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Airport Food Service Design Trends
By Stephen H. Zwick, AIA

To enhance revenues, airports and airlines are enhancing their food venues

pictured: Deep Blue Sushi for Jet Blue at New York City's JFK by Ziecture PC

Changes at airports and in the airline industry directly impact both business and leisure travelers. Heightened security, low cost carriers, rising fuel costs, and lower labor costs are all factors directly and indirectly effecting the traveling experience.

Longer lines resulting from increased security post 9/11 have led to longer hold times for passengers. Rather than arrive a half hour or hour before one's flight, passengers now arrive sometimes two hours before their take-off. Low cost carriers are also redefining the industry. Low cost carriers like JetBlue, Southwest, and Airtran are forcing the older carriers to reduce their rates. Cheaper fares are leading to cost reductions. Cheaper airfares are also making airports and airlines look for additional sources of revenue. To reduce operating costs, meals now must be bought or aren't available on domestic flights. To enhance revenues, airports and airlines are enhancing their food venues.

These enhanced food service venues have profited from the passengers arriving earlier and spending more time at airports waiting for their flights. With no food or fewer food options offered in flight, passengers are both eating before boarding and buying food in the terminal to take along with them on their journeys. So in addition to more branded quick-serve choices, airports and airlines are upgrading their full service locations with more unique and varied concepts offering travelers more dining options.

At Philadelphia International (PHL), La Guardia, and JetBlue's JFK Hub, in sit down locations operated by OTG Management, traveler's can sit down at fast casual dining locations, grab food to go from take out counters, markets and quick serves, or do both; that is "double meal": sit down and eat in the terminal and then take food to eat on their planes in flight.

Fast casual concepts like Akoya at LaGuardia, Sky Asian Bistro and Cibo Bistro &Wine Bar in Philadelphia, Deep Blue Sushi and New York Sports Grill for Jet Blue at JFK are dramatically upgrading the quality of food, and dining environments in airports setting a higher bar for other food management companies to emulate.

Two-hour hold times or those inevitable delays can be spent, for example, at Cibo Bistro's wine bar or drama kitchen. OTG Management's CEO Rick Blatstein at this location, as well as at his other locations, chose to build "a restaurant in an airport, not an airport restaurant". Cibo's bar with its under lit onyx top, and its neon under lit and illuminated twenty foot tall back bar with its pour per glass wine dispensers surpasses in presentation many of Philadelphia better known downtown locations by some of it more famous restaurateurs. The dining bar surrounded by rear-illuminated panels encapsulating spices, showcases an open kitchen where fine pasta dishes, grilled steaks, and daily specials are prepared.

At Deep Blue Sushi for JetBlue's JFK hub, passengers can sit down and order sushi made to order by sushi chefs. The sushi bar itself with its stainless steel work tops, iridescent glass tile walls, deep blue patterned glass eating counters, and sculptural metal tuna fish liquor display towers is a focus and show piece one would more likely expect to find somewhere in Manhattan than in an airport. The overstuffed sofas surrounding the sushi bar offer a further reprieve from the airport allowing a restive spot within the airport to get out of this sometimes anxious environment without actually having to leave.

OTG Management started as a local operator with one location in Philadelphia International. OTG's start typifies another trend in airport food service. Both the developers selecting operators, or the prime operators running the entire food service show have been leasing or sub-leasing selected locations to regionally known establishments to give more local flavor. Branded national concepts maintain their place, but local operators also get the opportunity to get into these high traffic locations.

The success of OTG's first location at PHL the Jet Rock Bar & Grill in Terminal B, led to its replication in other terminals at PHL then in NYC at LaGuardia. To fill other food segments an Italian and a Pan-Asian concept, Cibo Bistro & Wine Bar and Sky Asian Bistro respectively were also added to OTG's repertoire. Upscale food concepts with high levels of design by Ziecture PC in such unexpected environment have directly resulted in higher revenues per square foot by OTG Management than for any other food service prime operator providing food service in this airport segment.

Based on varying revenue sharing agreements between food service operators like OTG and airlines like JetBlue and USAir, higher revenues for the operators directly translate into additional revenues for the airlines. When airlines and airports select operators through a request for proposal (RFP) process, the maximization of this symbiotic financial relationship is a determining factor in which operator gets selected. Consequently, new airport design as well as renovations are giving greater consideration to the placement and design of food service because more food options in better designed locations generate additional income for airlines and airports that can no longer be derived simply from higher ticket prices.

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