



Robin Lynam

Get Caviar in the Air

Cathay Pacific Catering Services at Chek Lap Kok uploaded 13.1 million meals on the planes, including those of its parent airline, last year; costs of meals served in the air vary from airline to airline. Executive chef Jorg Kubisz confirms that Aeroflot is at the high end of the scale when assessed for food spending per passenger. By ROBIN LYNAM

"To me, an airplane is a great place to diet," says celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck, but the sentiment is one which Jorg Kubisz would almost certainly regard as hurtful.

Kubisz is the new Executive Chef of Cathay Pacific Catering Services, the largest of the three airline catering operations at Hong Kong International Airport, and one which at present looks after the in-flight meal requirements of twenty nine carriers besides, of course, those of its owner, Cathay Pacific.

It's an awesome responsibility. Kubisz and his team are responsible for feeding the passengers and crew on around 130 flights per day. That works out at around 1,000 meals, although in theory the facility has a production capacity of 80,000, and on one memorably long day – January 18 of this year – was obliged to produce 62,660. Last year Cathay Pacific Catering Services or CPCS loaded 13.1 million meals on to planes, accounting for around 70 percent of the total for the airport.

Cathay is, as you would expect, its largest customer taking around 58 percent of the upload, although curiously the company doesn't service Dragonair which Cathay part owns. It takes its responsibility to other airlines equally seriously however, and the occasion of my recent visit – my first since a familiarisation tour just before Chek Lap Kok opened – was to preview the new

business and first class menus for Aeroflot Russian International Airlines.

Don't laugh. Recent years have seen a number of remarkable changes in the airline industry with a number of carriers previously high on the "avoid at all costs" list reinventing themselves and beginning to seriously compete with those that have traditionally set the industry's service standards.

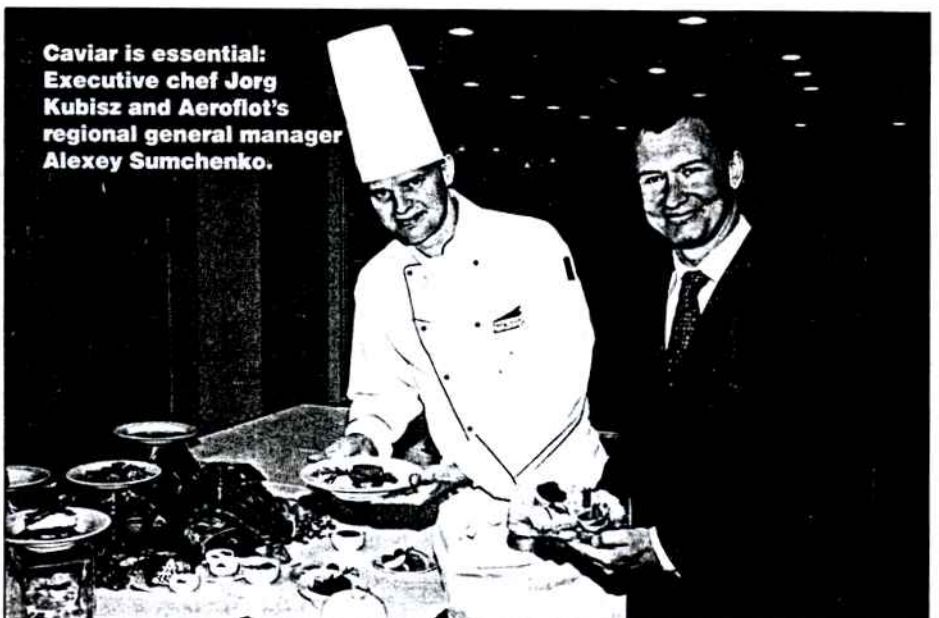
China is a good example. Mainland aviation has been transformed over the past decade with investment in new aircraft, staff training, and improved service standards in flight, and Russia is an analogous case. Aeroflot has also worked hard to put its house in order,

buying or leasing new Airbus Industrie and Boeing aircraft for long haul routes, and paying close attention to all aspects of in-flight service – including of course the food.

