

TRAVEL

5 MYTHS ABOUT AIRLINE FOOD

In-flight meals often ridiculed, but are they really that bad?

Everett Potter
Special for USA TODAY

Is there any aspect of aviation that's more ridiculed than airline food? In-flight meals are the subject of cheap jokes even when celebrity chefs are hired to rethink menus and bring culinary glamor back to the skies. Here are five myths that we lay to rest.

1 ALL AIRPLANE MEALS ARE FROZEN AND REHEATED HOURS LATER.

Many airline meals are, in fact, frozen and later resuscitated on board. But "not everything is frozen," says Heather Poole, a flight attendant and author of *Cruising Attitude*, who points out "that we do serve salads and sandwiches on some flights."

Nor does the terms "frozen meals" properly describe the entire process. Karen May of United Airlines says that "in cases where we have to cook and chill meals, we often prepare them using the sous vide method," which means that the food is sealed in airtight plastic bags and cooked slowly. Each ingredient is treated differently as well. Nikos Loukos is a veteran airline consultant who writes Inflight Feed, which covers dining in the sky. He notes that "chicken is cooked to a strict procedure that involves getting the meat to the right temperature and then quickly blast chilling it to try and keep the moisture levels in the meat."

2 THEY ONLY GIVE GOOD FOOD TO BUSINESS- AND FIRST-CLASS PASSENGERS.

This is indeed a longstanding belief, and not without merit.

"Well, passengers do pay an awful lot to sit in first class, don't you think?" Poole asks. "I mean they should get something for spending all that money."

The irony, of course, is that while someone may be flying up front, they may crave what's being served in the back of the aircraft.

"I can't tell you how many first-class passengers will ask us if they can have a snack from coach," says Poole.

But Nikos Loukos, who samples airline fare constantly, has a broader take on the best food in the skies. He recalls the "Lobster Thermidor option on Singapore Airlines which I've been fortunate enough to sample in first class, and yes it was memorable. However there are a number of airlines who do go above and be-



Jose Ordonez prepares salads for United Airlines at Newark's Liberty International Airport. EILEEN BLASS, USA TODAY

flight departs." But Loukos adds that "even those who travel beyond the curtain in premium cabins may also be served a reheated frozen meal. I have experienced lukewarm meals in business class, so it's not always perfect in the front either."

3 SOME FOODS SHOULD NEVER GO IN THE AIR, YET AIRLINES STILL SERVE THEM.

"This reminds me of the marinated vegetables we served in business class one month," Poole says. "I walked on board and I almost died. The smell was awful. But they tasted good. Even so, that smell wasn't worth it."

Over at United, Karen May says that catering tries to be proactive and that "our chefs minimize the use of ingredients with strong odors and avoid things like butter sauces and fried foods, which don't do well at 30,000 feet."

As for Nikos Loukos, he admits that "While I've had some lovely seafood meals in-flight, the majority of the time I haven't enjoyed them. I don't think that all types of fish are suitable to use in in-flight meals."

4 YOU'D BE BETTER OFF EATING FAST FOOD THAN WHAT THE AIRLINES SERVE.

That all depends upon whom you ask. May of United Airlines says that the food that her airline serves is of a much higher quality than one might believe, even in economy.

"On flights that offer our Choice Menu to United Economy customers, passengers can choose from a variety of premium snacks and, in many cases, fresh-

food options, including organic steel-cut oatmeal and a harvest-ham baguette with maple spread for breakfast, and a rustic Italian sandwich and French country-style bowl for lunch and dinner."

A more scientific way to approach an in-flight meal is becoming the norm in Europe, where new legislation requires that airline catering companies provide passengers with nutritional information on each meal served.

This allows passengers to make an informed decision.

Heather Poole takes a more pragmatic approach, saying that this "depends on a lot of different things like the airline, how the long the flight is, the time of day, the route, and whether your seat is in coach or first class. Long flights always have better food than short flights, and anything under three hours is considered a short flight. International flights will always have better food than domestic flights, even if the flying time is about the same."

5 AIRLINE FOOD IS DESIGNED TO MAKE YOU RELAX AND EVEN FALL ASLEEP.

While this has been suggested by some observers for years and regarded as nearly an airline conspiracy, Loukos contends that "I think this is an old myth that has been doing the rounds."

Flight attendant Heather Poole, a veteran of more than two decades in the skies, is somewhat blunter when confronted with this theory.

"What is this, a flight attendant fantasy?" she asks. "I think airlines are more concerned with saving a buck than they are about making passengers fall asleep."

ASK THE CAPTAIN

When pilot, co-pilot use conflicting controls

John Cox
Special for USA TODAY

Q: You are flying on autopilot and there's an alert of a pending midair collision. The captain pulls the stick back and the co-pilot pushes the stick down. Which way does the plane go?

— Johanson, San Francisco

A: In most conventional airplanes the yoke is interconnected, resulting in the strongest pilot determining if the airplane will climb or descend. In fly by wire, with non-interconnected side sticks, a full up and full down command would result in no flight path change because the inputs are algebraically summed.

The scenario you present fails to address one important point. The "alert" would be from the Traffic Collision and Avoidance System (TCAS). TCAS usually commands a coordinated climb or descent. One airplane goes up while the other goes down. This makes your scenario very unlikely, as both pilots are trained to follow the TCAS command.

Q: Why do both the pilot and co-pilot both place their hands on the throttle during takeoff?

— Paul Sorelle, Sturgeon Bay, Wis.

