

Remembering the Golden Age of Airline Food

Why were in-flight meals so much better in the past?

BY [DIANA HUBBELL](#) MAY 8, 2023

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The good old days in the 1950s, when airlines advertised delicious food. COURTESY RICHARD FOSS

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WE WERE 30,000 feet above Utah when I found myself wondering, *What the hell happened here?* After four hours or so up in the sky, I had cracked and handed over my credit card to purchase food. The “snack pack” that arrived verged on parody: a dozen almonds, a shriveled turkey jerky stick, a bizarre hybrid between a granola bar and a cookie.

Airline food has long been a subject of ridicule, but as of late, it's gotten downright depressing—especially within the continental United States. From desiccated chicken in questionable cream sauce to pasta lightyears past al dente, I've lost track of the number of tragic, bland meals I've picked at while flying over the years.

In fairness to the chefs who engineer these meals, the deck is stacked against them. Our ability to taste sweet and salty flavors drops by around 20 percent while flying. And even though airline meals tend to add extra sodium to compensate, it can still feel like you're eating with your taste buds on mute.

Much of this has to do with the humidity level in an airplane cabin hovering around 12 percent—in the Sahara desert, it's around 25 percent. Since our noses need moisture to smell properly, that bone-dry air, coupled with a low pressure and a generally stressful environment, is a recipe for disappointment.

And yet, it wasn't always this way. Once upon a time in the pre-Reagan era, flying in the United States still had a whiff of glamor. In the 1950s, Pan Am passengers in economy dined on stuffed guinea hen, while those in first class enjoyed scoops of caviar and eggs made to order.



Charcuterie sliced to order on Scandinavian Airlines in the 1960s. COURTESY RICHARD FOSS

Passengers on Trans World Airlines (TWA) once dined on roast beef au jus, carved from a trolley in the aisle. And those on Alaska Airlines toward the tail end of the 1960s might have taken advantage of its Golden Samovar service, an homage to Eastern European culinary culture, complete with dishes such as tartlet Odessa and veal Orloff.

Perhaps most striking of all, United Airlines ran an “Executive” flight exclusively for men between Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as between Chicago and New York, every weekday at 5 p.m. from 1953 to 1970.

While that Don Draper–esque fantasy may be a thing of the past, corporate suits on an expense account still have it pretty good on some flights, particularly once you get away from domestic options. Singapore Airlines, for instance, serves its first- and business-class passengers items such as grilled rib-eye with artichoke-potato hash and black olive chimichurri. Meanwhile, Qantas first-class passengers might dine on a green mango salad with Queensland spanner crab, pork, and cashews in a *nam jim* dressing.

Still, it’s fun to reminisce about a time when those of us in cattle class didn’t have to subsist on stale Cheez-Its. To get a better picture of the Golden Age of air travel, Gastro

Obscura spoke with Richard Foss, author of *Food in the Air and Space: The Surprising History of Food and Drink in the Skies*.

Q&A With Richard Foss



What does a man like for dinner 20,000 feet up?

Food alone doesn't make the flight, but it *is* one of the reasons TWA shines in air travelers' eyes. Thoughtfully planned meals—perfectly cooked and graciously served with TWA's compliments—add to the friendly feeling of being at home in the air, which is the hallmark of TWA travel in the U.S. and overseas. Where in the world do *you* want to go? For information and reservations, see your travel agent or call TWA.



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A 1951 advertisement from TWA. SHAWSHOTS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

What were some of the earliest in-flight meals like?

The challenges of cooking in flight dictate the quality of the food. Aboard the zeppelins, they actually had multi-course dinners served in a separate dining room. Now, when you're in a hydrogen zeppelin, that's a real bad place to have a barbecue. They wanted a kitchen with no open flame.

