

Businessweek | Industries

## With Shake Shack in First Class, Airline Food Is No Longer a Joke

The burger is just about mastered at 35,000 feet. The next big hurdle: crispy fries and avocado toast.



A tray of airline food featuring a Shake Shack burger entree. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

By [Brooke Sutherland](#) and [Mary Schlangenstein](#)

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By all accounts, airlines have no business serving cheeseburgers on flights. Airplane food is essentially glorified leftovers: Whatever gets served at 35,000 feet gets cooked ahead of time, chilled to a safe temperature and then reheated in the air—a bit like trying to re-create last night's restaurant meal for today's dinner. The process is full of potential pitfalls, and to deliver a burger, you have to avoid all of them: soggy bread, hockey-puck meat, bland taste, wilted lettuce.

But Delta Air Lines Inc. went for it with the rollout of burgers from Shake Shack Inc., offered to first-class passengers on longer domestic routes from several of its top hubs starting in March after a Boston test run. It's proved so popular that burgers now account for nearly 15% of the roughly 4,500 hot meals prepped every day at the company's Atlanta flight kitchen. Just a few weeks into the expanded program, the on-ground facility is ordering a third bun-toasting-and-buttering machine—the same ones Shake Shack uses in its restaurants—to make sure it can keep up.



The Delta flight kitchen in Atlanta. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

That toaster is part of the trick to pulling this off. Because, surprisingly, the burger tastes like Shake Shack should. On a recent flight from Boston to Atlanta, the only giveaway that this was an in-flight meal was the lack of French fries—a dish most airlines are still trying to perfect. Fries tend to lose their crispiness when they're reheated, and nobody wants a soggy potato stick. American Airlines Group Inc. is experimenting with a special container to keep in-flight fries appropriately crunchy, but Alaska Airlines, Delta and United, which have all evaluated or even tested the side dish for their menus, don't currently offer French fries to customers. "I don't care about being first to market," says Ash Dhokte, Delta's vice president of onboard services, when

asked about fries during a visit to the flight kitchen. "I care about being best in class."



A bun-toasting-and-buttering machine at Delta's flight kitchen. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

The Shake Shack partnership is the most visible example of airlines' push to improve in-flight food and capitalize on travelers' growing willingness to pay for premium options. Airline stocks have declined this year after warnings of pullback in consumer spending, but that weakness is so far concentrated at the lower end of the income spectrum, leaving carriers hyperfocused on the well-heeled flyers who can still afford to pay for the pricier front-cabin tickets that pad airlines' profit margins.



Machine-toasted buns. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

“No one is going to fly an airline because of the food they serve, but serving a good meal to a customer, especially in a premium cabin and especially with

more people paying for it, can be a positive,” says Henry Harteveltdt, founder of Atmosphere Research Group. “If I’m paying thousands of dollars for a business-class seat to Europe or Asia and getting something that resembles cafeteria food, I’m not a happy camper.”

Whatever dishes airlines offer have to go through a carefully orchestrated process—from sourcing ingredients to perfectly assembling each item on individual dining trays that get loaded onto plane-bound meal carts.

Gategourmet, one of the main third-party in-flight caterers, keeps nine kinds of olives, 17 varieties of lettuce and 82 types of cheese in stock at a facility near Boston’s Logan Airport that serves a dozen international airlines including Air France and Qatar Airways. The kitchen uses an elaborate color-coding system and nips the corners off pans and cutting boards to keep halal and kosher ingredients separate. Delta relies on robots to help out at its Atlanta kitchen; their whirring arms grab trays, place dishes and deposit salt and pepper packets.



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As with everything that touches an airport’s operations, security is tight: Even a knife that gets used in a food preparation kitchen has to be carefully tracked and accounted for at all times so no one sneaks one into a meal. “There’s a lot of time and effort and hard work that goes into getting food on an airplane,” says Aaron McMillan, United’s managing director of hospitality programs. “A lot of people take it for granted.”



A robot at Delta's kitchen assembles food trays with cutlery, napkins and side dishes. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

Still, there's a reason airline food is a punchline. The explosion of air travel over the past few decades forced airlines to shrink galleys to make room for more seats, limiting the food possibilities, says Jens Kuhlen, president for North America at Gategroup, parent company of Gategourmet. That, combined with relentless pressure to boost the industry's paltry profit margins, led to a commoditization of in-flight dining. Airlines had little reason to one-up each other on food.



