



A Different Dining Experience

Food to rival the finest restaurant offerings makes for the perfect business lunch in mid-air. **by Bruce Fabricant**

As business aviation has boomed over the past two decades, so has the quality of in-flight catering and the desire of the catering companies to satisfy passengers' food cravings at 36,000 feet. Without question, the dining experience on a private jet has become a key aspect of every trip whatever the trip's length.

However, when it comes to the in-flight dining experience, taste isn't the only issue that determines the quality of a meal aloft. Today's private jet operator seeks to ensure that in-flight catering meets high standards in terms of service, food handling, safety, security and costs. Consequently, the private jet in-flight catering business – now a \$100-million industry – has evolved from simple box lunches to virtually anything that rivals the finest offerings of the best New York or Paris restaurants.

In-flight catering has grown over the past several years as a result of the increase in fractional aircraft ownership along with the boom in the sale of private jet cards that offer flight-time by the hour. Both have made private jets available to a wider clientele. Indeed, business aviation in-flight catering is expected to grow even more in the coming years – for this year alone more than 800 new private jets are projected to be delivered, according to Honeywell Aerospace.

"The demographics have changed dramatically and so has the cuisine," explained Joe Celentano, who, with his brother John, is co-founder of Rudy's Inflight Catering (www.rudysinflight.com) at Teterboro Airport, New Jersey. "We started our company out of the back of our family's restaurant in Hackensack, New Jersey in 1983 when only the largest companies had corporate

jets. The aviation crowd liked our food and wanted us to furnish boxed meals for their passengers.

"Today we are seeing a much younger clientele than ever before. We are seeing things that 15 to 20 years ago you would not have imagined except on a holiday weekend."

In their first year of operation, the brothers were preparing meals for about 15 aircraft per week. Eighteen months later, they were preparing meals for 15 to 20 aircraft per day. However, the company really started to expand rapidly when a key fractional ownership company began using Rudy's services.

Over the past 20 years Rudy's facilities have grown from a 2,000 square foot kitchen to a 17,000 square foot state-of-the-art facility to reflect that expansion. Today, Rudy's provides meals for an average of 400 flights a day out of New York and Washington DC

continued on page 78

area airports - a number that can triple on peak days. More than 120 employees work at the Teterboro facility, which, incidentally, will be expanded with the addition of a 9,900-square-foot warehouse this year.

NEW CHALLENGES

Celentano points out that today's new clients come with many new challenges. For example, many corporate aviation clients are traveling with young children, creating a different demand. Additionally, many business flyers have really grown to be more health-conscious, while there is also a noticeable increase in the request for organic fruits and vegetables.

Conversely, a prior spike in high-protein requests such as those called for by the 'Atkins Diet' has declined recently. Moderation and healthy choice seem to be the norm right now, with whole-grain and whole-wheat-based products being popular.

"Organic food requests were running at 30 percent last year, and I expect that figure to be closer to 70 percent this year," predicted Celentano. "The person flying in the back of a corporate jet is someone who is often a successful business person or celebrity. They are truly educated about nutrition."

Another passenger demographic shift in cosmopolitan areas has come in the form of more internationally selected food requirements. However, according to Celentano, for Rudy's Inflight Catering there is no such thing as an exotic food request. "We may get someone who specifically requests a very obscure recipe from a cookbook and faxes or emails us the recipe which we will prepare. It may be that a Malaysian flyer is heading back to Malaysia and requests that we go to a specific restaurant to get a unique meal."

And following in the tradition of the original Rudy's restaurant, if a customer wants it, Rudy's Inflight will get it. To do this, Rudy's employs a mobile shopper on each shift to obtain special requests from the array of food available in the New York-New Jersey area. "Rudy's will go get sushi from Nobu in New York City on the spot for someone who specifically requests it, or it'll make the sushi in-house for another client," explained Sean Magovern, president, Airworks Inc., a charter company which includes high profile celebrities among its clientele.