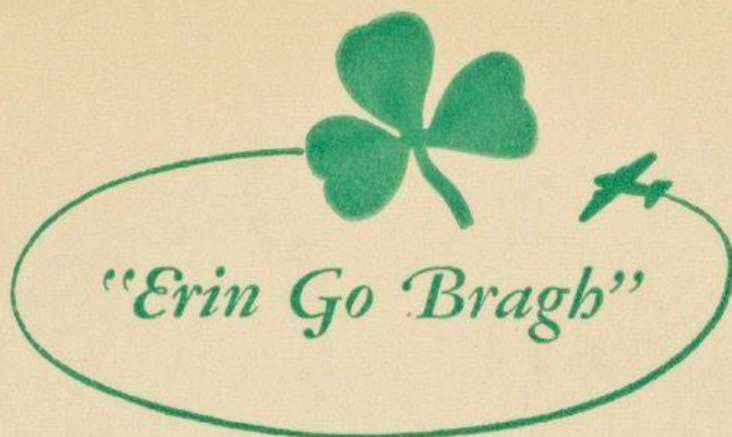
So the challenges of cooking in flight started being resolved before the first fixed-wing

aircraft. It's way before induction sources, but they had figured out that if you take a power source and hook it up with a cable, congratulations, you've invented the electric oven.

What happens once we start getting to actual airplanes?

In fixed-wing powered aircraft, the very first meals were sandwiches, coffee, and cocktails on flights between London and Paris. For a very long time, food in those aircraft was very boring because there was no way to heat anything. You would come in with the coffee in a thermos and by the time you drink it, it's lukewarm.

Aboard what would become United Airlines, the food was monotonous. Stewardesses had instructions to pack the fried chicken, rolls, and salad in separate baskets. It was basically a picnic lunch in the air. The thing is there were no frequent fliers in this era, because travel was extremely expensive. Air travel was done by the elite. Among other things, people were terrified of it.



"Erin Go Bragh"

Minted Fruit Cocktail

Wafers

Green Olives

Burr Gherkins

Leg o' Lamb Stew, Dublin Style

Shamrock Rolls

Erin Salad, Chef's Dressing

St. Patrick Ice Cream and Cakes

or

Cheese and Crackers

Coffee

Tea

Milk

Mints



Served aloft by

U N I T E D A I R L I N E S

on the

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1940

United Airlines led the way in food prior to WWII, and had special menus for holidays, but no choices. COURTESY RICHARD FOSS

How'd we get from sandwiches to roast beef dinners here?

War is a spur to technology of all kinds. We think of war as a spur to the technology of killing people, but it is also thanks to war that we get improvements to engines in aircraft and cars. What we think of as the modern airline meal was done as part of a defence contract [for World War II].

An experimenter named William Maxson in Los Angeles invented the convection oven. What Maxson figured out was if you took these little trays in an insulated box and blew hot air over them, you could reheat a whole bunch of things at once.

So if I have roast beef and mashed potatoes and some vegetables, I have to figure out how much I have to cook them in a convection oven at the same time. So they're all partly cooked, then finished onboard.

Because convection heating is very fast, you have a meal that can be ready very quickly. You just slide 10 or 12 meals into these slots, let them sit in there for a couple of minutes, and slide more in. All of a sudden, you have zero waste and you're feeding people much more efficiently.

Why exactly were the food options so much better?

Airlines in that era were prohibited from competing on price, so the only way they could compete was on quality of service. You see a slew of advertisements in the 1950s that are about the quality of food on aircraft.

Insofar as there was superior quality, it was often because an airline found themselves with inferior aircraft. So the only way they could get someone to fly them was better food.

United Airlines had the best food in the sky for a while. They put in a huge order of Boeing 247s in the 1930s. After four months, the DC-3 came out, which was bigger and faster. Since they couldn't just scrap their brand-new aircraft, they were stuck with something smaller and slower. All they could do was get better food.

The same thing happened to Alitalia airlines after World War II. They had these lumbering slow leftover bombers, so they turned them into flying Italian restaurants.



Pan Am's giant flying boat seaplanes had a spacious dining room. COURTESY RICHARD FOSS

What were some of the other international carriers up to then?

The best food in the air in the 1950s was by Scandinavian Airlines. And the reason was that they were perfectly aware that no one in their right mind would want to visit Stockholm in February. This was an era in which most people needed to change planes. So they had such good food that passengers would fly SAS on their way to Greece or Africa.

The same thing happened in Asia with Singapore Airlines. When Singapore became an independent country, [Singapore's prime minister] Lee Kuan Yew asked consultants, "Should we have an airline?" and they all said no. But he wanted to be a global business hub. Previously, Singapore had been a relative provincial backwater; it became an international powerhouse. The airline was a big part of that transformation.

