

Air Canada Amps Up Its Business Class Dining With Chef David Hawksworth



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To this day, friends of the family shudder when they recount the tale of their airline trip in the 1970s, where not only was food served buffet-style in the back of the plane in a first-come, first-served style, but—horror of horrors—customers were asked to *put food back* when meals ran short. In today's increasingly food-friendly skies, frequent fliers, road warriors and luxury travelers are light years away from such hardship. With celebrity chefs such as Joël Robuchon and Nobu Matsuhisa making mile-high dining a must-have, and the recent announcement in October of international Thai cooking school Blue Elephant serving Royal Thai cuisine to Hong Kong Airlines business elites, flyers and foodies are gradually seeing eye to eye. There's more pressure than ever for airlines to step up their dining options, with sites such as [airlinemeals.net](#) serving as outlets for frustrated passengers to cast a shaming lens on inflight meals that look less than appetizing.

Although Toronto Pearson International Airport has undergone a much publicized revamp of their food offerings, with the likes of Susur Lee and Massimo Capra opening outlets in Terminal 1, it's surprising that Canadian airlines haven't joined the celebrity crush until now.



The announcement this fall that Vancouver chef David Hawksworth joined the Air Canada lineup for business class travelers may change that perception. Hawksworth has the culinary chops to tempt the tastebuds of the jetsetting elite, winning accolades such as chef of the year and newsmaker of the year from Canada's restaurant industry publications. His namesake restaurant at Rosewood Hotel Georgia has made the *enRoute* top 10 listings and through Hawksworth Restaurant, he founded a scholarship that encourages young Canadian chefs to make their bones in kitchens around the world.

Despite Hawksworth's French classical roots in the kitchen — he spent a decade working in Michelin-starred kitchens such as Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, L'Escargot and The Square — his aesthetic tends towards clean flavours, which may serve him well when preparing meals for elevated dining. Although Air Canada claims its new Boeing 787 Dreamliners have a more moisture-filled environment within its cabins, other factors affect how we consume food when flying: reduced cabin pressure, residual noise from engines and other passengers all play a role. Food needs to overcome those elements, as well as entertain bored mid-flight frequent flyers: hardly the ideal dining environment. British chef Heston Blumenthal even resorted to asking air travelers on British Airways to use a nasal clearing spray before eating to clear their palates and combat dehydration (an idea that, perhaps not surprisingly, failed to gain traction).

Hawksworth is trying a different tactic. "We're trying to make things that are a little more acidulated and fresher. Making a thick creamy buttery sauce does nothing for me," says Hawksworth. "Maybe if I've just been skiing and hiking and it's freezing outside, then maybe, but if I'm pretty comfortable up at 30,000 feet and I'm just sitting there, I want something that's fresh and light."

Creating the dishes are not without challenge, as every change can result in huge financial costs, says Hawksworth. Although he is working with his restaurant's culinary director Kristian Eligh, Hawksworth is also facing a new situation in having his dishes executed by Gate Gourmet, an airline caterer and provisioning service that claims to serve about 250 million meals a year worldwide — a far cry from his established kitchen brigade.

[David Hawksworth discusses cooking for Air Canada](#)

"It's always good to have someone else's perspective, and it means we've looked at even the smallest things in a different way," says Hawksworth. "For example, instead of blanching vegetables, we use a little bit of compound butter. Since they will go into the oven for seventeen minutes, so we don't cook them beforehand, but instead do it all in the air."

The new dishes made their debut in October on Air Canada outbound business class meals and include a yellowfin tuna tataki with a scallion ginger topping, passion fruit and puffed rice, and a tamari roasted sablefish main course with bok choy, brown rice and chili miso vinaigrette. Whether or not they are picture perfect will be up in the air.