

# Food for thought



Rudy's Inflight Catering views the expansion of catering in the Washington DC market as inevitable. Here, Rudy's Pres Joe Celentano and Senior VP John Celentano (center L and R) stand with some of their staff at the company's newly opened state-of-the-art facility in Chantilly VA.

## Rudy's Inflight takes a bigger bite of the bizav catering market.

By Paul Richfield  
ATP/CFII/A&P. Beechjet 400,  
Citation 525, Gulfstream IV and  
Mitsubishi MU300

**H**ungry corporate operators serving the US national capital region are in luck—Rudy's Inflight Catering has just opened a new flight kitchen and support facility in Chantilly VA, just beyond the southern fence line at IAD (Dulles, Washington DC).

Rudy's, which has won *Pro Pilot's* Best Catering Award for 20 consecutive years, had outgrown its old facility and wanted to be positioned for continued growth in the Washington area market.

Formally unveiled on Sep 30, just prior to the NBAA convention, the new facility is the third flight

kitchen for TEB (Teterboro NJ)-based Rudy's, which has catered bizav flights originating in the New York area for more than 2 decades. For company president and cofounder Joe Celentano, the move southward to Washington was inevitable.

"The DC market is one of the most vibrant in business aviation, and we wanted to be a part of it," he says. "We're incredibly anxious to open the IAD facility prior to the Presidential inauguration in January, because it's going to be such a large event. In the New York/New Jersey market, 300-500 transactions a day is typical, but for the inauguration we're expecting 1000 or even more.

"We're planning and ordering for the event now, and even have a special menu for it in the works—the Americana—with a patriotic

theme. It's all coming together, although we have a lot of detail work ahead of us. Logistically, the biggest issue for us is obtaining clearance and airport badges for our drivers and other employees, and we've been working on that all summer."

Washington, in many ways, is unique among corporate aviation markets, and not just for its heightened level of security. No other area in the world receives as many foreign dignitaries, and many of them arrive from overseas in widebody, corporate-configured aircraft. This type of traffic is almost evenly split between IAD and ADW (Andrews AFB, Camp Springs MD), which Rudy's supports with a pair of "high-loaders"—large trucks with trailers that rise up on scissor-lifts.

This level of access comes with special responsibilities, among them the need to handle international waste, or trash coming from other countries.





In the business for over 25 years, John (L) and Joe Celentano stand in the hub of Rudy's new facility, which was unveiled and began operations in Aug 2008.



IAD Dir of Operations Monalisa Shaheen reviews potential employment documents submitted by Expeditor Supervisor Omar Martinez.

"This is a big issue in the Washington DC area," says John Celentano, Rudy's senior VP and cofounder. "You need certain equipment on the trucks, specialized record-keeping, hazmat training—there are a lot of moving pieces. The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority can be extremely tough and demanding, and they've taken a very hard stance on this.

"We're working with them, of course—and even they recognize there's a need for us in the DC area. The airports here have, until now, depended solely on commercial caterers geared mainly toward the scheduled airlines. Finally, the business aviation community has a catering option specifically for their types of operations and their special needs."

### Family restaurant roots

The Celentano brothers are among the aviation catering world's most seasoned veterans, having practiced their trade from an early age. It all began with a restaurant their parents owned in Hackensack

NJ, within minutes of the various New York-area airports. They decided to name the place Rudy's, after their uncle.

"Pilots and passengers would come in from Newark and Teterboro to eat, and ask if we could pack up some food for them to take back to their airplanes," says Joe Celentano. "We looked at what people were doing, and there was no real system for it—it was mostly just cardboard boxes covered with tinfoil. We knew we could do better than that."

By all accounts, they have. Rudy's has grown to become an industrial operation on a massive scale, employing more than 300 people at its 3 locations. Around 1/3 of the workers are administrative and clerical—the rest tend to be cooks, kitchen staff and drivers. The company has 33 vehicles at TEB, 10 at IAD and 7 at HPN (White Plains NY). Rudy's transitioned recently from Ford E150 vans to a fleet of small sport utility vehicles—mostly Ford Escapes and Honda CRVs.

Joe Celentano explains why: "We've found that the small SUVs are really the best way to get in and around airports, and in city traffic. They're much less expensive to operate than the big vans, and have a much lighter environmental footprint. The drivers don't need [commercial drivers licenses] and the smaller vehicles are much easier to maneuver in ramp areas and FBO parking lots."

