



Grab a seat in style: Cibo Bistro & Wine Bar at Philadelphia International offers an extensive selection of wine by the glass.

Airport lounges take stylish flights of fancy

By Kitty Bean Yancey,
USA TODAY

They're raising the bar at U.S. airports.

Forget burgers and brewskis in forgettable surroundings; a new generation of stylish drink-ing establishments is taking wing:

- LaGuardia Airport's year-old Akoya sushi bar/lounge in the Central Terminal entices hipsters with a bold magenta/purple color scheme and 42-inch flat-screen TVs.

Figs restaurant/lounge, also before security checkpoints in the same terminal, landed the "best airport restaurant design" accolade from Airport Revenue News in 2003 and 2004. The seating areas are sleek and minimalist chic, reflecting the taste of celebrity chef/creator Todd English. There's also a smaller Figs bar past security.

- The Shades of Blue Lounge past security near departure gates in Philadelphia International Airport's new international terminal entices globetrotters with décor in cool shades of blue, along with jazz murals and soundtracks.

- Neon towers illuminate bottles on the 20-foot-high back bar of Cibo Bistro & Wine Bar, also in the Philadelphia's year-old Terminal A West. Forget the usual short, pedestrian airport wine menu; Cibo pours 30-plus wines by the glass.

• Meanwhile, lounges at airline clubs are getting a face lift. Witness the ultra-modern bar with 42-inch plasma screen TV in Virgin Atlantic's new Clubhouse for Upper Class passengers and top frequent fliers in JFK's Terminal 4. The \$3.4 million Clubhouse also has a cocktail area where guests can entertain themselves with headset TVs or Sony PlayStations.

"Everyone's upping the ante," says Kelly Beamon, executive editor of Hospitality Design, a magazine that covers the restaurant/bar/hotel industry. She says airport upgrades reflect "the democratization of style. ... People (now) expect an aggressively designed experience wherever they go."

Harriet Baskas, author of the *Stuck at the Airport* guide to services at terminals nationwide, applauds the trend.

All those airport sports bars "look fun, but as a woman traveling by myself, I'd feel more comfortable having a drink in a nicer place. (Also), there are a lot of people who go early, get through security and want to sit down and have a nice glass of wine in a nice place."

The target customer for the new upscale bars is "the sophisticated individual who's not too concerned" about paying what's charged at a trendy city watering hole, says Paul McGinn, president of Newton, Mass.-based MarketPlace Development, which develops retail programs

at airports. It brought Figs, Akoya, Shades of Blue and Cibo into the Philadelphia and LaGuardia terminals.

Another reason for upscaling at the airport: Patrons are spending more time waiting. "In the post-Sept. 11 world, we have people coming to the airport earlier, and they have time on their hands," McGinn says. "Traveling isn't easy, and if a bar or restaurant can provide more amenities ... it's a win-win."

But in the post-Sept. 11 era, a stylish bar can be a win-lose.

Before the terrorist attacks, airport planners aimed to make airport bars, eateries and shops destinations for locals, too. (Examples: the shops and eateries in a lobby concourse at remodeled Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and the shops beyond security at the Pittsburgh airport.)

That's iffier now that airports have become more like fortresses.

"We did have a lot more (local) and event business" before 9/11, says Connie Bass, marketing director for the Encounter Restaurant at Los Angeles International Airport, a forerunner of the new super-hip airport bar/eateries.

Encounter, perched on 135-foot arches on the grounds of the airport but not in the terminal, was renovated in 1997 and decorated in an "intergalactic fantasy" motif. Locals poured in for half-price martini happy hours amid Jetsons-futuristic furnishings.

The circular eating and drinking spot, complete with fabulous views and bartenders who squirt mixers from dispensers decked out as laser guns, retains an L.A.-area following, "but now it's more travel business," Bass says. "Every time there's an Orange Alert we get calls saying, 'Are you open?' We are. ... It's challenging."



Fish and sip: Chef Wang Hua offers sushi at LaGuardia's Akoya.