

A CHANGE OF COURSE

In-flight diners are more conscious than ever before,
but what's on their minds has changed slightly.

by **PAUL SILLERS**





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Clockwise:
Dnata quickly implemented new safety protocols for its operations.
In 2019, Emirates focused on seasonal, route-specific ingredients, such as Alphonso mangos on flights to India.
Emirates served strawberry desserts on UK and Ireland routes.
Scandinavian Airlines' New Nordic packaging will curb plastic waste.

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Growing interest in the provenance of the foods consumers eat and the vessels in which they are packed is a trend that airlines have been embracing for some time. Recently, this has been evidenced by such initiatives as Singapore Airlines' From Farm to Plane offering and Scandinavian Airlines' New Nordic packaging, which replaces plastic containers with paper ones coated with organic plant-based plastic. With over 1 billion onboard meals produced every year, scaling sustainable catering practices to

the industry-wide level is no mean feat, and though many eco-friendly initiatives have been gathering pace, COVID-19 has added new layers of complexity.

Such shifts have led airline caterer LSG to update its 2020 *Trend Report* before the year even came to a close. Dominik Sharaf, digital communications manager at LSG, says passengers now want even greater transparency with regard to product handling, origin and hygiene, but adds that there are limits regarding availability (considering the large amounts of food airlines provide) and cost (and the willingness of customers to pay for it). While many of the drivers influencing airline catering continue to have relevance, some have been overshadowed by COVID-19, Sunbul Dubuni, director of Customer Insight at LSG, says. "Hygiene has become more interesting. We also see the boost of the health and well-being trends," she adds.

The industry has responded to these health and safety concerns with extra layers of protection, even though the World Health Organization has said there is no evidence that viruses causing respiratory illnesses can be transmitted via food or food packaging. >

“As an industry, we came together quickly to implement elevated global guidelines, processes and policies for our operations,” says Robin Padgett, divisional senior vice-president, Catering, at dnata, referencing the COVID-19 guidelines set forth by the Airline Catering Association (ACA). Modeled on what the ACA calls the four Ps (people, premises, policies/processes/procedures and procurement), the guidelines are designed to provide additional controls and checklists tailored to the local risk landscape to ensure that measures such as social distancing and PPE are being respected. IFSA, which released its COVID-19 Pandemic Preparedness Guidance for Airlines and Airline Catering in May, is working alongside ACA to develop standardized guidance that will be unveiled during the FTE APEX Virtual Expo in December.

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SEALED AND DELIVERED

Before the pandemic, aviation was looking to reduce packaging and eliminate non-recyclable materials – especially in Europe where mandates – like Directive (EU) 2019/904 – that promote a circular economy have been introduced. COVID-19 has temporarily slowed this initiative. “Reducing, reusing and recycling is what we strive for,” says LSG’s Sharaf. “It might be temporarily overshadowed by the safety aspect, and new packaging solutions will be explored, but after the COVID-19 crisis this topic might gather speed again.”



At Lufthansa, there has been a temporary revival of single-use plastic due to the new hygiene regulations in place, says airline spokesperson Boris Ogursky. “[But] the replacement of single-use plastic cutlery and closing the [waste] loop for single-use plastic cups are still on our agenda in 2021.”

Caterers have had to repackage the pre-flight lounge dining proposition as well: “We’re working with airlines to introduce light-touch, innovative packaging solutions to ensure what the passenger receives hasn’t been heavily handled,” Padgett says. “The dining experience will change in the immediate term ... but we have no doubt airlines are focused on quality and, when safe, will return to a fuller culinary service.” That’ll inevitably mean less plastic, too.

Outside of lounges, but still on the ground, AtYourGate, an in-airport food and retail delivery service, now offers a touchless delivery option. “Customers who opt for touchless deliveries can retrieve an order after it is placed in a safe area by our team member, who then retreats to an appropriate distance,” says Chris Hartman, AtYourGate’s co-founder and chief experience officer.

The shift to touchless catering may signal the possibility of a new ancillary revenue stream for airlines, too, should passengers be willing to pay for fully sealed meals. As of right now, Swiss International Air Lines



Clockwise, starting at top left:

Emirates served heirloom tomatoes with burrata to first- and business-class passengers traveling to Italy.

