

Why Running a Good Airport Restaurant Is So Difficult



For chefs, airport restaurants are challenging — but worth it.

It seems like a cruel trick that holiday travel season coincides with some of the year's worst weather, forcing many of us to subsist on lame \$15 deli sandwiches and \$9 Bud Lights at the airport as we wait for flight delays to be resolved.

Thankfully, the concourse dining desert is becoming as obsolete as rubbery in-flight meals. Airport food and drinks are getting better — it's now possible to get a [Michael Voltaggio sandwich and Kogi BBQ at LAX](#), James Beard-nominated Southern food [in ATL](#) (at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport's One Flew South), and a Shake Shack burger [at JFK](#). And many of these newer restaurants are charging "street prices" (or very near) for their dishes, meaning that the days of **captive-audience markups are becoming a thing of the past.**

That doesn't mean that restaurants that do sell food at higher prices than their brick-and-mortars are necessarily cheating you. "It's incredibly expensive to operate at the airport," says Adam Sappington, who charges street pricing at the Portland International Airport location of his popular SE Portland restaurant the Country Cat, which opened earlier this year. (The Port of Portland requires all restaurants and shops in inside the airport to offer "street pricing," at the same rate as out-of-airport locations.)

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Sappington says he wants to "change the way people perceive airport food," but that means he's also had to change the way his staff operates. The Country Cat is known for whole-animal, farm-to-table scratch cooking, and at PDX Sappington was determined to break down animals, smoke meats, and make scratch pastries — all out of a 700-square-foot kitchen in the terminal.

"People don't say, 'I want to be a chef, so I'm going to go to an airport and cook.'"

Obviously, that requires a lot of labor, especially considering the brutally long airport hours. Country Cat PDX is open from 5 a.m. to 12 a.m. every day, 7/365, and requires a staff of 17 to 19 kitchen employees for most of that time. Many of those staffers have never worked on equipment more complicated than microwaves and griddles. It's inspiring to teach them the art of cooking, Sappington says, but can be time-consuming, and it can be hard to recruit experienced cooks to come to the airport restaurant.

"You walk through TSA every time you come to work. That alone is kind of a mental space for people to get past," Sappington says. "People don't say, 'I want to be a chef so I'm going to go to an airport and cook.'"



Photo: One Flew South/Facebook

Chef Duane Nutter of Atlanta's One Flew South has also run into **staffing problems**. If it's hard to find experienced cooks, servers, and bartenders to come work at the airport, it's even harder to ask them to pay the \$160 for a TSA screening that can take two to three weeks to be approved. Many find other jobs in that time, he says — jobs that don't require them to commute to the airport, take the train in from the staff parking lot, and get through security just to begin their shift.

Then there's the airport system for accepting deliveries, which is a hassle at best, because small local producers can't just pull up to the restaurant and hand off supplies; they need to go through a whole process to get themselves, and their products, approved by TSA. Deliveries can only be accepted for a small window of time, usually in the wee hours of the night, which requires more staffing on the part of the restaurants.

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In Atlanta, that access also requires a **\$2 million insurance policy**, says Nutter, which many small farms don't have the means or interest in taking on. Trial and error eventually led to him setting up a system with his main produce supplier to accept deliveries from smaller suppliers, like fishermen, at their street location, then deliver the product to the airport along with the produce.

Sappington has it a little easier thanks to cooperation from the Port of Portland, which oversees the airport, and has facilitated all of the complicated airport processes whenever possible, by setting up training programs, TSA assistance for purveyors, and intuitive alerts about flight delays and schedules.

Despite all of this, operating in the airport is generally worth the hassle and high rents, which are typically a percentage of gross sales — about 12 percent on average. ("You could have two restaurants [on the street] for that kind of money," Nutter says.) Airports represent a valuable marketing opportunity for restaurant brands who can take advantage of a captive audience of tens and thousands of people passing through a day. No doubt in part due to the decline in airplane meals, customers are spending more on food and beverages in the airport — the average rose almost 10 percent from 2009 to 2013, according to a survey from the industry group Airports Council International. Still, though the restaurant and grab-and-go serve 800-1,200 customers a day, Sappington says that **some days they barely break even**.

Some restaurants avoid the daily hassles that plague chefs like Sappington and Nutter and work with big distributors like HMS Host, who typically hold contracts for the entire airport. That's the case at Chicago's O'Hare, where Rick Bayless has three Tortas Frontera outposts. The restaurant group doesn't operate these directly; instead, they **license their brand and proprietary ingredients** to a distributor.

Stacy Dixon, who runs development and marketing for the Frontera Hospitality Group, says that they don't mind the arrangement because it hands off day-to-day issues like staffing and deliveries, but it comes with its own challenges. Because they don't own the restaurants, the Frontera team conducts periodic quality control checks to make sure everything is up to their standards, and had to create a new supply chain to deliver produce from local farms as well as their own salsas and other ingredients. "We push and train as hard as we possibly can to get these staff that we don't hire to represent our brand as best as they possibly can," Dixon says, though she doesn't offer specifics.

In some ways, creating this relationship with the customer in the airport, many people's first foray into your city, can pay off **even if the restaurant is operating even or at a loss**. Scott Drummond, owner of popular barbecue restaurant the Salt Lick, says that he too feels the squeeze of high rents and odd delivery hours, but keeps the prices at his Austin-Bergstrom and Dallas-Fort Worth the same as those at his original location in Driftwood, Texas for one reason. "We don't want to create ill will with the people who we consider are the most important people in the world — our customers," he says.

That may represent a sea change in the way that operators see diners in airports — not as captive targets, but as lifelong loyalists.

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Such an activity seems preposterous, but in the Golden Age of airplane travel, it was glamorous to go to the airport for a fancy meal and a view of the planes taking off. Back then, of course, no one had to take off their shoes or be subjected to a full-body scan. But it's still become possible to imagine a world where the airport is once again a dining destination.



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