

Picnic in the Sky



In-flight dining may have gotten off to a bumpy start, but there was a time when everyone on board an airplane received gourmet meals served on elegant china. Follow the progression from that first champagne toast in the air to today's salted peanuts



For thousands of years, people yearned to fly. When that dream became a reality, a new challenge arose: "What's for dinner?"

In his new book *Food in the Air and Space* (Rowman & Littlefield), author Richard Foss charts the course of the rise and fall of in-flight cuisine. Along the way, we meet intrepid chefs struggling to heat meals without setting the plane on fire, resolute scientists determined to find out why airplane meals taste so awful at 5,000 miles high, and a \$40,000 olive. So, fasten your seatbelts while we take off for our first culinary stop: Paris, France.

FLIGHT CUISINE UNCORKED

Air travel began not with a wing and a prayer, but with a balloon and lots of hot air. On December 1, 1783, a hydrogen balloon equipped with a wicker basket for passengers took off from Paris on a two-hour journey that traveled about 22 miles. On board were two Frenchmen, physicist Jacques Charles and one of the balloon's builders, Nicolas-Louis Robert.

Although this wasn't the first manned balloon flight — that distinction went to an ascent the week before — it does hold an honored place in the annals of food history. Right before takeoff, Charles popped the cork on a bottle

of champagne, filled two glasses, and toasted the crowd, which numbered more than 400,000 and included King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette, and the US ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin. In-flight beverage service had begun.

Ballooning remained a rich person's sport, an amusing way to spend a few hours rather than a serious means of transportation, although gentlemen explorers also conducted scientific experiments while in the air. Despite the fact that the wicker basket made for a rather drafty dining room, passengers often washed down cold meats with copious amounts of wine. Although it was impossible to heat food using an open fire — hydrogen is extremely flammable — in the 1830s an English balloonist named Charles Green brought onboard a quicklime coffeemaker so his guests on the English Channel crossing could have a hot drink to go along with their dinner of beef and chicken, followed by port and brandy. Quicklime, a process that creates heat when calcium oxide is combined with water, had been used as a means of heating food since at least medieval times. Unfortunately, Green accidentally dropped the coffeemaker overboard during the night, so early morning coffee wasn't served.

By the time the 20th century dawned, hot-air balloons were being replaced by a vessel that could be navigated much more accurately — the Zeppelin — and as the airborne experience became

more luxurious, a better way to feed hungry passengers was needed.

THE AGE OF ELEGANCE

Today, it seems obvious that airplanes should carry paying passengers. But back in the early 1900s, there were only a few people who thought that air travel could ever compete with the well-appointed ocean liners that sailed the seas or the comfortable trains that crossed the land. One of those people was Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin, a former German cavalry officer who had better success as an inventor than as a military man. Although von Zeppelin died in 1917, his Zeppelin airships, designed to compete with even the most luxurious ship or train, dominated commercial air travel for almost 30 years.

The first hydrogen-gas-filled Zeppelins could accommodate 20 people, who dined in a mahogany cabin inlaid with mother of pearl. The travelers sat at tables covered with white tablecloths and set with fine china, while a steward attended to their needs. The food was catered by local deluxe restaurants and loaded onto the airship right before takeoff. Hot coffee and tea — necessities because of the lack of indoor heating — were stored in thermoses.

While World War I brought commercial travel to a halt, after the war the Zeppelin Company remained at the forefront, building bigger and faster airships that could travel longer distances. The company was also the

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first to install an all-electric kitchen on its airships.

Travel by Zeppelin reached its zenith in the 1930s, with the construction of the ill-fated Hindenburg. Large as the equally tragic Titanic, the Hindenburg had on board a staff of 15 cooks and servers, as well as a steward, to attend to the needs of the 30 to 50 passengers. In addition to the dining room, which featured murals painted on cream-colored walls, the Hindenburg had a reading room, a writing room, a bar, a smoking room, a bathroom, and 25 private passenger cabins. The airship's officers had their own dining room, while the rest of the crew ate in a mess hall.

Since only the wealthy could afford to travel by air, the menu reflected their tastes. For breakfast there were freshly

baked rolls to accompany the eggs, breakfast meats, and hot drinks. Lunch might begin with a hot soup, followed by duck served with vegetables, and fruit for dessert. Dinner also started with soup, followed by a fish course and a meat course, accompanied by fine wines from Germany and France.

