

Noritake

Dishing Out Style Aloft

by Luigi Vallero

In today's competitive 'fare wars' environment, airlines are striving to retain customer loyalty with the promise of excellence in operational standards and a high level of care and quality in their in-flight products. But this usually involves treading a fine line between the apparently contradictory needs to save costs and improve service levels. In the past, when air travel was perceived as something special, there was, in general, more attention paid to passengers by cabin attendants, with meal service considered an important component of the flying experience.



Japan Airlines

While first class is now a privilege that only a limited number of carriers can afford to offer—and very few passengers can pay for—in recent times business class has become the ‘privileged’ mode of travel for long-haul travellers. To a lesser extent this also applies to the so-called ‘economy plus’ product introduced by some airlines.

As an antidote to boredom on long-haul flights, most travellers need to be entertained; and feeding them is one of the industry’s most commonly-used marketing tools to appeal to customers. In their ‘up market’ cabins, many leading airlines have turned meal service into a fine art, not unlike a carefully-planned and choreographed ‘show’ or ‘production’. Culinary quality and variety aside, the presentation of the meal tray, crockery, and cutlery is a key factor in rounding off the airborne gastronomic experience.

The task of the in-flight chinaware designer is not an easy one, as items have to fit into the confined spaces of an airliner’s galley and meal trolleys.

Compliance with universally-accepted dimensional standards—as defined by ATLAS and KSSU—is a prime consideration, along with weight limitations, strength, storage capability, and even customizing the product for individual airlines. All over the world a small number of chinaware suppliers have become specialists in providing the airline industry with items that fulfil these stringent requirements. Among them is Noritake, a Japanese firm that has been associated with airline catering for over 50 years.

Noritake was established in 1876, under the name Morimura Brothers, by a young diplomat named Baron Ichizaemon Morimura IV. It was Japan’s first fine china trading company, with a head office in Tokyo and a retail and wholesale office in New York City. The company’s aim was to bring to North America, and later to the world, the unique beauty and elegance of Japanese fine china. On January 1, 1904, Baron Morimura founded his own manufacturing company: Nippon Toki Gomei Kaisha. It was later renamed Noritake, taking the name of the village—now a suburb of Nagoya, in central Japan—where the factory was located.

Today, 100 years later, its reputation for superior artistry, attention to detail, and uncompromising standards of excellence see Noritake acknowledged as a world leader in tableware. Throughout its long history Noritake has been a leading-edge company based on its core ceramic technology, and now comprises five distinct business groups: Industrial Products; Electronics; Ceramics & Materials; Environmental Engineering; and, Tabletop, which also manufactures products for in-flight meal service.

The first order from an airline was received by Noritake from Pan American World Airways early in the Fifties (today, US carriers remain loyal repeat customers). Since then, a large number of other airlines—numbering almost 60 from around the world—have been added to the Noritake customer portfolio.

Within the company’s experienced tableware designers and craftsmen—numbering more than 50 personnel—a group of ten is dedicated to the airline market. These specialists work in cooperation with airlines’ in-flight services and marketing departments to meet individual requirements in terms of design and functionality. (A successful line of in-flight dinnerware must be practical, durable, stackable, and sophisticated in both pattern and shape design.)

In keeping with modern airline trends, most of Noritake’s current chinaware production is for business class services, while economy class is usually supplied with less expensive melamine ware. Complementing the package of airline products, glassware, cutlery, and hollowware are designed and produced by either Noritake itself or associated companies. Materials used range from bone china to fine white porcelain, crystal stemware, silver-plate, and melamine.

Japan boasts a rich cultural heritage and culinary tradition, and the Japanese are very demanding travellers. Compare the standard offerings on long-haul economy class trays on flights



between Europe and Japan or California—roughly the same distance—and you will discover that the ‘eastbound’ tray will contain at least one course more than on the westbound flight. Apart from indigenous passengers, who expect authentic Japanese cuisine served in the proper way, many sophisticated travellers of other nationalities have



Qantas Airways

developed a taste for Japanese food and the ritualistic elements of Japanese presentation, often preferring it to Western fare on international flights. Indeed, it has been estimated that on flights to and from Japan, roughly 60% of passengers opt for a Japanese meal.

