



Perfecting the mile high meal

By Dean Davis

Navigating through the logistical minefield of catering at 35 000ft for a myriad of customers is something to be admired. I recently flew to the Cathay Pacific Catering Services facility in Hong Kong and was left in awe at the sheer size and scale of the operation.





Airline catering needs to be fast, efficient, prepared under strict hygienic conditions and of course, it needs to work around the clock 24/7. Flying out of O.R.Tambo International at 13h03 on a Thursday afternoon, I was trying to wrap my head around the actual size and capacity of Cathay's catering facility. A bit of pre-trip research yielded some far-fetching figures – 50 400m² in size, averaging over 55 000 meals per day, surely these can't be right? In fact, I was pretty confident that they were over-inflated. Nevertheless, in the next 14 hours, I would be proved quite wrong indeed.

Touching down in 29°C / 84%RH weather at 07h50, I seemed to have brought the sunny weather of South Africa to Hong Kong, sans the cold of course. After checking in at the Regal Airport Hotel (a mere three minute walk from passport control) and having a much anticipated (make that 'much needed') shower, I was picked up by Cathay Pacific Airways escort, Carina Chow. I still don't know why we travelled by car, a couple of steps across a few runways would've taken us to the same building (albeit with a few police officials in hot pursuit) – the Cathay Pacific Catering Services (CPCS) facility.

Once inside I was introduced to Pat Cheung, Cathay's senior marketing and customer services officer. After a fascinating presentation of the facility and learning that the figures I initially

researched were in fact accurate, we donned some hygiene-friendly gear complete with hair nets, face masks and white jackets. The following areas make up the three-storey building, each with its own group of dedicated staff members, all working together to ensure that meals (trays, cutlery and literally every single item you can imagine that is necessary for an airline) all go out on time and in accordance with HACCP and ISO9001:2000 accreditation:

- ◆ Warehouse – Before any ingredient enters the CPCS kitchen, Cathay's quality assurance and warehouse staff check all of the items in the receiving area so as to ensure that the products comply with the high standards expected and demanded by the company.
- ◆ Vegetable Room – Vegetable and salad items are checked, washed and sanitised before being processed. Once the basic preparation is complete, the ingredients are then sent to the different kitchens for further processing.
- ◆ Fruit Room – CPCS imports and processes around 7 500kg of fresh fruit every day, including on average 4 000kg of assorted melons. CPCS quality checks all of the fruit both before and after washing, sanitising and processing.
- ◆ Inbound Area – Equipment from inbound flights is transferred from the aircraft back to the CPCS facility by hi-loader trucks. Once the equipment arrives, it is loaded onto a state-of-the-art system which automatically transfers the meal carts to a pre-assigned ware-wash line.

Food Flight Facts

- ◆ CPCS supplies over 30 airlines with more than 20 million meals produced in 2006, accounting for 67% of the total market share in airline catering from Hong Kong International Airport.
- ◆ Daily capacity = 80 000 meals
- ◆ 152 flights per day
- ◆ Highest monthly production record = 1 896 102 meals in August 2006
- ◆ The 2005 CPCS grocery list consisted of the following: 45 626kg of eggs, 288 516kg of chicken, 426 665kg of fish, 378 442kg of beef, 152 722kg of pork, 22 478kg of fresh fruits, 624 543kg of fresh vegetables, 78 230kg of ice-cream and 110 166kg of cheese!



- ◆ Bakery Section – CPCS produces more than 45 types and approximately 70 000 pieces of baked items, including 20 000 pieces of assorted bread and 24 000 portions of soft rolls every day. About 16 000 croissants and Danish pastries are also made fresh every day in-house.
- ◆ Central Hot Kitchen – Approximately 55% of all the hot food produced by CPCS is Chinese cuisine. CPCS chefs take pride in producing authentic dishes. Working on two shifts, three cooks – using a custom designed omelette-making machine – make on average 4 500 omelettes every day.
- ◆ Commissary, Cutler Section and Bond Store – Handling roughly 570 product lines, the CPCS commissary ensures that all of the dry stores needed (coffee, teabags, printed media, etc) for each flight are replenished ready for the next departure. That's 750 000 items per day, not forgetting the 290 000 pieces of cutlery and 250 different dutiable product lines!
- ◆ Ware-wash Section – All of the equipment from incoming flights such as cutlery, plates, trays, etc (whether used or not) are cleaned and sanitised thoroughly.
- ◆ Dishing Section – Using specification sheets with photographs, all cooked food is dished strictly in accordance with the customers' instructions and ISO9001:2000 regulations.
- ◆ Tray Setting Section – Yes, even the trays for each flight are set before each departure. Cold items such as salads, appetisers and desserts are pre-set with the plates and cutlery on tray and put into meal carts.



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◆ **Outbound Section** – Once the completed meal carts reach the outbound area, they are stored in the dispatch cold rooms and checked by CPCS supervisors. The meals are only transferred to the aircraft, by refrigerated hi-loader trucks, just in time for departure.

If all this wasn't enough, the facility also specialises in special dietary requirements. In fact, over 20 varieties of special meals can be prepared with a minimum notice of 24 hours. These include vegetarian meals, non-vegetarian religious meals, medical meals and children's meals – all prepared in the respective specialised kitchens (for example: Halaal, Kosher and Japanese). The comprehensive list of meals available under each special dietary section is truly staggering. I'm usually not left speechless but after seeing each of the kitchens and the incredible attention to detail, I found it rather hard to verbally express my amazement for at least a few minutes.

My oenophilic palate was most impressed with the notable array of wines available on board each flight. Passengers were served incredible stuff, such as: Château Lynch Bages 1998, Château Branaire

Dubru 2001, Montesodi Chianti Rufina 2003, and Domaine Bouchard Fere & Fils 2005. I even sipped a South African red. Bellingham's The Maverick Syrah was superb during both trips across the Indian Ocean; although, I'm clearly not the only one who likes to quaff fine wines onboard. In 2007, Cathay Pacific Airways served 1.3 million bottles of wine and Champagne to passengers on all flights. Writing this after a few days back from Hong Kong, I still find it hard to digest the facts and figures associated with CPCS. Airline catering is a fine example of how restaurants and hotels can approach their business. Careful planning, attention to detail, strict hygiene standards, quality food and genuine enthusiasm to hospitality are all needed. The amount of work involved to simply serve food at 35 000ft puts things into perspective when you pay hard-earned money for sub-standard service and a meal at any establishment. CPCS executive chef, Jörg Kubisz and his vast army of culinary experts are setting the standard. The two hours I spent with them have given me a newfound respect for airline food. I hope this article has done the same for you. ✈



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