

CPCS: Catering to high-flying appetites

by Luigi Vallero



Mention of airline food

often provokes horror stories of ‘rubber’ chicken or ‘cardboard’ steaks. Yet, airline catering is an important revenue generator—or drain on expenses, depending on which side of the ‘equation’ you are looking at—with several implications ranging from marketing positioning and perception through to health and hygiene considerations, and an impact on operational performances. Catering is also one of the first victims of airlines’ cost-cutting drives.

It is vital that caterers, who are often third-party suppliers, maintain a close and well-coordinated relationship with the airline, and should always be regarded as a fully integrated part of an ‘assembly line’ process. Additionally, the airline has a duty to ensure that the food supplied meets company specifications.

Nowadays, at least in the western world, short-haul flights in coach class often mean flying on a packet of pretzels, or maybe a cookie and a drink. However, medium- and long-range services are still associated with a somewhat more elaborate level of service, albeit dependent on how much an airline is prepared to offer its customers. Airlines often treat their premium passengers with gastronomic masterpieces from renowned chefs, while caterers have to exercise ingenuity and creativity to mass-produce elaborate ‘signature’ dishes.

Among the world’s most acclaimed caterers is Cathay Pacific Catering Services, or CPCS, a wholly owned subsidiary of Hong Kong’s major ‘flag-carrier’ (*Airways*, Mar/Apr 1997 & October 2005). Aiming to be the best in-flight catering company in the Asia-Pacific region, CPCS employs effective systems and processes in what is one of the world’s largest flight kitchens to produce Asian and western cuisine of very high quality. In doing so, the company continually places emphasis on customer satisfaction while enforcing high standards of hygiene with consistent product and service quality from the supply of raw material through to food preparation and delivery to the customer.



CPCS started operations in 1967 as Air Caterers. Having changed its name to, first, Swire Air Caterers in 1974, and then to the current title in 1992, CPCS celebrates its 40th anniversary of experience in the airline catering industry this year. Indeed, its already high level of service has risen significantly since the move to Chek Lap Kok International Airport (*Airways*, September 2004).

As a measure of its growth, CPCS kitchens deliver some 18,000 airline meals to customers of more than 30 scheduled carriers operating out of Hong Kong. Daily, the company caters to the needs of an average of 140 flights operated by 33 airlines departing from Hong Kong, including all outbound Cathay Pacific flights. In fact, the home carrier alone accounts for approximately 65% of meals produced by CPCS. The company’s kitchens have a daily production capacity for 80,000 meals, although the average figure is around 45,000. So far, the highest production achieved was 66,917 meals, on April 29, 2005.

The catering handling time for each aircraft varies between 25 and 30 minutes, with a complete turnaround—which includes cabin dressing—taking 45 minutes. (Apart from preparing meals for all classes of service, CPCS supplies airlines with other items of food, drinks, and related products.)

Before moving to the ultra-modern establishment at Chek Lap Kok, CPCS was located in a much more logistically challenging environment at Kai Tak Airport (*Airways*, Jul/Aug 1994 & November 1998). Angus Barclay, general manager of CPCS, recalls that the premises at the former space-constrained location comprised three distinct buildings apart from each other, while the entire process of food production and delivery was a logistics nightmare, moving along lines on seven different floors. Now, everything is handled under the same roof, and food needs only two floor-level changes from the time it enters the building as raw material until it departs on meal trays, ready for delivery to aircraft galleys.

The food processing flow

A visit to an in-flight kitchen is always a fascinating experience. Ms Wings Mok, marketing & customer services manager of CPCS, invited *Airways* to follow the sequences of food processing at the company's premises. Wings explains that before any raw ingredient can enter the CPCS kitchen, both quality assurance and warehouse staff—situated on the ground level of the building in its operations area—check that all items in the receiving area comply with the company's high standards. Once accepted, vegetables, fruits, meats, poultry, and fish are dispatched to the respective processing rooms on the third floor production area; here they are checked, washed, and sanitised—to clinical standards—before being processed.

To put into perspective the quantity of food handled, roughly 3,000kg (6,500lb) of fresh fruit—including more than 1,200 melons—are imported and processed by CPCS on a daily basis. Annually, the vast amounts of food and drink handled and processed here translate to 850t (1,874,000lb) of chicken, 480t (1,058,000lb) of fish, 250t (551,000lb) of beef, 80t (176,000lb) of tomatoes, 110t (242,000lb) of lettuce, 71t (156,000lb) of ground coffee, 4.6 million tea bags, 8.2 million sugar tubes, 315,000 eggs—and a cellar housing 1,133,423 bottles of wine.