With the increasing bifurcation of the international airline industry into "no frills" carriers that compete on cost, and full service operators that compete on service, food for the latter has become a massively important component of the service and marketing mix.

Asian carriers have traditionally spent the most money on food. American airlines are generally the least generous in this area, as in most others, and have spent even less on it since 9/11, dropping meal service all together on many domestic flights.

It's a different story over here. Carriers like Cathay are particularly conscious of a need to keep standards high, and Kubisz and his sous chefs routinely prepare recipes by well known



Caviar is essential: Executive chef Jorg Kubisz and Aeroflot's regional general manager Alexey Sumchenko.

international chefs or from popular local restaurants for in-flight catering promotions such as "The Best Chinese Food in the Air".

Its main regional rival in this area is Singapore Airlines, for whom incidentally Wolfgang Puck, who appears to be a man of flexible views on sky high dining, has devised some dishes. Not surprisingly, perhaps, that catering contract for Hong Kong resides not with CPCS but with LSG Sky Chefs, a smaller operator here, but the largest worldwide. In first and business class Lufthansa, which owns that company, offers menus devised by top international chefs in six two monthly cycles annually.

CPCS has been looking after Aeroflot for some time, but the airline is now making a serious effort to bring its services in line with the high expectations business travellers from this part of the world automatically take on board as hand carry.

Its new code sharing arrangement with Cathay Pacific may have given it a certain impetus in this direction. I interviewed Cathay's chief executive David Turnbull a few months ago, at a time when the Aeroflot arrangement was no more than an industry rumour, and asked him whether passengers who turn up at the check in desk with Cathay tickets only to find that they are travelling with another carrier ever express dissatisfaction with the arrangement.

He conceded that it does happen, but added that Cathay tried to work with code share partners offering "comparable" service standards. Aeroflot accordingly has to ensure that those passengers are not disappointed on the Hong Kong to Moscow route. So will it measure up?

Sevruga, Frozen Vodka

So far as in-flight catering is concerned it certainly looks like it. The food is essentially the same in first and business class, but differently presented, and in first there will be a choice of five main courses rather than three.

This, according to Kubisz, is the largest number CPCS prepares for any carrier, and a first for the kitchens. Although he is unable to disclose figures for food spending per passenger, Aeroflot, he says, is at the high end of the scale, and economy class passengers

The Aeroflot's inflight menu has these and a host of other delicious items.



can expect to eat decently as well.

Staff on the flights are going to be working hard to put the food at the front across properly. Many of the dishes require a considerable amount of galley preparation, and premium class passengers will be offered soup – something most carriers avoid because of the complications involved in serving hot liquids at high altitudes, particularly during periods of turbulence.

For a Russian carrier Kubisz and Aeroflot's regional general manager Alexey Sumchenko deemed caviar to be essential; Sevruga, washed down with champagne or frozen vodka. Chinese tastes will also be catered to. The current meal service cycles – coming and going - also include abalone with prawns and XO sauce, and a variety Western and Russian main courses with an accent on attractive and idiosyncratic presentation.

Of the desserts Kubisz and sous chefs Stephen Winter and Saul Owens are rightly proud of the banana cheese cake, and a good selection of international cheeses is on offer.

It must be a strange job for a chef who trained in hotels, although Kubisz does come from a family of aircraft engineers, but its satisfactions, he says

are different. Although the theatrical element of hotel dining is missing the creativity of the job involves developing menus that are enjoyable, nutritious, consistent and safe under the unusual circumstances in which they are served. That, it seems, is quite enough of a challenge to be getting on with.

Not all airlines are willing to spend the money on assured food quality, but Aeroflot appears to be mindful that it has an old Russian tradition to maintain. It is widely believed that the first in-flight meal served to passengers – and for that matter the first in-flight drinks service – was aboard a plane flying from Russia to the Ukraine in 1914.

Much has happened in the intervening 90 years, including the birth, life and death of the USSR – not a great era for catering at any altitude – and aircraft have developed from bi-planes to wide bodied jets.

Taking one consideration with another, things are much improved. Should you be flying to Moscow you can expect a considerably higher level of comfort than you might have during the Soviet period, and there is another assurance worth having. The food will definitely be better.