A: Some operators have both pilots place their hands on the throttles, but most now only have the flying pilot (the one actually manipulating the controls) set the throttles. Only the captain can command a rejected takeoff, so his/her hands must be on the throttles after the initial setting of takeoff thrust.

Q: I can't figure out the difference in the uniforms between the pilot and the co-pilot. How do you recognize which is which?

— Ambika, Texas

A: Captains have four stripes, first officers have three stripes. Occasionally you might see a professional flight engineer with two stripes.

Q: Just how do airports recycle the de-icing glycol?

— Gary Gallagher, Florida

A: De-icing fluid is collected in special drains where it is stored. Once it is removed, it is cleaned of debris and water, then may be reused.

Cox is a retired pilot who runs his own aviation safety consulting company, Safety Operating Systems.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Many airline meals are frozen and later reheated onboard — but not all of them.

yond to provide a quality meal in economy class."

He cites regional fare on Turkish Airlines, the Bibimbap dish on Korean Air, traditional Greek-inspired dishes on Aegean Airlines and Swiss International Airlines' Taste of Switzerland program.

"If there is a curry on offer in the economy-class cabin definitely choose it," he says. "Studies have shown that curry dishes perform very well in-flight, and are full of great-tasting flavor."

But if you're convinced that the economy meals will be inferior on your flight, Loukos says that there is an alternative to bringing your own food onboard.

"You can always pay to upgrade your standard economy-class meal tray to something a little more decadent," he points out, a tactic that few American fliers are familiar with. "Airlines such as Air France, KLM, Austrian Airlines, Aer Lingus and British Airways offer this service, where you will be served a business-class style of meal in economy class for a fee. Most of these meals start at about \$15 and some are prepared fresh literally just before your

Bad service is biggest bugaboo for hotel guests

Christopher Elliott
Special for USA TODAY



ON TRAVEL EVERY MONDAY

They're apathetic. They're never around when you need them. And they lie.

I asked what annoyed guests most about hotels, and that's what readers told me. Properties whose employees are indifferent to your comfort, turn their backs on you or bend the facts nettle you the most.

You've probably read about bothersome hotel guests lately. A few weeks ago, an online travel agency even published a survey on problem travelers, and it named "inattentive parents" as the most annoying hotel guests. But is that what really grates on your nerves?

No, travelers tell me. It's inattentive hotel employees.

"It's the bellmen who talk with one another rather than helping their guests carry luggage and open doors," says Doug Devitre, an educational consultant based in St. Louis. "It's the buffet service that seats you and leaves the bill without doing anything else."

Turns out there are a lot of things that tick us off about hotels. And fortunately, there are

ways to un-tick us, too.

The most-cited aggravation, by far, is the hotel employee who doesn't offer all the facts. Adam Dailey, an entrepreneur from San Diego, recalls checking into a hotel recently at 9 a.m. after arriving on a red-eye flight from California.

"They told me that no rooms were available," he remembers. "Then I heard them say to each other a few minutes later that they were not full."

Hotel insiders could offer any of a number of explanations for why they wouldn't be able to offer Dailey one of the apparently free rooms. But that's not the problem — the issue is that the front desk employees, with their careless banter, led him to believe they were not being entirely truthful.

Here's something else that drives guests crazy: "Getting an old room when there's a newly renovated room on another floor that is the same rate," says Emmy Trinh, a jewelry designer from Vancouver. No one knows why some guests are sent to the good rooms and some are relegated to the ones in dire need of an update. Is it loyalty status? Luck of the draw?

It matters not. It vexes guests.

Furniture can bother visitors, too. Patrick Smith, an airline pilot whose book called *Cockpit Confidential* includes a section about hotel rooms, says anything from a toe-breaking doorjamb to an er-



ANDREY POPOV, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Travelers say that inattentive employees are one of the most annoying things about hotels.

HOW TO RESPOND TO POOR SERVICE

► **Speak up.** Complain in the moment when something happens. Don't wait until you get home to fire off a letter to the general manager. The only way your hotel can fix your problem is if they know about it.

► **Keep your party smile ready.** Be nice and friendly, especially when you're inconvenienced. Employees are more likely to react defensively when faced with anger. And don't forget to say "thank you." "Hotel staff are always willing to help guests who are appreciative," says Emmy Trinh, a jewelry designer from Vancouver.

► **Don't come back.** The best way to show your displeasure with an inconsiderate employee or a room that's not to your liking is to stop giving the hotel your business. Don't forget to fill out the guest comment card and let them know why. For the most egregious cases, talk to your corporate travel manager about the hotel's contract.

gonomically hellish work space can drive a guest crazy.

But the most annoying thing of all are the little cardboard brochures that litter even the most upscale hotel rooms, Smith says. The ones that advertise everything from room service to Wi-Fi. They're everywhere, silently ordering you to eat more, watch pay-per-view or save the environment.

"It'd be one thing if this laminated litter was placed unobtrusively," he says, "But it tends to be exactly in the way."

Why don't you see more guest surveys about these obvious irritants?

Maybe hotels don't want to know. Cardboard ads are an opportunity to upsell their guests, so perhaps they're indifferent if they annoy you.

Got a problem with a run-down room? Come back after the renovation, and you'll be happier. And I'm sure I can find a revenue manager to explain the one about hotels that are booked solid, yet have empty rooms. I won't bother.

Don't get distracted by surveys that suggest we're upset with other guests. We know who's putting these bees in our bonnets, and it's not other travelers.

Elliott is a consumer advocate and editor at large for National Geographic Traveler. Contact him at chris@elliott.org or visit elliott.org.