Typically, Rudy's products are transported in tamper-proof boxes, which are then moved to (and secured in) commercial refrigerators the company installs in its most

frequently used FBOs. Therefore, packaging is a critical element of Rudy's business, and materials are sourced overseas and purchased by the shipping container load. Food products are also acquired in vast quantities, to take advantage of economies of scale.

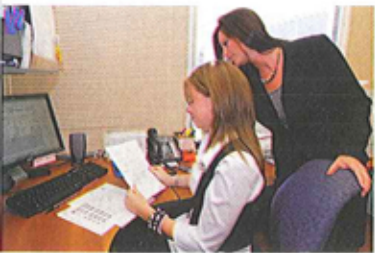
"You have to purchase everything in bulk for this to make any sense at all from a business standpoint," Celentano says. "Right now, for example, we have 6 pallets of pasta inbound, because we know we're going to need it."

Rudy's offers a wide range of food choices and customers can pretty much get whatever they want. Executive chefs run each of the respective kitchens, and can respond instantly to clients' demands, no matter how eclectic or extreme. Meals for specific cultural requirements are a specialty, and Rudy's can procure a large assortment of kosher and halal meats. Still, the core product line is streamlined to a great extent, around sandwich, fruit, cheese, vegetable and cookie trays. This is largely due to the top-tier flight departments that use Rudy's services regularly.

"They know exactly what they want and how they want it, which makes it very easy for us," says Monalisa Shaheen, a Rudy's veteran recently named director of operations for the new Rudy's IAD facility.

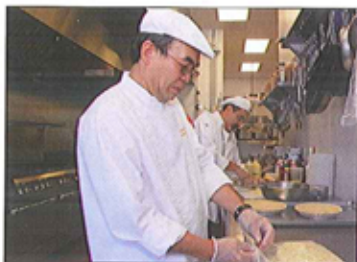
### Aviation Services Network

This pursuit of standardization has borne fruit in other areas, most recently in the creation of an entity known as the Aviation Services Network (ASN). This new business



Customer Service Agent Tiffany Beetem (L) and Customer Service Mgr Dawn Ingram assess an upcoming order to ensure quality.





[L-R] Always ready to accommodate a client's request, Executive Chef Jonnie Khaoung (L) and Chef Bozzy Sattarzadeh prepare an array of quiches for an upcoming order. Two of Rudy's commonly ordered menu requests—an assortment of fresh sushi and sashimi garnished with colorful flower accents, and an arrangement of classic deli sandwiches—a Rudy's staple.

grew out of customer requests from numerous corporate operators, who wanted to scale back or eliminate their inhouse catering departments, lower their overhead, and at the same time improve the quality, presentation and packaging of the food served aboard their aircraft.

Toward these goals, Joe Celentano has teamed with aviation caterers around the country, such as Air Gourmet in Los Angeles CA and Las Vegas NV. Not every caterer can join—ASN membership is based on a business's reputation, ability to comply with stringent health and safety standards, and its level of technical sophistication. Fractional provider Flight Options became the first ASN customer after eliminating its own catering operation.

"Our goal was to create something that operates seamlessly with a telephone and Web-based interface, like 1-800-Flowers.com," Celentano says. "We want customers to have a single point of contact, and ensure the same high level of service, even if they're a long way from the nearest Rudy's kitchen. ASN has had another benefit—it's bringing us even closer to the fractionals, who immediately jump on any new way to leverage their buying power."

Traditional corporate operators and charter providers can also benefit from ASN. Services include centralized billing and invoice verification, menu planning and design, and a rigorous affiliate audit process. ASN works through a customized software program accessible through any computer, and includes a locker replenishment program at participating FBOs.

### Careful expansion

Before its drive on Washington, Rudy's consolidated its New York position with the lease of an unused building right on HPN's Taxiway J. Although it's significantly smaller than the TEB and IAD facilities, that's fine because administrative tasks are handled at the other 2 locations. Prior to obtaining the building from Westchester County, Rudy's had operated from rented quarters in Elmsford, about 9 miles from HPN—a situation that was workable but hardly ideal, according to Joe Celentano.

"It's not that far, but it's far enough away that some people didn't think we had a local enough presence," he says. "Now that we're right on the field, it's a different situation entirely for us. Planes taxi by and

see our signage, and trucks with the Rudy's logo, and they know that we're right there and ready to serve them. Logistically, the night curfew program [at HPN] gives us a bit of a break. The staff goes up at 0400 and is finished by 1900, because that's when the flow of traffic stops up there."