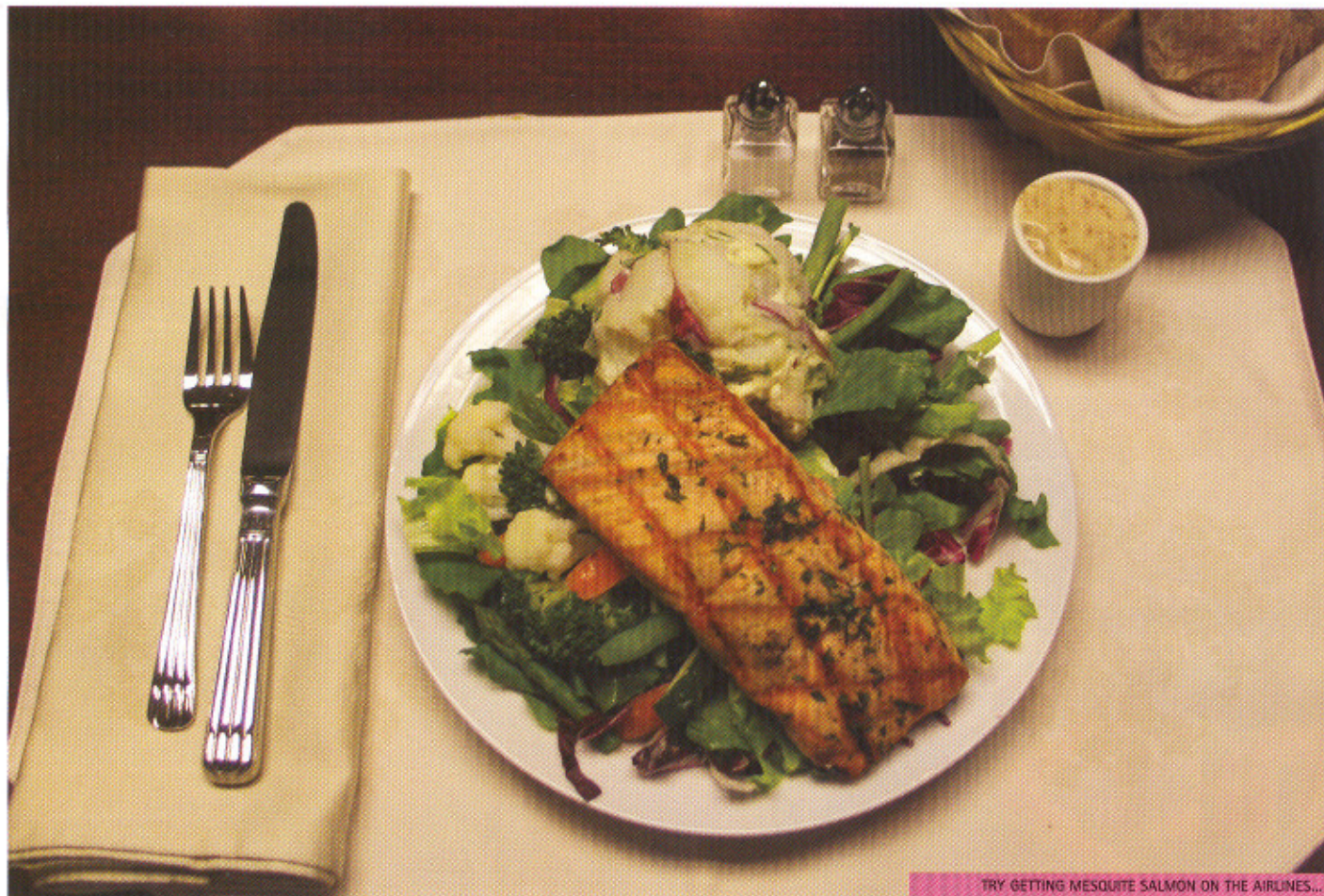
The culinary fare on private jets varies widely. "The menu could reflect a request from an artist working so hard that they feel

they owe themselves the indulgences of their favorite fast food, so they'll ask specifically for a brand," Magovern added. "Then on the same flight, there may be another member of the group who wants all-organic foods."

In another scenario, during the gathering of the United Nations General Session in New York City, Rudy's finds itself providing service for more than 30 foreign governments - which presents a need to respect the diversity of each nation's religious requirements and customs.

Through the years a growing portion of the flights Rudy's Inflight Catering prepares meals for are international in scope. In the past, return flights from Paris, London, and Rome to the United States posed a problem for catering. That is no longer the case.

"There are more and more in-flight catering companies popping up throughout the European continent," observed Celentano. "There are some really phenomenal catering companies abroad that are really rising to the occasion and trying to mimic what has been going on in the U.S. for the last 20 years. European FBOs no longer have to rely on hotels or small restaurants to accommodate their catering orders." >



TRY GETTING MESQUITE SALMON ON THE AIRLINES...

ADDITIONAL DEMANDS

Most flight departments, charter companies or fractional operators place an order 12 to 24 hours ahead of time. However, Celentano adds: "a core part of our business are the ASAP (as soon as possible) orders we fulfill every day. These are the orders we scramble to provide. That really is the cornerstone of the business we have built at Rudy's."

"A call comes in and we're told that an executive is en route to the airport and is 30 minutes out. His meeting has run late and he has decided he wants sandwich and fruit trays for four persons and cookies and brownies for dessert. The caller asks whether we can get the order to the aircraft in 15 minutes which we do."

