



## Chef teams with Air Canada taking Canadian cuisine to new heights

**ALEXANDRA GILL**

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David Hawksworth has worked in Michelin-starred restaurants around the world. He has won countless awards and founded a national scholarship for young chefs. In 2011, he opened the acclaimed Vancouver restaurant, Hawksworth, and soon will be launching a second. But now, the celebrity chef is about to embark on a culinary challenge of the highest order.



### MULTIMEDIA

Chefs put pen to paper to sketch out a new dish, mapping out flavour and visual appeal



### MULTIMEDIA

See the chef behind R&D restaurant, his food and more



### VIDEO

Video: Judgment day for Tim Hortons' new Nutella doughnut and pastries

Fasten your seat belts and unfurl your napkins: As of Oct. 1, Mr. Hawksworth will be serving his first-class rendition of Canadian cuisine on departing Air Canada flights in international business class and at the airline's Maple Leaf lounges across the country.

"The logistical challenges of serving beautiful meals in a plane flying at 35,000 feet and going 550 miles an hour are enormous," Mr. Hawksworth said last week by phone from Toronto, after unveiling tamari-roasted sablefish and smoked Ontario duck breast, among other dishes on his inaugural menu.

The partnership, a first for Air Canada, is part of a larger trend that has seen airlines around the world hooking up with their country's hottest chefs to fly a distinct national flag on their premium menu selections and make the pricey experience more palatable. In Australia, Neil Perry designs meals for Qantas Airways, in addition to running a small restaurant empire. Air France worked with famed chefs Joël Robuchon, Guy Martin and Thibaut Ruggeri before signing a deal with triple-Michelin-starred chef Régis Marcon.

In the United States, Delta One collaborates with a regionally tailored collection of chefs and restaurateurs, including Danny Meyer for flights departing from New York and Food Network star

Michelle Bernstein on Southern-bound flights leaving Miami.

"We view Air Canada as a proud brand ambassador for Canadian pride," explained Craig Landry, vice-president of marketing. "But we had to ask ourselves, 'Are we really bringing to the world a unique perspective on Canadian cuisine?' That led to a new culinary mission."

Last winter, the company sent out a request for proposals to 30 chefs across Canada. After initial talks, the list was narrowed down to five “well-known” chefs, who were all instructed on the technical requirements and asked to develop test menus. The search team visited the chefs in their restaurants. Mr. Hawksworth, who articulated his vision of contemporary Canadian cuisine as an expression of fresh, regional ingredients, was first.

“He set the bar incredibly high,” said Mr. Landry, going on to describe the sample dishes with near-ecstatic enthusiasm.

The sablefish, for example: “I have seldom tasted a fish that was so rich and tender,” he raved. Barbecue chicken with roasted corn and grilled scallions “had a richness of sauce that was an explosion of flavour.” Chocolate fondant? “The second you put that in your mouth, you realized something very special was happening.”

The task of catapulting those flavours into the skies, however, is no easy feat. Mr. Hawksworth, working with Air Canada’s in-house catering company, Gate Gourmet, will have to create at least 1,200 meals a day from five separate commissary kitchens across the country.

“The pressure is relentless,” said Mr. Hawksworth, who has some experience with the genre, having worked for Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons when the British restaurant was designing menus for Virgin Airline upper class.

“The product has to be consistent throughout Canada,” he added. “Running out of ingredients is not an option. It has to be made eight hours beforehand. You have to remember that there is a 30-degree slope on the planes for takeoff and if there is turbulence, the food will stay in the warmer.”

Then there are all the special dietary needs that need to be taken into consideration, the fact that in-cabin ovens have only two settings (250 F and 350 degrees F) and the time it takes from the food leaving the kitchen until it is assembled on the aircraft. “We’d like to roll out a ravioli, but we don’t have a company that would be able to make it for all markets and there are too many unknowns,” added Mr. Hawksworth, who did his primary research by watching a lot of YouTube videos filmed by airline customers documenting their business-class experiences.

While it might seem like a slam-dunk branding opportunity, Mr. Hawksworth, who acknowledges that he hasn’t yet taste-tested his recipes in-flight, is winging his culinary reputation.

Is he worried?

“A life without risks is not worth living,” he said, laughing. The family discount on air travel probably doesn’t hurt, either.