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AIN Catering Survey: Bizav Flight Attendants Speak Out

by Kirby J. Harrison

"Air Gourmet rocks!" It was the ultimate in contemporary praise, voiced by a flight attendant in response to a recent survey to determine the top business aviation caterers.

"We should," said Dwayne Lortie, general

manager for the Los Angeles-based caterer. "We've been doing it 15 years now and we've got it down. We have an experienced staff, qualified chefs and a good product." Such exchanges were prompted by a survey sent to more than 1,600 bizav flight attendants, who listed their choices of the best caterers and graded them in 10 categories ranging from courtesy to cost.

And while the survey did not settle the question of which caterer is the undisputed best, it was remarkable in that the respondents seem generally very satisfied with the majority of caterers they use.

In each of 10 categories, caterers listed were graded, from a low score of one to a high of five. The average total score of all 10 categories was 4.43, suggesting that while there may be occasional lapses in good service or quality, most caterers receive high marks from flight attendants.

The highest score in a single category came in courtesy, in which caterers received an overall average score 4.58. The lowest came in cost, with a 3.90 score.

Determination of the top individual caterers was based on their average scores from all

10 categories. The results created a tie for first between New Horizons of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and Georgis Catering at Chicago Midway Airport with a score of 4.620, but Rudy's In-flight Catering of New Jersey was just a pinch away with a tally of 4.618 and Air Gourmet of Los Angeles and Air Concierge of West Palm Beach, Fla., followed closely.

Alan Swanson, a displaced Scot, manages the veteran catering service at New Horizons and said its success is in the "whole package." There's no part of the catering process that isn't critical, he explained. "Quality food, attractive presentation, proper packaging, on-time delivery. It's all important."

New Horizons has been in business for more than a decade and is owned by Susan Rosette, who has more than 15 years of aviation catering experience. "It's knowing what you should do, and doing it that way every time," she said.

At New Horizons, that includes not

only quality ingredients and an interesting menu, but refrigerated vehicles, a rapid turnaround for liners and dining ware and a 24-hr hotline service.

In addition to the full-time chefs, New Horizons can also call in a long list of colleagues for specialty items. Chefs at New Horizons are well known for their in-house breads and pastries, and in particular for their Florida stone crab. The crab is served with the shell removed and citrus mustard and drawn butter on the side. "When they're in season, which is about seven months of the year, we can barely keep up with demand," said Swanson.

Georgis Catering has been in business since 1946 and executive assistant Alice Georgis can recall catering the Beatles and serving filet mignon for the "Air Bud" dog made famous by the Budweiser beer commercials. As a Chicago-based caterer, the company provides meals for a "huge number of sports teams," including the Bulls, the Cubs and the White Sox.

In the face of fierce winter winds, ice and snow, Georgis provides bizav catering from its location near the metropolitan center to virtually every outlying airport, from Aurora to Waukegan. It's always a challenge, said Georgis. "We once got a call to cater a flight for a Middle East prince and nine other passengers. No flour products, no alcohol, no red-wine vinegar and enough food to feed a hundred."

Among the specialties at Georgis' Chicago pizza, of course. And what makes it uniquely "Chicago" pizza? "It's better than New York," she added with a laugh.

Others in the top five, in order, were: Rudy's, serving New Jersey's Teterboro Airport and other New York metropolitan airports, with a score of 4.618; Air Gourmet, serving the greater Los Angeles area, with a score of 4.578; and Air Concierge, serving most central-Florida airports, with a score of 4.283.

Complaints and Compliments

While catering generally received high marks from most of the flight attendants responding, there were a number of highly critical comments.

"Cost and packaging are still big issues overall," said Yvette Collins, a full-time corporate flight attendant for two years. In fact, cost was the category in which respondents gave caterers the lowest grade, 3.9 out of a possible 5.

Flight attendants report that a catering order for breakfast and lunch for six, excluding expensive wines and imported items, can easily exceed \$1,000.

One flight attendant with 14 years experience in the corporate world listed as frequent problems spoiled and out-of-date dairy products, incorrect orders and late deliveries. And she added, "With the prices charged by caterers in major metropolitan areas, it isn't unreasonable to expect an order to be complete, exact, fresh and of the highest quality and on time."

Packaging received a lot of complaints, in particular the dome lids. "Stop the dome lids and giant trays more appropriate for a triple seven [Boeing 777]," said one respondent.

One caterer has "beautiful and delicious food," said another flight attendant. "But the packaging isn't flight-attendant friendly because they package hot and cold items together, as well as hot items together that require different heating or cooking times.



Catering is a critical element to a successful flight. Flight attendants emphasized that ingredients must be fresh and of top quality. "And don't send store-bought cookies and call them homemade," said one survey respondent.

Then I have to go through the entire order and repackage it before my passengers get aboard," she said. "This happens regardless of the order request."

Other specific complaints included: soggy croissants that were mixed in with the salad instead of being packaged separately; use of dry ice that resulted in frozen California wraps; store-bought cookies passed off as homemade; and failure to make use of the Internet for placing and confirming orders.

While not shy about complaints, many flight attendants were equally quick with compliments as well. "If you get good service," said one flight attendant, "let them know."

Sandy Smalley of Sen Ray, among others, was especially approving of a relatively new and not so well known Long Island caterer called Gura. "They've been enthusiastic from the start. It's quality service in every area." "They're young and highly motivated and their food is refreshingly different," said another flight attendant.

Gary Johnson, a caterer by profession, and former pilot Frank Boyle, both in their early 30s, created Gura as a business aviation entity a little more than two years ago. "We give our clients what they want. When they want it,"

Top Five Business Aviation Caterers as Picked by Business Aviation Flight Attendants

Caterer	Score 1-5
Georgia Catering Chicago (733) 585-3653	4.620
New Horizons Miami/Fort Lauderdale (954) 969-7006	4.620
Rudy's Inflight Catering Teterboro/New York (201) 727-1122	4.618
Air Gourmet Los Angeles (310) 253-7700	4.570
Air Concierge West Palm Beach, Fla. (561) 602-5882	4.283



Flight attendants responding to the AIN Catering Survey noted that orders are almost always repacked. Further, they requested that catering orders be packaged exactly as requested to repacking can be done quickly.

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