WHAT'S COOKING



Some bright new dreams for the post-war world are in operation even now. One of them is a meal you can buy as a unit, pop into the special oven, and serve to your guests in 15 minutes.

By Sgt. GEORG N. MEYERS
YANK Staff Writer

THE old, old comedy stuff about getting a full meal by swallowing a pellet out of a slot machine is becoming less and less funny. And more and more true to life.

Right now, if you fly the right places, you can get a partially precooked, quick-frozen meal of steak, French-fried potatoes and carrots all ready to eat in 15 minutes. And after you're finished you don't have to wash the dishes. You just toss them away.

This answer to the prayers of housewives and KPs is not one of those postwar promised-land snow jobs. Hundreds of packaged meals are already coming off a food-factory assembly line in Queens Village, New York. At the moment, however, civilians are not getting their hooks in because NATS—the Naval Air Transport Service—has the whole deal practically sewed up.

Several big food-products manufacturers have been experimenting with quick-frozen meals for some time, but the first outfit to hit the market on any large scale seems to be a company whose employees previously had nothing more to do with food than eating it three times a day. The outfit in question is the W. L. Maxson Corporation of New York City.

William L. Maxson, the company's headman, is probably not known by name to many GIs, but he should be. He perfected, and his company builds, the M45 quadruple mount for machine guns which got some praise as an anti-aircraft rig when the Jerries were trying to eliminate our Remagen bridgehead. The Maxson company also builds several precision instruments and computing gadgets for the Army and Navy.

Maxson himself is a graduate of Annapolis. He invented the thing you used to see in the service stations which tells you how much gasoline has been pumped into the car and how much the gas costs. But the really important fact about Maxson is that he's a big man, weighs close to 300, and likes to eat.

Because it hasn't been easy of late years for a born chow hound to get along on civilian ration points, Maxson tried to figure out some way of keeping left-overs in edible shape so he could have a snack every now and then. And he was mindful that every time he snacked he got the fish eye for leaving a sinkful of dirty dishes. He talked over his double problem with some sympathetic dieticians and food chemists, and after only two and a half years of trying this and that he produced the Maxson Sky Plate.

The Maxson Sky Plate is a portable version of the old blue-plate dinner served in a dish with three grooves. The dish, made of lacquered cardboard, serves as the container for the Maxson meal. The meals themselves are prepared, assembly-line style, at the factory and loaded onto the lacquered plates, a few minutes before the food is completely cooked.

A cardboard top is slapped on the plate and sealed with a plastic ring. Then the meals are wheeled into a sharp-freeze chamber. After four hours in this chamber at 20 below zero a steak is frozen so solid you can drive nails with it.

Until they're ready for shipment, the meals are kept in a holding chamber at minus 5 degrees. A refrigerated truck delivers them to customers. Currently, almost all the Sky Plates are delivered to Navy planes that fly the Atlantic. Aboard the plane they're stored in an insulated, but not refrigerated, balsa box until chow time. Then they're shoved into a special oven invented by Maxson, and in 15 minutes dinner is served.



Here's the Maxson version of a blue plate special.

This special oven is the main hitch in the Maxson scheme. An ordinary oven, it seems, dries the food. The Maxson Whirlwind Oven uses a fan arrangement that maintains an even heat and keeps the air moving all the time. The fan business is supposed to speed up the thawing process by removing the cold air from the food.

The oven used in Navy planes will take care of six Sky Plate meals at a time and weighs 33 pounds. It's not in production yet for retail sale, but tomorrow, or the day after, it will probably sell to housewives for from \$15 to \$25.

Maxson can't quote any price yet on how much his packaged meals will sell for out of the ice-box at the corner grocery store. Too much depends on how quickly the public takes to his idea, and what happens to food prices. The usual rule-of-thumb on prices for frozen foods is that they cost at retail about one and a half times as much as the same foods would set you back if you bought them fresh. Maxson thinks he will be able to sell his meals at about the same price as an average meal in a restaurant.

The hard-eating inventor thinks that most of his customers will be people who want to whip up a quick dinner without much trouble. He seems justified in thinking that there are a lot of such people.

