

# MOVING AWAY FROM BLAND

From New Ways Of Ordering To The Food Itself, Operators Are Finding Ways To Spice Things Up

BY ANDREW TELLIJOHN

When jetBlue's Terminal 5 opens at John F. Kennedy International (JFK), passengers will be able to go into a hold room, check menus from several restaurants from their laptops, order their meal and get some work done while a member of the wait staff prepares their food and delivers it to them (Related story, Page 52).

"We are really focusing on making Terminal 5 unlike any airport dining experience," says Karen Mirante, director of business development with **OTG Management**. "Every hold room will be set up this way. ... We've never seen anything like this at an airport before."

While some design details are yet to be worked out with the JFK technology, OTG has begun using similar ordering options at some of its Jet Rock Cafés and Boar's Head Delis. Several of its locations have self-order technology, where passengers can walk up to a touch-screen and order a customized meal, then pick it up without ever dealing with another human.

## TAKING ORGANICS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Organic restaurants have been all the rage in recent years with concepts like French Meadow Bakery, which kicked off at **Minneapolis-St. Paul International** (MSP) and Organic to Go, which is expanding on the West Coast.

Several companies are on board with the move toward organics and are already working to take this trend to the next generation. Vince Modica, senior vice president of concepts and standards with **HMSHost Corp.**, agrees that organic and healthy foods remain among the industry's hottest trends and sustainability in packaging is likely the next big item on the agenda.

The company has its own Los Angeles-based organic concept called Eaterna,



which offers passengers a grab-and-go organic option and as consumers demand it, HMSHost systemwide is presenting healthier options cooked in trans-fat-free oils at many of its restaurants.

Stephen Freibrun, a principal with **SH&E**, says many fast-casual restaurants are breaking in to airports and following the health kick, as well, because it's of interest to customers both young and aging.

"The reason fast casual is taking off is baby boomers who grew up in fast food are now on their 40s, 50s and 60s and have money and now want a high-quality product but still want the convenience and speed of fast food," he says.

"As boomers grow older, health and nutrition become even more important. These issues are also interesting to younger customers who have grown up in a world filled up with better nutritional information," he says. "That's a bit in conflict with stories of us as a country getting fatter."

He noted that several airports are making a push to follow this fresh and health-conscious trend offering items from sandwiches to juices spiked with vitamin boosters.

*Travelers want their airport experience to be as stress-free as possible; Areas USA has introduced concepts such as Vinea, a tapas and wine bar, to provide such comforts for its customers.*

While organic has been catching on for a couple of years, the next evolution of that trend is going to extend into product packaging. HMSHost has a team of employees examining the company's packaging, looking for more environmentally friendly options and discussing how their ideas might work with airport authorities.

Wholesale changes are a ways off because many airports don't yet have systems in place to handle some new packaging options, but it's not going away.

"Besides being something that the community is looking for, we believe it is the right thing to do," Modica says.

## FOOD, PERSONALITIES CREATING ATMOSPHERE

Minneapolis, Minn.-based **Architectural Alliance** spent six months studying the Restaurant of the Future, an exhibit the company unveiled at a hospitality show

last year. As part of its research, firm officials uncovered several characteristics and trends they think are or will soon be affecting the industry.

Sherry Cooper, a principal with the firm, agrees that as baby boomers live longer and become more knowledgeable about diabetes, food allergies, heart disease and other special dietary needs, it's a natural that people are becoming more health conscious.

But that doesn't mean the diners of the future are going to settle for bland food and beverages. April Meyer, a senior associate with the firm, says sushi, Thai, Asian, Greek and other flavorful offerings are becoming king at airports.

"Bland is totally out," she says. "People do not find themselves looking for bland, tasteless food. They want a variety of food offerings."

One way HMSHost has attempted to meet this demand is by bringing already-popular chefs to the airport. Its arrangement with Wolfgang Puck started the movement several years ago and the company has been expanding on that, utilizing local talent in several markets not only to help create notoriety, but for menu planning purposes as well. That appeals to the airport passenger that may have heard of chefs like David Wilhelm at **John Wayne** (SNA) in Orange County and Todd English in the Northeast.

"A lot of people have heard of them but never had a chance to experience them," Modica says. "We are in constant dialogue with the chefs."

SH&E's Freibrun says he hopes U.S. airports start taking that concept up a notch, following off-airport restaurants by using chefs to create dining environments with theater and flavor. Diners desire entertainment and experience almost as much as their meals in many cases and the U.S. has lagged behind European restaurants in capitalizing on such desires, he says.

He cites Gordon Ramsay's fine dining restaurant that became a hit at **London Heathrow's** (LHR) Terminal 5.