As you can see, in-flight food is a highly customized matter according to the individual requirements of the client – although some external factors may dictate food requirements on aircraft to a small extent. For example, the newer generation aircraft that fly as many as 12 straight hours have an affect on food requirements according to Celentano. "Distance really dictates what you need to bring on board to make it a good experience."

INDIVIDUAL TASTES, INDIVIDUAL COSTS

Whether the in-flight meal is a tuna sandwich or braised turkey roulade, though, there isn't a scale for typical food costs on a private jet flight, whether a short or long trip, or whether the food is hot or cold servings. Celentano points out that in terms of pricing and costs, costs fall into four major



PREPARATION IN THE KITCHEN



RUDY'S CUSTOMER SERVICE DEPARTMENT

categories: raw materials (food); packaging, which has to be business aviation specific; the logistics of getting the food to the customer from the kitchen; and labor, which includes salaries, insurance and medical benefits, among other things.

"In-flight catering is so highly individualized," added Celentano. "It could be a group of people going to a function who might require a small platter of hors d'oeuvres and wine, or six men going to a sporting event who want as much food as they can pack on the airplane. Catering is the most highly personalized part of any flight."

While commercial airlines have aggressively cut back meal service because of intense competition and soaring fuel prices, private aviation has also taken a hard look at culinary costs. However, Celentano is confident that Rudy's catering measures up: "We know price is an issue, but if service is impeccable, the costs should be justified. Our customers want quality and because of my relationship with the vendors, I can get almost anything I need on a moment's notice."

"Fractional companies and other private jet operators have cut down on excess in an effort to control costs, and are running their business models a lot more efficiently than ever before," continued Celentano. "They prefer quality to quantity. Years ago, private jet operators ordered extra food. Now the trend is if there are five people on a flight, portions are being ordered for three people – and that is more than adequate."

SAFETY AND SECURITY MEASURES

There has been a tradition in some corporations that the CEO personally serves the food during the flight. But today as corporate aircraft have grown in size and extended their range, flight attendants are much more common.

Virtually all of a flight attendant's dealing with on-board meals involves food safety issues, whether it's food purchasing, packing, preparation or assembly. "There is no doubt flight attendants fulfill a very necessary safety role on a corporate aircraft," said Celentano, who, incidentally, is an original board member of the National Business Aviation Association's flight attendant committee, which champions flight attendant safety training.

"Food safety on board an aircraft is predicated on two primary factors, time and temperature," said Celentano. "You obviously do not want food to be held at a temperature that can impact safe food handling. All flight attendants who are properly trained know the length of time they can work with food before it spoils. A flight attendant who has 12 people on board a Gulfstream V, for example, knows exactly how to order food. The attendant recognizes that the meal is not going to be as intricate as one would be if there were only three people on the flight. Passenger count dictates how much time is available to work with the food."

Indeed, Rudy's Inflight Catering offers training and assistance for any flight attendants or clients who order through the company.

The emphasis on food safety is apparent throughout Rudy's daily operation. The company adopted NASA's Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) program, a quality assurance program designed to analyze potential food hazards, identify times when food might be exposed to contamination, and establish a procedure unique to a specific operation.

So what might you expect to see in Rudy's kitchen? "Our hallmark is fresh fruit," said Celentano, pointing to a wooden fruit preparation table staffed by half a dozen people. At a similar table a few feet away, surrounded by another half-dozen

continued on page 82



workers, vegetables are being prepared. The fruit and vegetable tables are far away from the stainless-steel tables where meat is prepared for cooking.

"Most food contamination is caused by uncooked fruits and vegetables," said Celentano. "That's why we have different tables. Fruits and vegetables are also washed thoroughly before they are cut. It's logical when you think about it. The knife that cuts the fruit or vegetable touches the outside first and then drags the contamination along as it cuts."

Once an hour every day at Rudy's a red light and buzzer goes off and work stops in the Teterboro kitchen. A steady stream of food handlers head for the washbasins to clean their hands. Minutes later everyone is back on station, slicing and dicing, cooking and packaging. In addition, when a worker changes to a different type of food, he or she washes their hands again. An employee is required to attend recurrent training on bio-hazards, microbiology, and food handling, among other things, twice a year.

In addition to safety regarding the food itself, since 9/11, airport security has become a major concern for everyone, including in-flight caterers. Celentano believes that security has absolutely affected every part of the industry. "We are an extension of every flight department so we need to have the same heightened level of security."

Rudy's is a closed facility: Employee background checks are a necessity for employment. Rudy's has also equipped its 33 vehicles with GPS-driven tracking devices. If the vehicle stops for a significant

period en route, Rudy's is alerted so it can be determined whether security might have been breached. The company also installed 26 camera monitors that operate on a 24-hour continuous loop at its facilities at Teterboro, Westchester and Washington DC. Visitors must arrange their visit in advance and show proper identification before being escorted into the building.