LSG staff, ready to serve.

JetBlue's Mediterranean Salad Shaker is a customer favorite.

LSG says passengers want greater transparency with regard to product origin and hygiene.

is offering the option on long-haul flights, free of charge, on a trial basis. The service can be ordered via phone or online within the booking flow.

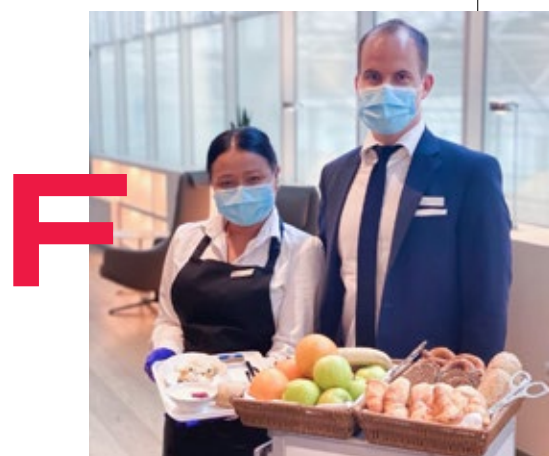
“Integrating these actions into passengers’ own devices will reduce contact with airline [personnel] and provide another layer of confidence for passengers,” dnata’s Padgett says. The company’s partnership with Bluebox, announced in October, opens the door for airlines to earn ancillary revenue via digital sales of meals and other products. LSG’s Sharaf adds that the adoption of these services will reduce weight load and waste while allowing for improved forecasting data and ancillary revenues. “We’ve been talking about this topic for the last couple of years, but the crisis seems to accelerate the acceptance for it,” he adds.



PHOTOS: EMIRATES; LSG; JETBLUE

CATERING

But not everyone feels that this is the moment to capitalize on catering add-ons. Linda Celestino, vice-president of Guest Service and Delivery at Etihad Airways, says that at the airline, there “has not been a focus on enhancing ancillary sales attached to our in-flight catering during the time of the pandemic. On the contrary, we’ve taken the opportunity to increase our all-inclusive offering in Economy class.”



FINISHING TOUCH?

It is widely held that in-flight service is what distinguishes one airline brand from another, so what happens when human and product touchpoints are being rethought, readjusted or removed entirely?

At JetBlue, buy-on-board items including beer, wine, liquor and snack boxes have been temporarily suspended in the main cabin, as has the self-service pantry, on select aircraft to minimize touchpoints and crowding in the aisle. “As an alternative, snacks and water are provided in pre-sealed snack bags that can be quickly offered to customers,” says Emma Magee, Corporate Communications, JetBlue. Not even those in Mint are getting their pre-departure beverage and hot towel.

But it isn’t suspensions all around. Delta Air Lines flight attendants pass cans and single-serve bottles using trays to minimize touchpoints. “Since beer and wine selections have fewer touchpoints than other adult beverage options and are individually contained, they [will be] the first to be reintroduced on board as Delta brings back food and beverage options,” says Delta spokesperson Olivia Mayes.

And with the exception of the Dine on Demand service in business class, Etihad’s in-flight services remain intact. “We’ve had to alter our delivery to meet current health requirements as a result of COVID-19, but we’re not phasing out touchpoints,” Celestino says. “We are maintaining the in-flight offering and not removing from the guest experience and will keep fine-tuning our in-flight product for the benefit of those who travel with us.” In September, Etihad announced it would test machine-learning software by Lumitica that analyzes which meals passengers aren’t eating in order to track food consumption patterns, optimize planning and reduce waste.

With so much in flux at the moment, the reality is that airline catering will have to remain ready to adapt to fast-changing and commercially squeezed realities. “In all classes, we have seen a move to packaged and pre-prepared products, but we expect premium classes to return to a more ‘normal’ service fairly quickly,” Padgett says.

In addition to class of service, geography – more specifically how the pandemic develops in different regions – will also dictate an airline’s catering offering. “We’ll have to have different models,” says Dubuni. “But passenger experience will still be the momentum, and out of this experience, airlines will create loyalty.” ■