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OPINION

FINE DINING TAKES FLIGHT

Lauren Ho on taking in-air cuisine to new heights

Airline food has a dubious reputation. But does a meal at 35,000 feet have to be second rate? Daniel Hulme doesn't think so – and he's prepared to invest £20,000 per recipe to prove with.

Depending on which section of the plane you are travelling in, in-flight meals can range from ho-hum to outright unpalatable. Even private jet operators struggle to impress with their on-board catering: the food, although decidedly more fancy, is still largely selected for its ability to withstand high altitudes – a somewhat pesky obstacle for high-flying travellers who expect the same quality of food wherever, and however high, they might be.

Daniel Hulme, CEO and founder of On Air Dining, is determined to up the in-flight food ante. "There are companies doing food for private jets, but no one is really pushing the boundaries," he says.

A chef by background, Hulme was living in Valencia, Spain, when he accepted a job catering the events for the 2010 America's Cup. He watched the many private jets arriving in the city and started to think about the standard of food on board. After extensive market research, Hulme – business plan in hand – approached large-scale event caterers Alison Price and Co. He set up its aviation division and spent four years developing menus, honing his skills and perfecting new techniques. In late 2014 Hulme went solo. He established On Air Dining and set out to rethink the cooking, packaging, delivery and storage of top-notch food in the air.

Storing food in the air rules out certain ingredients. Scallops become rubbery, while game tends to dry out. And then you have to compensate for the effect of altitude on passengers. "It is an extremely dry environment," Hulme explains. "Your taste buds are also heavily affected by pressure."

Air travellers lose up to 50 per cent of the taste of salt. Three more of the basic "tastes" – sweet, sour and bitter – are also compromised. But Hulme worked out that umami, the fifth and perhaps most mysterious "taste" somehow resists the effects of altitude (it has its own distinct taste receptors on the tongue). "Umami is a flavour that makes your mouth water," explains Hulme. "By increasing the saliva, it means that food tastes better."

Hulme and his team have found ways of incorporating umami into their dishes, including desserts. "It's a hidden flavour, but we've developed and pushed it by using specialised sous vide and dehydration techniques," he says.



Daniel Hulme, CEO and founder of On Air Dining. Credit: Rupa Photography



Hulme says that umami, the mysterious fifth 'taste', is the key to high-altitude culinary success, even in desserts. Credit: Rupa Photography

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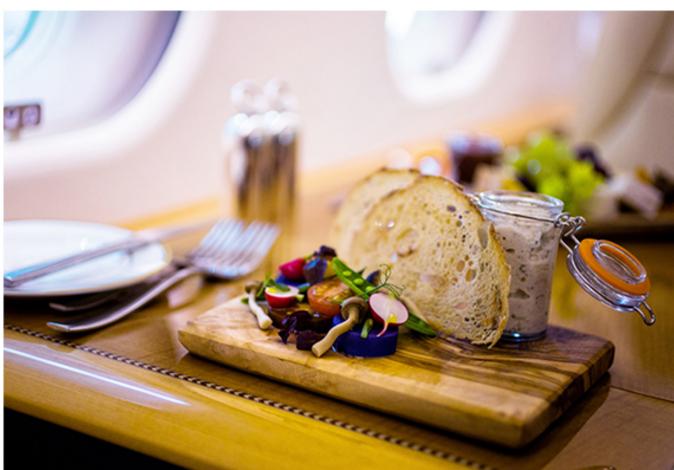
With dishes costing up to £20,000 to develop, it's no surprise that the going price for some of the offerings can be as much as £600 per head. "It can take us up to three months to design a menu," explains Hulme. "We have to figure out how we're going to cook every single item on that dish, how it's going to be reheated on board, how we're going to infuse the flavours and how we're going to make sure it tastes as good in the air as it does on the ground." He goes on, "That development process takes a lot of time, man hours, trial and error, testing and researching." And while far-flung, lavish ingredients such as green sea urchins from the Arctic Circle and the now notorious Kopi Luwak coffee obviously increase the cost, the quality of the produce in general also plays a major role. "We don't negotiate on the level of produce," affirms Hulme. "We spend a lot of time researching and trying to find the best produce we can, with 60 per cent supplied by local artisan farmers in the UK."

Hulme is shrewd enough to understand that his skills do not extend to creating authentic international cuisine. "Sushi comes from Nobu, our Chinese from China Tang and Indian from Tamarind," says Hulme. "We sit down with their chefs and talk to them about how they need to cook the food and chill it. We then repackage it to go onboard the aircraft."

You eat with your eyes more in an aeroplane than you do on the ground, so you need the food to be visually stunning.



Hulme works with chefs at Nobu and other restaurants to create in-flight versions of signature dishes. Credit: Rupa Photography



On Air Dining has created precise guides to in-air plating up. Credit: Rupa Photography

The dishes are chilled and packaged according to Hulme's specifications – rather than the usual blast-chilling method, he uses a more precise rapid chilling system that better preserves flavours and stops the chance of any bacterial growth. There remains the hurdle of plating up the dishes to the exacting standards required of fine dining restaurants. The solution: a clever step-by-step guide with photos and written instructions. "The flight attendants are often very busy," says Hulme. "They're not chefs. You eat with your eyes more in an aeroplane than you do on the ground, so you need the food to be visually stunning."

Now employing thirty-five people, including fifteen highly rated chefs, with a state-of-the-art base at Stansted Airport (including the only certified halal kitchen in the industry), it's easy to see why Hulme is fast becoming the go-to guy for top quality food and service. "I like to say we are a 'culinary concierge' company," he says. "We have an extensive menu, but we will also make anything our client wants." Indeed, from specialised diets to chocolate-covered grasshoppers, nothing is out of the question.

Hulme is now also offering his services on ground level with the launch of "On Air – In House", which delivers to private homes and events. But with 150 private jets departing from London every day, it is in the air that Hulme sees real opportunity. And he enjoys the challenge. "It's fun. It's never dull. No two days are ever the same," he laughs.