As a Japanese company, Noritake offers the best opportunities to develop products that are faithful to Japanese dining tradition. The first Japanese-style product range was developed by Noritake for the first class cabins of Japan Air Lines (JAL) in the Sixties. Today, airlines from other nations select Noritake for chinaware of indigenous Japanese design and shape.

Drawing from Japanese dining tradition and style, the Kaiseki and Shokado 'schools' have been identified as the most suitable options for airline service. The kaiseki tradition, which derives from the Honzen style (*Honzen-ryori*) established for Samurai of the Kamakura period (12th century), is the most prestigious Japanese meal style. Kaiseki entails a multi-course presentation reflecting the season of the year, with each dish being served on a different plate, or in a different bowl, designed specifically for that food.

Placing a combination of square and circular ceramic plates of different sizes upon a lacquer ware *orishiki* tray, and using a combination of wooden and china bowls and cups of different heights, decorated in the Kyo-kaiseki style of ancient Kyoto, recreates the convention of the kaiseki meal for first class or business class service. For example, Club ANA—All Nippon Airways's business class—features a kaiseki presentation.

Distinguishing itself from kaiseki, the shokado style utilizes a unique presentation lacquer ware *bento* box, containing individual dishes separated so that each flavor is

KAISEKI
懐石



Air Canada



All Nippon Airways



Cathay Pacific Airways

SHOKADO
松花堂



British Airways



United Airlines



China Airlines

maintained. Shokado *bento* boxes evolved as a convenient way to serve meals at outdoor gatherings such as flower and maple tree viewings. Because of its advantage of all food and dishes being held securely in the box, the shokado style is rapidly becoming the standard for in-flight meal service, especially in business class and, for a number of airlines, in economy as well.

For instance, Noritake has developed a customized *Shokado bento* service for United Airlines's business class, drawing on ceramic and lacquer ware design tradition dating from 16th century Kyoto. *Sake* and tea services provide another opportunity to sample traditional Japanese design aloft.

Over recent years, a fusion style has developed. Cathay Pacific Airways was one of the first to identify this in order to distinguish its first class bone china from the competition. The Hong Kong-based carrier worked closely with Noritake's creative design team to develop a cohesive service product which includes both Western and

Asian tea serving sets, Western-style plates, a *sake* bottle and cup, an egg cup, chopstick rest, Chinese spoon, and a full complement of lacquer ware—all combined in a beautifully balanced and attractive presentation.

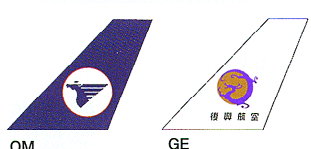
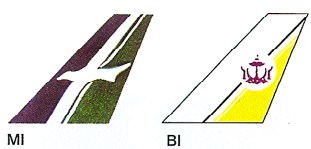
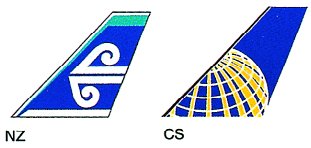
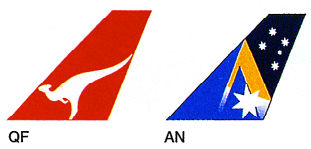
Other airlines are following suit, and Lufthansa has introduced Noritake-designed fusion chinaware in its first and business class cabins, initially on long-haul Japan flights, with other services to follow.

Despite the widespread influence of low-cost carriers, premium long-haul services are likely to persist, catering to the needs of more demanding travellers. If so, they will continue to be a vehicle for passengers to sample high-quality airborne service enhanced by the style and excellence of Noritake products. ➔

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United Airlines



Airline logos depicting some of Noritake's international customers.