Bread has always been an important accompaniment in almost all cuisines, and CPCS has its own bakery capable of producing more than 85 items ranging from the simple roll to decorative cakes. Daily, approximately 40,000 assorted rolls and about 12,000 croissants and Danish pastries are baked in the in-house ovens.

All kitchen staff look almost 'surgical' in their attire and cleanliness, with every production area employee having to wear gloves, hairnet, mask, and long protective clothing at all time. Entrées (main courses, for non-US readers) are prepared in the central 'hot kitchen'.





Because approximately 40% of CPCS's daily production are Chinese cuisine main dishes, the company has developed a special 'flaming' hot wok section where cooks replicate restaurant-quality food to please even the most demanding travellers. Besides catering to western palates, CPCS also provides meals that meet specific ethnic, religious, or other dietary needs, eg Japanese, *halal*, kosher, vegetarian, diabetic, etc. All food processed within the premises is strictly non-frozen, and even kosher meals for Israeli carrier El Al are especially freshly produced under rabbinical (?) supervision, whereas other caterers usually rely on frozen produce.



An interesting 'kitchen aid' in this area is the custom-designed omelette-maker. Working in two shifts, two cooks using this prodigious machine produce an average 10,000 omelettes every day.

Once entrées have been cooked they are assembled, along with appetizers, in the dishing section. Here, using sheets with photographs for reference, cooked food is dished out exactly to customers' specifications, using the respective airlines' own china or melamine ware.

HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) procedures are closely applied during each step of the process, with temperatures constantly monitored. The in-house quality assurance department tests, on average, 800 food samples per month, taken randomly from any point along the manufacturing process.

Cold items such as salads, appetizers, and desserts are then pre-set with plates and cutlery on meal trays, again according to the individual airlines' specifications, before trays are placed in meal trolleys. Once the carts are complete, they are sent to the outbound cold rooms and placed in storage for a few hours, before being loaded onboard their assigned flight.

On a parallel track, again at the ground floor operations area, equipment from inbound flights is transferred back to the CPCS building. Once in-house, trolleys are loaded onto the modern Power & Free System, a meal cart transport and storage process, which automatically transfers them to a pre-assigned wash line. All non-disposable catering items such as cutlery, plates, trays, and linen, as well as the meal trolleys themselves, are thoroughly cleaned and sanitised. Meal carts pass through

an automatic car wash-like machine, and are dried automatically. After all pieces of cleaned equipment have been checked, they are placed in special equipment bins or onto the Power & Free System, and sent to either the impressive high bay warehouse storage area, or directly to the working areas, as needed.

In another section of operations, the commissary area handles more than 700 product lines, and an average 750,000 items per day. It ensures that all dry stores needed, such as coffee, teabags, printed items, napkins, etc, for each flight, are replenished in readiness for the next departure, while the cutlery section sorts and packs 300,000 pieces of cutlery every day. In the nearby bonded store, more than 500 different dutiable product lines are handled, including all soft and alcoholic drinks, which need to be chilled in timely fashion before being boarded.





In the final phase of the process, meal trolleys reach the outbound area where they are stored in the dispatch cold rooms. Here, catering coordinators check that the correct number of meals are loaded according to the number of passengers booked, while allowing for any last-minute changes. Trolleys are then placed onto the refrigerated high-loader trucks for loading onto aircraft.

Recognition

If a company's success can be measured by the number of awards and accolades it receives, then CPCS is up there with the front-runners. Having been recognized as best catering supplier for a number of years by carriers like All Nippon Airways, British Airways, El Al, Korean Air, Malaysia Airlines, Qantas, and United Airlines, CPCS has also garnered respect for its environmental performance and social service activities.

Despite the declining yields of the last few years, largely a result of airline cost-cutting, CPCS continues to be profitable because it continually strives for efficiency and excellence, not only in its home base of Hong Kong but also at the kitchens it manages in Taipei, Ho Chi Minh City, Cebu, Vancouver, and Toronto. There are new



challenges to be faced, with the continuing spread of LCCs (low-cost carriers) in Asia as in other parts of the world, but CPCS is undoubtedly well positioned to embrace any new catering trends and policies whilst putting its stamp of service excellence on a new era of air transport. ➔

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