

On tour: A sense of inclusion with Sky Chefs

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A warm welcome for *PAX International* in Chicago

CHICAGO, USA—Greetings from a late-September day in Chicago, USA. I'm breaking all journalistic rules by inserting myself directly into the story, writing from the first-person perspective—but I can't help but think this is the best way to share everything I learned on my first-ever airline catering kitchen tour yesterday. After five years in this industry, I finally had the absolute pleasure to see it all in person.



Rob Mower, General Manager (left), and Dana Gill, Head of Marketing and Communications, Latin and North America, at the customer centre in Chicago

The tour

I met with Rob Mower, General Manager, at the Chicago facility in the afternoon, just as staff was switching over from morning to evening shift. Despite being end of shift, there was still an uplifted and efficient energy about the place.

Located in Des Plaines, a Chicago suburb about six kilometres from Chicago O'Hare (ORD), the facility employs nearly 1,000 people and produces between 10,000 to 12,000 meals per day, Mower says, pointing out that it operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Rob Mower, General Manager (left) and *PAX International's* Jane Hobson during the facility tour

The facility, opened in 2015, boasts 130,000 square feet; 100,000 square feet on the main floor where production and storage happens, and 30,000 square feet on the second floor which houses the customer centre, offices, cafeteria and change rooms.

We start the tour on the main floor. All of the rooms are temperature controlled for optimal health and safety.

First in the large storage area, we walk through aisles storing food, drink, tableware and linens for the caterer's seven customers, organized and sorted onto several tall shelves. Suppliers and distributors deliver the products to the Sky Chef's facility where it is separated for flight orders. There is an ambient storage and deep-frozen storage section.

Next, Mower leads us to the dishwashing station. Thousands of products come through this area daily, directly off galley carts to be washed, sanitized and put back into production for the airline's next flight.

Finally, we move into the food prep area, first suiting up in jackets and hair nets and passing through the sanitizing station. Here, anything from breakfast plates to dinner entrees are cooked and plated according to the airline specification, using their serveware and packed into their trays and galleys.

After this, we see the beverage trays section where staff are diligently restocking. It takes just three minutes to completely restock the tray. Mower says it is likely the same trays are in and out of the facility on the same day.

The stocked galley carts are then moved to the storage room—a lineup of carts ready for final check before being loaded onto the trucks and delivered to ORD.



Chef Fernando Balsano, Executive Chef at LSG Sky Chefs (left), and *PAX International's* Jane Hobson

The food

The final leg of our tour brings us back upstairs to the warmth of the customer centre. Chef Fernando Balsano, Executive Chef at LSG Sky Chefs, presents a six-course dinner. It starts with radicchio salad, crisp and crunchy with a light but flavourful vinaigrette. Course two is an absolutely delightfully fresh eggplant ceviche, complete with cilantro and served under a smoking glass cloche.



Course three: baby beet tartare

The next course is a baby beet tartare, with yellow and purple beets with a gentle earthy flavour, followed by a rich and robust mushroom ravioli with mushroom foam and warm, bright green asparagus sauce poured on top. Course five is the citrusy, sweet lime raspberry sorbet, followed up with the sixth and final course of ice cream with Chef Balsano's infamous dulce de leche. It is impossible to tell you which course was my favourite—they were all exquisite. Never ever have I felt so welcome, so taken care of.



Course one: radicchio salad

The learnings

While we eat, we discuss the sense of inclusion that LSG Sky Chefs Americas weaves into its company culture. As we walked the facility, Mower was greeted excitedly by nearly every employee, with smiles, fist bumps and high-fives. I felt this sense of inclusion myself. And not because I was invited (and required) to wear the Sky Chefs visitor jacket and hair net, but because people were greeting me too as we wandered busy rooms. In the beverages section, employees were laughing, enjoying the last few minutes of their shifts.

As I write this, I am still pondering the experience. It was impressive to see—and to learn—how all the small, moving parts, each with meticulous attention to detail and regulation, come together time and time again, with few imperfections, to create an inflight experience for passengers that makes them feel welcome, taken care of and included.

I could feel the purpose, the creation, the dance and the joy as we walked through the facility. That is how I sum up LSG Sky Chef's operation in Chicago. It is an airline catering facility, yes, but it is also much more.