

SKY DINING

Design, engineering and testing are integral to aviation success. That goes for the food, too! From taste to toast to the washing-up, we look at how produce, technology and logistics become fine dining at 30,000 feet.

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IT'S LUNCHTIME at Neil Perry's Burger Project in Sydney's World Square, and the queue snakes past the restaurant and down a long flight of stairs. Perry and staff flip burgers, call for supplies and pass plates of grass-fed beef burgers with kim chi, whole chicken wings with Szechuan pepper, little buckets of chips, and Valrhona chocolate ice-cream to the hungry food reviewers. One customer is astounded to see the pony-tailed chef at the helm. "You don't expect Neil Perry to actually be here," he says.

Actually, you do. It's that attention to detail that has propelled the self-confessed control freak to the position of one of Australia's most-awarded chefs. Perry effectively established the identity of modern Australian cuisine with his landmark Rockpool restaurant in Sydney

in 1989. Less than a decade later, he was approached by Qantas to create some signature recipes. He didn't exactly jump at the chance. "I thought, that's not really going to do either of our brands any good, because I'm a control freak," says Perry, whose empire today comprises Rockpool Bar and Grill, Spice Temple and Rosetta as well as the new Burger Project. "They rang me back a couple of days later and asked, 'What would it take?' I said it would require staff and that I wanted to do the whole menu in First Class."

Qantas agreed and soon expanded Rockpool's role to the meal services in Business and Business lounges. Perry quickly infused Qantas catering with his philosophy of quality, preparation and service. Today, Qantas is acclaimed for its innovations in lounge >

Spice Temple-inspired salad of tingling prawns, tofu and Sichuan pepper (summer menu for Business and First flights from Australia)





Qantas Centre of Service Excellence training facility, Sydney

and inflight catering. If the secret to good food is fresh ingredients, culinary skill and careful preparation, few meals can boast the qualifications of those served to Qantas' First and Business customers. Each dish is the product of premium produce suppliers, often exclusive to Qantas, and up to nine months of testing and development by a dedicated division of the Rockpool Group. A team of seven from Rockpool Consulting is embedded full-time at Qantas. They're most likely to be found testing menus and training staff among Qantas' four domestic Q Catering centres, its 24 international catering providers, or at the airline's impressive \$10m Centre of Service Excellence training facility in Sydney.

"Rockpool is part of the fabric of Qantas," says Kylie Morris, Head of Creative Development and Customer Experience at Qantas. "We're bedding them more and more into what we do. Think about it. Neil doesn't get to survive and earn 100 chef's hats in this challenging industry without being a savvy businessman."

Perry's overhaul of the First menu introduced a multitude of cultural influences, reflecting the endlessly curious and peripatetic chef's own tastes. But Perry insists his Qantas strategy has been built on four simple cornerstones: bread, cheese, fruit and salads. "Those things were not well looked-after in planes before, and I believed if I got those things right, then a beautiful, simple entree and main course would follow. It's been about less-is-more, and focusing on the quality of the actual product. Generosity isn't the number of things you give, it's the quality of what you give."

Many people accept that the pressurised atmosphere of an airliner's cabin conspires against fine food. Perry, who is surprisingly *au fait* with the science of cabin humidity – "I do a lot more with Qantas than design menus" – doesn't buy it. "Food is marginally different when you taste it in the sky. But if something tastes great on the ground,

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it tastes pretty bloody good in the sky as well! I think it's just a cop-out from bad caterers, bad menu planners and airlines that don't really understand that food is so important to their customers."

Qantas spends millions annually on more than 1500 Australian food and beverage suppliers. But sourcing the best produce is merely the entree. Qantas' greatest innovation was as complex as it was simple: cooking in the sky.

Just consider toast. "Toast is one of the hardest things to execute; most airlines just reheat it," says Kylie Morris. "We put toasters in, which sounds really easy, but to design a toaster that is certified to use on an aircraft..."

The device is fitted to the galleys of Qantas A380s and 747-400s, usually near a similarly scientific sandwich press and one (or two) space-efficient espresso machines. Morris signs the cheques for the toasters. "It's actually an engineering device and costs about as much as a car. Anything 'airline' means adding a few more zeroes."

Bringing near fine-dining preparation and service to the sky requires enormous and ongoing investment in equipment, systems, training and people. Perry's big idea was that the proteins – fish, meat and poultry – could be seared in advance and the cooking completed in the sky. Accompanying starches, sauces and vegetables are ▶

Stir-fried king abalone mushroom with Shanghai noodles and broccoli (summer menu on Business flights from Australia to Narita); Neil Perry (right)



also cooked, each food type in its assigned oven. Some vegetables, such as spinach, are blanched on board. “The crew went from taking a reheated meal out of the oven, to actually cooking and plating,” Perry says.

“At the same time, we took the menu from one entree and three main courses, to four small plates and five main plates. It required a complete rethink of how we deliver it and how it’s put together on the ground.”

The Galley Management System groups each dish’s components with colour-coded foils and cards, while onboard cookbooks and galley guides provide the crew with further references. Perry is in awe of the enthusiasm and efficiency of Qantas’ crew, as many flights depart Australia at breakfast or lunchtime. “In Business, you’ve got 65 or 70 people who immediately want to engage in the food service,” Perry says. “I know that if an entire restaurant filled up at once, all my chefs would freak out!”

Qantas cabin crew members such as Jacqueline Plant, a Sommelier on the A380, have been imbued with an appreciation of fine food. “I enjoy connecting with our customers and frequent flyers who look forward to new menus each season and new wines, and being able to share the stories behind what we serve on board our aircraft,” she says.

Kylie Morris adds: “On an A380 with 64 people in Business, two galley operators produce the food and give it to the crew who deliver it to the passenger. We are like a restaurant in the sky.”

International First and Business menus are updated every three months, taking into account seasonal produce and the types of fresh produce available to each of the 24 catering centres worldwide. The menus for the First and Business lounges must complement those in the air. The tally is in excess of 1400 new dishes written every year. Teaching and maintaining the Qantas-Rockpool standard keeps six

members of the team jetting around the world for 40 weeks each year. A typical visit to a catering centre occupies three days.

“We use very delicate items and there are ways of handling and preparing food that are unique to Qantas, so we do a lot of training,” Morris says. “And we eat a lot of food! You have to go to the gym in the morning because you’re going to try 200 meals that day.”

There is method in this madness. “We want to be famous for two things: food and service,” says Morris. “And with us, it’s like a new restaurant is being created every few months.”

Qantas First and Business lounges are already at restaurant-rivalling status. In Los Angeles, Singapore and Hong Kong, chefs prepare meals at live stations, cooking and plating food in front of guests. In the air, Qantas serves more than 450 First and 5000 Business meals every day on international flights. A single Sydney-LA A380 flight is loaded with 40,000 items, including more than 5000 pieces of cutlery, 2500 glasses/tumblers, and 100 meal carts.

Afterwards, there’s the washing-up. More than six million Qantas napkins and 2.6 million tablecloths are laundered each year. Shipping containers are despatched every week to retrieve far-flung linen, blankets, pillows, cutlery, trays and glassware.

The process of refining everything loaded on board, including the individual menu items is never-ending. Qantas crew maintain a continuous conversation via a dedicated app, providing feedback after every flight on the take-up of different meal and drink options. This allows loadings to be adjusted and keeps everyone informed. All the way up to the culinary control freak.