The Celentanos have looked into expanding to SWF (Newburgh NY), as this airport, with its long runway and light traffic, is attracting a growing number of corporate flights. Sheltair, which acquired Rifton Aviation, is working diligently to snare the corporate widebodies heading for the New York area. Still, SWF presents a geographic challenge—it's around 40 miles from TEB, and an even longer drive from Manhattan.

MMU (Morristown NJ) is another potential growth market—one that Rudy's serves from its TEB hub. Long Island business is expanding as well, but is becoming increasingly difficult to serve its airports from New Jersey due to ground traffic delays. Will Rudy's ever head west, to the bizav hubs of the affluent Rockies?

"We can duplicate this anywhere in the country," Celentano says. "We understand our customers very



Headquartered in Teterboro NJ, Aviation Services Network was founded in 2003 by Joe and John Celentano with the intention of raising the level of inflight catering experiences nationwide.



Always available for personalized customer service, Rudy's team of employees are available 24 hours a day to provide clients with a high level of quality and value.

Photos by Robert Kern





Located in the Teterboro vicinity, Rudy's 8000 sq ft warehouse is home to all Rudy's locker supplies, as well as an onsite same-day linen service.

well, and can anticipate their needs. The average flight is 2 hrs 20 min with 3 passengers, and it's usually businessmen going to a meeting. Naturally, there are all kinds of flights and passengers, but that core customer tends to drive our business model, our strategic planning and the way we allocate resources.

"We've always taken a long-term outlook on things, and we're not tied to outside financing. The trick is to find the way to tap into the local labor pool and deal effectively with the relevant agencies. It's always our goal to establish strong

ties with the local business community and use local vendors when we can.

"Our strategy is to go to vendors and guarantee them X dollars per month. If we don't order the planned amount, we still pay that minimum price. If we go over, we pay the difference. With that kind of guarantee, we know our vendors will be well motivated to get up in the middle of the night if that's what we need them to do.

"All told, it's been a very rewarding experience, doing this for the last 20-plus years. Coming to work

still brings a lot of joy to us, because there are so many pieces of the puzzle that have to fall into place. The ripples of the little pebble we've dropped into the pond are far-reaching."



Paul Richfield is a pilot, aircraft mechanic and aerospace journalist. He is a former executive editor of Pro Pilot and has written for the magazine since 2001.



Stationed directly on the field at HPN, Rudy's White Plains facility services airport locations such as FRG, HPN, ISP, JFK, LGA and SWF for around-the-clock service.

## Catering 101

Today's top inflight caterers have a wide range of food and service options on tap, resulting in hundreds of choices for business aviation operators and their passengers. To ensure customer satisfaction, it's important that flight-crews and support personnel communicate clearly with their catering provider. Operators are encouraged to consider the following key elements before calling their selected caterer:

Ensure the caterer has the name of the person ordering the catering and a valid, working contact phone number. This seems obvious but often isn't. Give the caterer a way to get a hold of you in the event of a question or concern.

The aircraft tail or registration number, and/or the tip number is needed, even if the food is to be delivered to a hangar or FBO conference room. Many catering orders have ended up in the wrong hands simply because a driver didn't know exactly where to take it.

To prevent confusion, the specific day and date of the order must

be verified. "Wednesday the 10th" might work, but not if Wednesday is actually the 9th.

Tell the caterer when to deliver the order, not when the flight is scheduled to depart. Often "wheels up" times turn into delivery times, and the food misses the flight. Plan to receive the catering 60-90 minutes prior to departure, and allow for outside variables such as distance to the inflight kitchen and rush-hour traffic.

Specify the airport and delivery location. Don't assume the caterer knows you're at TEB or HPN. The call center representative might be new, or the last order they did might have gone to LGA.

Tell the caterer if any passengers have food-related allergies, are on special diets or face any other considerations that might affect the way the food is prepared, packaged or served. Be especially sensitive to nut allergies, which can prove fatal in extreme cases.

Specify the mode of payment, as options abound. Catering may be charged to a credit card, handled

with a personal check or direct billed. In some cases it may also be added to an FBO fuel bill. Tell the caterer when, where and how you'd like the invoice delivered.

Be absolutely clear about what you want, and how you want it prepared and packaged. Do you want it on a plate, or how about on a tray? What about in bulk, microwaveable or foil containers? Do you want the meals packaged individually, or should each part of the meal be packaged separately?

Consider your passengers and their needs. Are they adults or children, men or women? Are they elderly? Do they have any special needs?

Ensure the person taking the order reads it back in its entirety. The military calls this a "brief-back," and considers it an essential part of all operational planning. So should you.

Think of your order in terms of hot production, cold production and shopping, and it will be easier to convey your needs to the caterer. Enjoy! □