

Dining in the clouds

Taste and the corporate traveler

Rob Seaman examines the key issues in on-board catering.

You have the best trained, most interactive and courteous flight crew. Your aircraft is first rate, with a great cabin layout and amenities second to none. The flight is going completely as planned. Your passengers arrived on time. Pre-flight catering was served without incident — of course. The departure went without a hitch. Weather looks fine en route. You've climbed out and settled into what should be a no-worries flight.

The cabin crew has started food service for the passengers — at which point the flight attendant comes forward to advise that the catering is not good. So now, despite all the hard work, expertise, and excellence of your operation, your flight's "customer satisfaction" is at risk because an outside service has let you down.

While passengers may forgive a lot of things, sub par food and beverage service is not one of them. For most experienced FAs, the catering is a direct and personal reflection on them. Some have been known to refuse an order if it does not meet their expectations and standards. Fussing the details is, after all, their role.

Personal taste is a driving force in private aviation. Bringing personal wine from a home collection (or finding out what that is and making sure you have it on board) is the norm for many. Likewise, some FAs who know their passenger well will shop at several locations while preparing for flight, just so that they can have products that the passenger wants. For frequent users, the flight department usually maintains a lexicon of passenger "likes" from food through to reading material and in-flight entertainment. This helps plan excellence every time. Consistency makes for a good trip.

There are some extremely important safety and control procedures to follow. Regardless of whether you're the FA or the FBO handling the catering, here are some insights to consider from a veteran — Philadelphia, PA-based Susan Friedenber, president and CEO of Corporate Flight Attendant Training & Global Consulting. Friedenber offers courses and consulting on the proper planning, execution, and handling of catering for private aviation operators and FBOs.

According to Friedenber, "The importance of food safety involves safeguarding it from anything that could harm the health of consumers. It's all about best practices.

"High standards enable everyone to enjoy their food without illness, injury, or other problems, but poor standards can lead to all types of harm and possible death. A pilot who is physically compromised due to food poisoning is not a good thing! An ill CEO cannot attend the meeting that he was en route to, resulting in loss of business and time-sensitive productivity. Food safety is important to everyone, and the people who work with food or order the catering have legal, ethical, and economic responsibilities for keeping food safe to eat."

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SECTOR FOCUS: CATERING

Using Friedenberg's expertise and some interviews with both FAs and FBO staff, here is a quick checklist for ordering or handling catering — whether you're a member of the flight crew and work at the FBO.

- Be cognizant of galley compartment size constraints.
- If you are unfamiliar with the aircraft, review the galley equipment (oven/microwave, and their respective sizes).
- Check packaging for accuracy.
- Be aware of food allergies/religious food restrictions/food-eating trends and special diets (inclusive of your pilots).
- Familiarize yourself with the aircraft seating configuration before ordering trays that will accommodate the space and passenger seating.
- Always order totally different crew meals to avoid possible food poisoning.
- In the case of FBOs, ensure that you (or a manager or flight department representative) have visited your catering facility.
- Be sure to look at their paperwork from FDA/insurance paperwork/local Board of Health inspections.
- Request your catering in sealed boxes to mitigate possible food sabotage.
- Review how catering will be stored at FBO until needed on the aircraft.
- Before taking it aboard, check food on the ground for correct order fulfillment, presentation, and quality.

As Susan Friedenberg says, "It's all about accurate information and communication skills. At the end of the day, it is called due diligence — and you as a business are liable if a passenger gets ill when you were charged with obtaining the catering."

If you want to know more about local catering, ask another FA what they've experienced and what they think. For example, Krista Devitt is an experienced professional private aviation FA. These are some people who stand out for her from all her travels.

"There are three caterers that are unusual and outstanding at the same time," she says. "First is Iacofanos Catering and Food Service, located in Aiken, SC. These caterers operated out of a semi transport truck during the Masters. They created beautifully plated and top-quality catering on the ramp!"

Second on Devitt's list is Par-Avion Exclusive Catering in Cape Town, South Africa. "The catering I received from this company was the best I've ever received. It was top-quality catering with every attention to detail. They even delivered the catering with hot towels that were actually towels!"

Third is Café Pushkin, on Tverskoy Bulvar in Moscow, Russia. Devitt says: "They provide top-quality food and now actually cater to the aviation industry. In addition to great food, they provide take-away containers and cardboard boxes with handles for easy transport. They've also become members of Dellos Air Service, which provides catering from a number of local establishments. You can order from Pushkin through the airport, or you can stop by the restaurant."

Catering can make or break your flight. Angry clients don't like paying for poor food service, and some have been known to dispute the entire trip bill over it. It's a quality and safety element of your planning and execution that deserves as much attention and detail as possible. Business aviation is about quality and service excellence. Don't let a bad sandwich sully your reputation. ■