On May 6, 1937, the Hindenburg caught fire as it tried to dock at Naval Air Engineering Station Lakehurst in New Jersey, and was totally destroyed within minutes. Thirteen passengers and 22 members of the crew were killed. The event, considered one of the worst airline disasters of its time, was captured on film and newsreels showing the airship going

up in flames were shown around the world. The Zeppelin era had ended.

Commercial air travel might have come to a halt, if not for the multi-engine airplanes that had been developed as bombers during World War I. While air-force pilots had had to make do with military rations and drinking soup or tea from a thermos, better food and service was needed to lure the wealthy traveler back in the air.



Flying Kosher

While today there is a dazzling array of special meals that a passenger can order, before 1945 kosher travelers had to bring their own food on board. One of the first suppliers of kosher airline meals was Borenstein Caterers, which catered to passengers traveling from New York to Tel Aviv on El Al.

Back in the 1940s, kosher meals were made fresh. But as the industry changed, kosher meals changed with it, and in the 1950s Julius Schreiber of Brooklyn introduced frozen kosher meals. However, airlines were less than enthusiastic about offering the kosher option for two reasons: Serving special meals slowed down the stewardesses in their attempt to serve all the passengers quickly, and kosher meals were two to three times more expensive than the nonkosher alternative.

During the 1960s, when kosher meals were sometimes of a higher quality than regular meals, some non-Jewish passengers began to engage in what became known as "kosher roulette." They'd order a kosher in advance, but once onboard they'd check which meal had the better entrée. If the kosher meal was steak, while the nonkosher one had chicken, they'd take the kosher meal. If the situation was reversed, the customer would insist there had been a mistake and he didn't order the kosher meal.

Even today some non-Jewish travelers order kosher meals, because they believe the meals are of a better quality.

But despite the popularity of kosher meals and the plethora of kosher caterers in business today, the Star-K website has some good advice for the *frum* traveler, for whom kosher is the only option: "It is always advisable to bring your own brown-bagged meal on the airplane 'just in case.'"

FRIED CHICKEN ON THE WING

While the United States and some countries in Europe had commercial airlines as early as the 1920s, the main selling point was speed, not service. Unlike the Zeppelins, which remained on an even keel even during stormy weather, airplanes tended to bounce about during turbulence. The result, since no one had yet thought to place raised edges around the tables, was flying plates and cups every time the plane dipped.

Airsickness was another common problem during those days of non-pressurized cabins. Some airlines therefore opted to solve the problem of in-flight dining by avoiding the issue. Since those early airplanes had to make several stops to refuel, if they were traveling long distances, the passengers disembarked and ate their meals in the airport's restaurant while their plane was being serviced.

Other airlines got creative. Transcontinental Air Transport, which later became the now-defunct airline TWA, had its copilots perform double duty. When they weren't helping the pilot navigate the plane, they had to serve meals to the nine passengers on board. To avoid spilling drinks on passengers, the copilots were instructed to kneel in the aisle when filling glasses.

Boeing Air Transport solved the costly problem of replacing broken china by serving meals on paper plates, the first airline to do so. One problem it didn't think worth solving was the monotony of the menu. According to reports from the era, no matter the time of day or night, the exact same meal was served: fried chicken, rolls, fruit cocktail, and coffee or tea.

Fried chicken became a staple of many other American airlines, because it could be served cold. Unlike the Zeppelins, which had enough spare electricity to use some of it in the kitchen, early airplanes needed all their electricity to keep the carrier in the air. While some airlines experimented with different heating methods — including charcoal, denatured



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alcohol, and steam heat — any cooking that required an open flame was kept to a minimum for obvious reasons: the chef didn't want to set the plane on fire.

Early pioneers in the airline industry quickly understood that big money could be found in flights that crossed the ocean or traveled across continents. Because the passengers were either extremely wealthy or high-level businessmen, catering to their taste buds became a priority.

Imperial Airways, an early British airline that flew flying boats, also known as seaplanes, studiously avoided serving its genteel clientele anything that remotely resembled ethnic food. Thus, whether the route took the seaplane to Cairo or Cape Town, the cuisine was impeccably British, with a menu that might include roast chicken or ox tongue as entrees, a green salad, and peaches with Melba sauce for dessert. Despite the problems with heating and refrigeration,

which had yet to be resolved, Imperial Airways gained a reputation as the highest-class picnic in the air. Naturally, those "picnic meals" were served by stewards wearing white gloves.