Celentano pointed out that security has limited Rudy's control of the food delivery process. "It used to be that we could go on board an aircraft at an FBO. That no longer occurs. We now have to deliver to an FBO; the FBO signs off for the meals and brings

the food on board the airplane. Because of this there is a time gap. Our clients were once assured exactly how the food left our building and how and when it was placed on board an aircraft."

SEEING THE JOB THROUGH...

Nevertheless, preparing the food does not represent the extent of Rudy's concerns with a client. "While food is important and almost a given on any flight, the most important part of our industry is the food packaging," says Celentano.

"When we first started in 1983 no one really looked at the packaging as a key



FRESH FRUIT IS RUDY'S HALLMARK ACCORDING TO CO-FOUNDER JOE CELENTANO

concern. They were just happy that they could get something delivered to the aircraft. We looked at the packaging and decided we had to find something as good as what would be used in someone's home or office. Even now we continually look at the latest in serving containers."

During every shift at Rudy's, workers put meals in special containers on food-packaging tables. They are flash cooled and then boxed before being shipped to FBOs in refrigerated vans. At the FBOs, the orders are placed in commercial refrigerators that Rudy's provides to ensure the food is kept at the proper temperature.

It could be argued that Rudy's is more like an upscale restaurant than a caterer because it custom cooks for each order, whereas big caterers use an assembly-line process when putting meals together.

"What we tell everybody is that there are many variables that are important for the success of a flight such as pilot training, insurance and fuel negotiation. But what it truly boils down to are three essential elements that passengers use to consider whether or not a flight is successful: First, passengers decide when they walk on the aircraft whether it appears to be clean; second, passengers look at the demeanor and appearance of the flight crew; third is catering."

"Food is a necessary diversion when you are trapped on an airplane for four hours or more. If catering is not just right then all of a sudden the passenger starts questioning



RUDY'S CO-FOUNDERS JOHN (LEFT) AND JOE CELENTANO (RIGHT)

why he or she is spending several thousand dollars an hour for that flight," stressed Celentano.

"There is no way to minimize all the other variables, but when passengers are on an airplane, they don't see things such as insurance," he continued. "They don't see fuel. They don't see the training or work that the mechanics have performed. These things are supposed to be perfect.

Passengers see the catering. If the meal and its presentation are good, then they make a difference in that flying experience.

"I am sure that no charter company has ever gained a client from catering but I can certainly tell you that they may have lost one because of poor or inadequate catering."

More information from Rudy's Inflight Catering;
Tel: (866) 727 1122;
Website: www.rudysinflight.com

OUTSOURCED CATERING: BUILDING A NETWORK

It's pretty clear that the catering business is growing, and while a single operator can build and maintain a comfortable following in one city, the trend is toward networking and multi-site capability. Rudy's Inflight Catering is a leader in this area. Two years ago, Rudy's created a company called Aviation Services Network (ASN), a catering consortium designed to bring common standards to the in-flight catering industry in terms of hours, quality, technology, customer service and financial management.

ASN has 300 airports within the U.S. in its nationwide network and 63 qualified catering suppliers in the network as well, adding two to three affiliates each month. The ASN client list includes corporate flight departments, private operators and fractional ownership providers.

Essentially, Aviation Services Network has revolutionized the in-flight catering industry, which has traditionally been made up of many 'mom-pop' operators. "We realized that there was an eminent

need for consistent service from high quality caterers, using an in-depth support system," said Celentano.

"We created ASN based on the requests of numerous corporate aircraft operators who wanted to streamline their catering departments, keep their overhead costs down and elevate the quality, presentation and packaging of the food served on board their aircraft. ASN has taken the burden off of the clients' internal departments by outsourcing their catering. We've become an extension of these companies based at our headquarters in Teterboro.

"Companies are seeing a savings in human resources, but more importantly, they are seeing a greater focus on owners who are getting exactly what they want. The owner experience has improved. A company's invoicing and remittance have improved dramatically. They are experiencing a financial savings and are seeing an elevation in service."

Providing companies with centralized billing, invoice verification, menu planning

and design, alignment with award-recognized caterers, and a rigorous affiliate caterer audit process, ASN also provides packaging and portion consulting, a locker replenishment program, controlled cost through competitive pricing and customized web-based software.

The customized software program is to process catering invoices from around the country. "This eliminates the obligation of business aviation professionals to handle day-to-day catering issues. They can concentrate on the core issue of safely transporting passengers," Celentano said.

ASN has established a regulated pricing structure in each market to minimize inconsistent and inflated spending, resulting in bottom line savings for customers. All prices are negotiated, agreed upon and audited right from the beginning in each market.

Finally, ASN provides a nationwide stock locker amenity program with over 400 aircraft cabin amenity items for both onsite and offsite locker locations.