## Dual-Branded Café, Newsstand Propels Hudson Into Food, Beverage

Mario DiDomizio got lucky when it came to starting the Hudson News/Euro Café airport brand. John Huss, the owner of the café, had planned to partner with **Westfield Concession Management** to open a location at **Washington Dulles International** (IAD) eight years ago, but at that point **HMSHost Corp.** had an exclusive food and beverage contract at the airport.

DiDomizio had been experimenting with the idea of combining a bakery with a newsstand location and he had a space next door to where Huss had wanted to open.

The two talked and decided to combine the site, which worked because the projected percentage split between food and retail sales was allowable without violating HMSHost's contract.

The result has been a popular dual-branded concept that won the ARN Best New Food and Beverage Award in 2000

and has been expanding across U.S. airports ever since.

"Mario liked it and wanted to start growing it," says Tom Kornacki, senior vice president of food and beverage for **Hudson Group**.

The key to success is finding a strong, local bakery partner that can provide fresh product daily. Some airports like the tie so much that Hudson has branded the concept after the local bakery rather than as the Euro Café, but the mix and strategy remain.

Hudson has also established Aeromart, a newsstand combined with a convenience store, that is in 13 airport locations and also expanding. That's often smaller and fits well into airports that need less food but more grab-and-go options.

"Our preference is to deliver to the airport what best suits their customer's needs," Kornacki says.

Between the Euro Café and Aeromart, the

company has found a growth engine that also allows Hudson to gain some footing in the food and beverage side of concessions in a small-scale way, Kornacki says.

But it is going to grow. Hudson just opened new Euro Cafes in **Ted Stevens Anchorage International** (ANC) and **Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall** (BWI), and has won a second location at **Vancouver International** (YVR) and a first at **Atlantic City International** (ACY).

Between Euro Café and Aeromart, Hudson will have more than 50 locations by year-end and the company's goal is to reach 100 units over about a five-year period. In addition to Kornacki, the company has a staff of four regional district managers and a vice president of food operations handling this growth.

The concepts also have helped Hudson build expertise in the food and beverage industry. The company now has food contracts in three small airports and plans to expand its presence in that side of the concessions.

"We're very interested in expanding into that line of business," Kornacki says.



*Hudson Group has combined its traditional Hudson News concept with a café offering breakfast, light meals and snacks, giving passengers a one-stop shop. The company expects to expand the Hudson News/Euro Café concept over the next few years.*



**International** (MIA) with a “welcoming atmosphere that makes travelers feel at home while serving traditional, homemade, freshly prepared foods,” Rabell says.

Its other concepts include Gloria Estefan’s Bongos Cuban Café, also open at MIA, and Vinea, a wine and tapas location that will soon premier at **Orlando International** (MCO).

“Areas USA is always striving to be in tune with its customers’ wants and needs,” Rabell says.

### SOME WANT UBER PREMIUM, SOME WANT UBER ... DOUGHNUT

In addition to wanting entertainment, Freibrun says business passengers especially are looking for uber-premium dining environments. While that used to be a pipe dream in the airport, restaurants such as Anthony’s, a top-notch seafood eatery at **Seattle Tacoma International** (SEA), helped put white tablecloth restaurants on the airport map.

“A passenger that doesn’t eat a hot dog when they are off airport doesn’t come to the airport and decide, ‘I want a hot dog,’” Freibrun says. “The level of service and quality of food they desire or demand

*HMSHost is in the organics game with a concept called Eaturna, which offers passengers healthy grab-and-go options.*

when they are off airport in their everyday life is the same desire and demand when they are at the airport. It doesn’t change.”

Architectural Alliance’s Meyer agrees and says she believes the trend isn’t limited to the business traveler. All travelers want personalized experiences, even if it’s just being able to choose the music they listen to at their table.

“Everyone wants to be a rock star,” she says. “Everyone wants to feel special.”

When diners still want a decent meal but they don’t have the time to sit down for an hour or more, that’s where one-stop shops have grown in popularity.

**The Hudson Group** several years ago teamed up with John Huss to create the Hudson News/Euro Café, a brand that has grown to more than 20 airport stores (see sidebar). There, people can buy magazines and a meal or snack.

Even Dunkin’ Donuts has added an all-day menu and it’s entered the dual-focused concept as well, teaming with **The Paradies Shops** recently to open



two TravelMart/Dunkin’ Donuts stores at **Southwest Florida International** (RSW). Paradies plans to add more as early as this summer.

“The Paradies Shops has been looking for the right opportunity to expand its services to include food and beverage,” says Lou Bottino, chief operating officer. “Combining a Dunkin’ Donuts operation with our TravelMart concept felt like a natural area of growth for our company, while at the same time providing our company with the ability to deliver the same level of first-class service to another part of our business.”

*We’d like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Andrew Tellijohn at [andrew@airportrevenue.com](mailto:andrew@airportrevenue.com).*

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