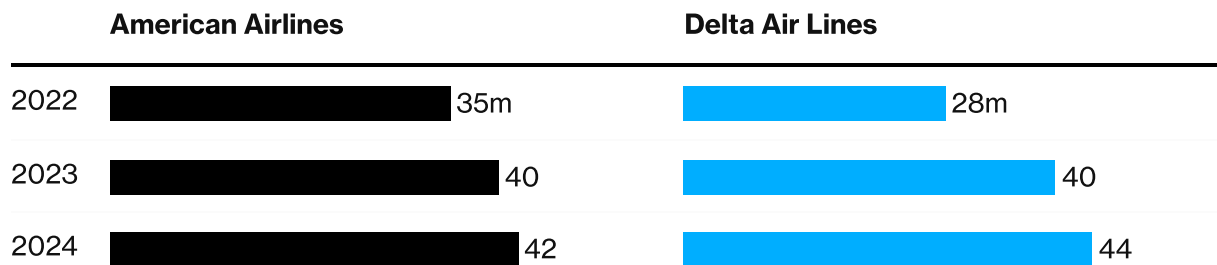
A worker loads a plane-bound meal cart. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

That started to change when Asian, European and especially Middle Eastern airlines with a reputation for top-tier customer experiences began competing more directly with North American carriers, Kuhlen says. United now offers Magnolia Bakery banana pudding in first class, while Alaska treats its passengers to Stumptown coffee, Beecher's cheese and Salt & Straw ice cream. Front cabin dining menus are often designed by celebrity chefs: Delta has Mashama Bailey of the Grey in Savannah, Georgia, and Alaska uses Brandon Jew of San Francisco's Michelin-starred Mister Jiu's restaurant.

The airlines, particularly the big ones, are limited by the scale of their needs: Delta, for example, served 44 million meals globally last year, while United did 52 million. It can also be challenging for outside partners used to serving customers on the ground to adapt to the unique demands of airplane food, says Todd Traynor-Corey, Alaska's vice president for guest products and experience.

## Soaring Demand for In-Flight Meals

Total meals served globally each year



Source: Companies

Seafood, for example, is particularly tough. No one wants to sit next to someone eating reheated fish that smells like reheated fish. Alaska neutralizes odors by marinating fish in miso- or citrus-based sauces, Traynor-Corey says. Breading also helps: Molly Brandt, executive chef of culinary innovation in North America for Gate Gourmet, is working on a dish she fondly refers to as “Guppy McGupperson”—a fish cake shaped like a goldfish. Steak is challenging too; it's hard to preserve that medium-rare finish many people prefer after it's been reheated midair. This is why airlines tend to focus on things like short ribs that keep their flavor more easily. In general, the dry air that circulates in an airplane cabin dulls our taste buds. Airlines are wary of overdoing it on the salt, but they will often supplement food with extra spices to add *oomph*. “If you can't taste it on the ground, you definitely won't taste it in the air,” Traynor-Corey says.





Airlines meals go through a carefully orchestrated process, from sourcing ingredients to perfectly assembling individual dining trays. *Photographer: Bailey Garrot for Bloomberg Businessweek*

Still, some things just don't work on airplanes. Alaska experimented with ice cream sandwiches, for example, but ditched them because they turned into a melted mess. The cookie part loses its firmness as it melts and doesn't do as good of a job containing the ice cream as a standard cup. Another holy grail is avocado toast. There are ways to keep avocado from turning an unsightly brown—lemon or lime juice, for example—but the dish can't come preassembled, as there's no way to reheat the toast without also warming up the avocado. With burgers accomplished, Dhokte says this is the next dish he wants Delta to master.

And then there's French fries. American's limited February test of sliders and fries was so successful it was expanded in March as a preorder option for first class passengers on domestic flights between 900 and 1,299 miles. The airline uses a specially developed thin cardboard container with a slightly waxy interior and holes to create a more dynamic air flow that keeps fries crisp when they're reheated onboard, says Sheri Whiteley, senior manager of onboard dining planning and development at American. Also critical are the use of higher-starch potatoes and a crinkle cut.

Michael Trager, a luxury travel adviser who runs TravelZork, sampled the sliders and fries on a recent flight from Palm Beach, Florida, to Dallas. Airplane fries are never going to match that fast-food feel, he says. But American's offering "actually turned out to be really good."

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