

# The New York Times

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NEW YORK, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2005

## Fine Dining in the Sky

### On Private Jets, Caterers Aim High to Satisfy Elite Appetites

By JOE SHARKEY

In the Zagat Survey on airlines, here is one reviewer's comment: "You're treated like cattle — but they get fed."

It's a whole different story in the world of private jets. On many of these planes, meal-times are increasingly a big part of the flying experience. And over the last 20 years, as business aviation has boomed and caterers battled for market share, the cuisine has steadily improved.

Joe Celentano, who with his brother John is co-founder of Rudy's Inflight Catering at Teterboro Airport in northern New Jersey, tells a similar story. "We started our company out of the back of our parents' restaurant in Hackensack in 1983, back when only the biggest companies had corporate jets," Mr. Celentano said. "It was very rudimentary. A pilot for a corporate plane came in and ordered sandwiches on a wrapped tray."

Now Rudy's is housed in a 17,000-square-foot kitchen and office building near Teterboro, where 400 meals a day are prepared from computer orders. You can still order a tuna sandwich, but the huge menu also offers braised turkey roulade, tabbouleh and stuffed grape leaves, soups, salads by the dozens, and even a selection of New York deli sandwiches.

Rudy's employs a mobile shopper on each shift to obtain special requests from the array of food available in the New Jersey-New York area.

"Rudy's will go get sushi from Nobu in New York City on the spot for someone who specifically requests it, or they'll make the sushi in-house for another client," said Sean Magovern, the president of Airworks Inc., a company that arranges charter flights for, among others, performers like Bruce Springsteen, Jimmy Buffett and Ricky Martin.

Food on private jets — a service that is a \$100-million-a-year industry — varies widely. "The menu could reflect a request from artists working so hard that they feel they owe themselves the indulgences of their favorite fast food, so they'll ask specifically for a

brand — KFC rather than just fried chicken," Mr. Magovern said. "Then on the same flight, there may be another member of the group who wants all-organic foods."

Not that fancy tastes aren't indulged. "Last weekend I was shopping at a culinary store with another corporate flight attendant, and she said she had just bought an ice-cream maker for her plane," said Marian Daub, a corporate flight attendant. "I've worked on corporate planes for 20 years and I thought I had done it all. But I have to say the ice-cream maker floored me."

The private-jet catering business evolved from box lunches and cheese trays to the cornucopia of today in tandem with a remark-

### A working lunch in the clouds can be anything the executive desires.

able surge in the industry, which has accelerated in the last three years. Next year, more than 800 new private jets — a record — are projected to be delivered, according to Honeywell Aerospace.

Meanwhile, big caterers are acquiring small ones. Last year, Rudy's started a national network of 60 regional caterers, Aviation Services Network, with operations at 300 general aviation airports.

Air Chef, based in Worthington, Ohio, and founded by Mr. Liston and Paul Schweitzer, the company's president, is also expanding. This month, the company — which has 20 kitchens around the country and one in London — acquired CorporateAirServices, a big family-owned caterer in Long Island.

Air Chef and Rudy's have two things in common. Both adopted technology that would be able to keep track of the bewildering tangle of individual food orders and customer preferences from hundreds of planes scattered all over the country and even overseas. And both had an early association with the company that is responsible for much of the recent growth in private-jet sales, NetJets Inc., which pioneered the concept of selling

fractional shares on corporate jets in 1986.

After spending 16 years at NetJets, which was eventually acquired by Berkshire Hathaway, Mr. Liston teamed with Mr. Schweitzer to start Air Chef in 2000. The Celentano brothers became associated with NetJets almost from the start, and Joe Celentano says it accounts for about 19 percent of Rudy's annual sales.

In recent years, partly because of the surge in fractional shares and a newer boom in sales of so-called jet cards that provide flight-time by the hour and make private jets available to a wider clientele, "the demographics have changed dramatically" and so has the cuisine, said Mr. Celentano. "You're seeing a much younger clientele."

How much does all this culinary attention cost? A commercial airline coach meal, assuming you can get one, costs about \$5. It's a little pricier on private jets, though operators are known to drive tough bargains.

"Companies have been driving the cost down," said Mr. Celentano. A typical meal prepared, packaged and delivered by Rudy's might run about \$45, he said. A typical Air Chef menu, from its South Florida operation for example, lists a coconut shrimp appetizer at \$19.95, crab cakes at \$38.95, and Key lime pie at \$10.95. A three-egg mushroom omelet with duck prosciutto from its Colorado menu is \$22.95.

While food has become a big part of flying on a private jet, it is by no means the central experience, according to Susan Berger of Randolph, N.J., who has worked as a flight attendant on private jets since Eastern Airlines quit operating in 1991.

The passengers she now serves tend to show frugality as well as health consciousness in the meals they order in advance. "We're not serving lobster or filet mignon very often," she said.

Partly, though, that is because passengers are less interested in haute cuisine than in getting things done. "The corporate plane is really an extension of the workplace," Ms. Berger said. "Right after we take off, if a meal is required I'll serve that right away. Then I clear off the tabletop; the laptops come out and they get right down to work. It's rare that I even have a movie on board because they all have their heads down working."