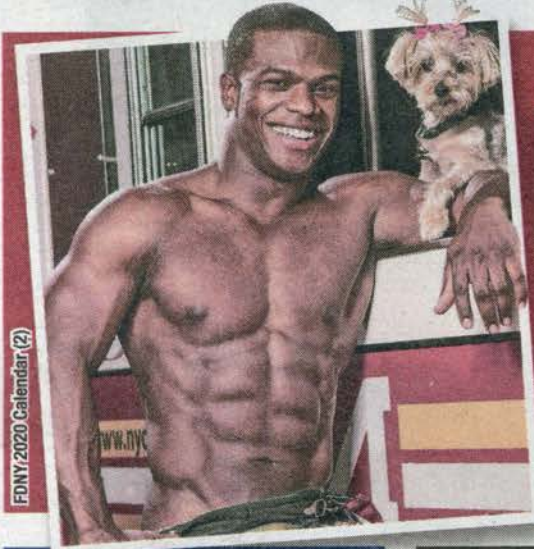
MICHAEL JACKSON: Even Concorde fliers got starstruck, asking the singer for autographs.



CINDY CRAWFORD: The supermodel once woke up on the plane to find Mick Jagger sitting next to her.



PAUL MCCARTNEY: Fellow passengers were treated to an impromptu concert when the music legend flew.



FDNY 2020 Calendar (2)

FIRE & FURRY NY's Bravest get cuddly

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**US
women
ready
for
some
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LAST CHANGE

City Council members' letter on school boss: Stop being 'divisive' or be fired



A bipartisan coalition of city and state politicians has had it up to here with "divisive" Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza, demanding Saturday that Mayor de Blasio expel the prickly education boss if he continues to see things only in black and white. "If Chancellor Carranza continues to divide this city, then someone who can unite this city... should replace him," they wrote.

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