EVENTUALLY, the Maxson Sky Plate will be available in 50 different menus. Just now there are only six. The main offerings of these meals are steak, meat loaf, beef stew, corned-beef hash, ham steak and breaded veal cutlets—meat courses of which most home frontiers have only the vaguest memory. Each plate comes with two vegetables, or one vegetable and hot bread. It all tastes good.

Several commercial airlines are trying to get Maxson Sky Plates for meal service in the air, but so far the Navy and some Army planes have a monopoly on the product. Meanwhile, other manufacturers are beginning to work out all kinds of packaged meals.

The ultimate aim of the manufacturers is to put out a meal in which there will be absolutely no waste. The next big development, obviously, will have to be a precooked, quick-frozen meal that you can eat plate and all. The plate, naturally, will be the dessert and conceivably better than the cake mother used to bake.

Shortly after the edible plate gets invented, we can start sweating out those slot-machine pellets. Ain't it gruesome?

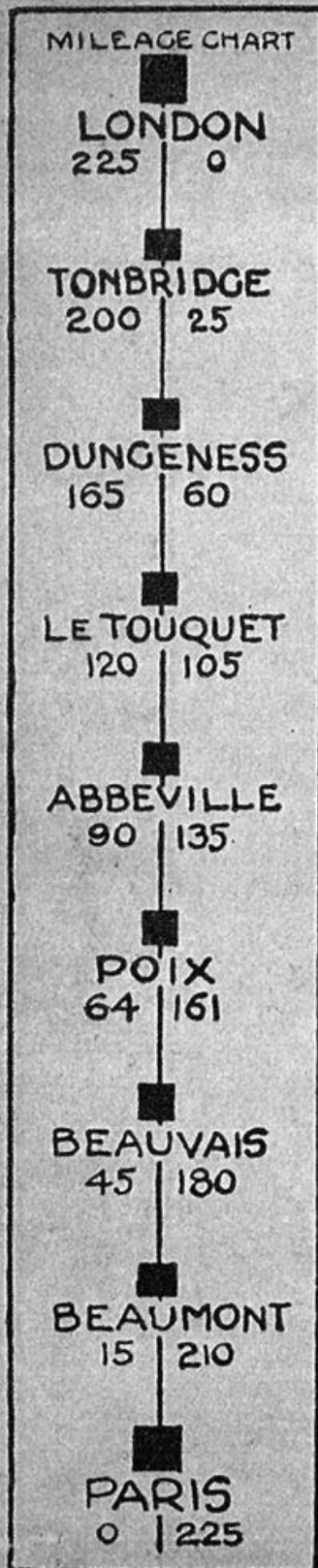
A 1945 article about the world's first convection oven, invented for military aircraft. COURTESY RICHARD FOSS

What about one of the most important components: booze?

In the early '30s, a lot of people were terrified of flying and wouldn't do it unless they were drunk. This was during Prohibition, so the stewardesses were at the ready to confiscate hip flasks. People would have to show their doctor's prescription so they could get slammed on the plane.

Western Airlines called themselves the "Champagne airline." Never in their life did they serve a glass of Champagne. They served California sparkling wine. But they still had someone running up and down the aisles pouring it on flights that took 20 minutes, because that was their trademark.

I should also mention the invention of the airline mini-bottle, which was partly a way to make the stewardesses stop stealing the full-size bottles to cater their own parties. There was an airline executive who went to the wedding of one of their own stewardesses and recognized that all the bottles were stolen.



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So why is airline food mostly so bleak these days?

There was a cascade of things that happened. Fares had been controlled by the Civil Aeronautics Board, but starting in the 1970s and '80s, you had airline deregulation by a guy who was an acolyte of Ronald Reagan.

Then once you get frequent flier points, especially for the corporate business people, people are going to stick with their loyalty program no matter what the food is like. Competition becomes much, much less because the most valued customers have those frequent flier programs. You have all the airlines with a race to the bottom, so flying becomes like riding a bus.

The irony is that airline food has gotten fantastically worse as the technology has gotten fantastically better. Airline food in first class is shockingly good because they have learned so much since World War II.

The more horrible you make it to fly coach, the more business people will demand to fly business and first class. The airlines make a bucket of money off people traveling up front, which is why they make coach as oppressive as possible.

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