WHEN FROZEN MET TASTELESS

It was only after World War II that the airlines solved many of the technical problems involved with in-flight food service. Instead of relying upon hotels to prepare the meals, larger airlines created their own flight kitchens on the ground, while smaller carriers used new catering companies such as Sky Chefs. A new technology developed during the war, frozen food, also transformed the way in-flight food was prepared. Later, convector ovens and built-in galleys made it easier to heat and store the food.

However, for the stewards and stewardesses, life became more difficult. The new aircraft built after the war, such as the DC-4, were much faster than older planes. They could also carry around 100 passengers. On some shorter flights, the staff was therefore in a race against time to serve all the passengers and clear away the empty individual trays — yet another change in the way food was served — before the plane began its descent.

During the early 1950s, competition between airline companies significantly increased at the same time that passenger expectations of deluxe service were also on the rise. Even national airlines subsidized by their home countries were feeling the financial pinch. In 1951, the industry's trade association, the International Airline Transport Association (IATA) therefore inked into "law" an innovation that would dramatically change in-flight food service: the creation of tourist-class service. According to the agreement, airlines could have separate compartments and standards for their wealthy clientele. The people sitting in the tourist-class compartment would receive lower service in exchange for lower prices.

For the next two decades, major airlines

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engaged in an upscale food fight as each tried to outdo the other in their efforts to woo first-class and, later, business-class customers. The champagne flowed freely during Delta's Royal Flight Service, while Northwest's Regal Imperial Service started with Scandinavian pastries and coffee after takeoff and ended with French pastries, with a selection of hors d'oeuvres, appetizers, and meat or fish entrees served in between.

Yet despite the culinary competition, jokes about the terrible taste of airline food began to circulate. It was only during the 1970s that science was able to explain the technical reason for what was wrong, although already in 1939 airline personnel realized there was a problem. While the early aircraft never climbed more than 3,000 feet high, more modern ones were beginning to climb to 5,000 feet and higher. As anyone who lives in high-altitude Denver can attest, food tastes different up there. Specifically, in conditions of very low humidity, our sense of smell is dulled. Since smell plays a large role in our ability to taste, food that's delicious at sea level will often taste bland way up in the air.

Chefs began to compensate by adding more salt, sugar, and spices to in-flight food. And it was partly due to these findings that a snack staple came onboard many flights: salted or honey-roasted peanuts.

FLYING FOR PEANUTS

The golden age of flying in the US came to a bumpy end in the 1970s with deregulation of the industry. Before, US airlines could only fly certain routes and prices were regulated. After deregulation, any US airline could compete for profitable routes (while neglecting the unprofitable ones). And during the recession-filled 1970s, competition was based not on service, but price.



In-Space DINING

No discussion of the history of in-flight food service would be complete without mention of meals served in outer space for astronauts.

Dining in a spacecraft is problematic for two reasons, one of which any *balabusta* who has cleaned her house for Pesach can sympathize with: crumbs. At zero gravity, crumbs float everywhere, clogging up fragile equipment and air vents as they travel. The other problem is moisture, which causes bacteria to flourish.

At first, astronauts had to dine on food squeezed out of tubes or food that had been compressed into bite-sized cubes. Needless to say, neither option was very tasty. As freeze-drying techniques improved, later space explorers could dine on rehydrated food stored in plastic bags, which might not have been gourmet but at least looked and tasted more like the food back home on planet Earth.

Airlines scrambled to cut costs, and one of the obvious places was in-flight food service. A popular airline of the time, People Express, took its inspiration from the no-frills British upstart Laker Airways and charged for the peanuts, sodas, and cookies offered onboard. While the major carriers still offered meals, they began to cut back on expensive items such as strawberries and, according to one legend, olives.

The way the story goes, one day American Airlines president Robert L. Crandall eyed the dinner salad he was served during a

flight. Noticing that the salad included a few olives, he figured that no one would really care if there was one less olive on the plate. This "cut in service," which became known in industry lore as Crandall's Olive, reportedly saved the airline \$40,000 a year.

While food is still served on international flights, meal service has all but disappeared on domestic flights in the US. Thus, the industry has come full circle: People will often bring their own food onboard — sandwiches, fruit, and the like — creating their own picnic in the sky. ✨