gategourmet's culinary team discusses the rising request for special meals

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Oliver Fischer, Director for Culinary Excellence, gategroup (left) and Chef Dave Minten, Regional Executive Chef, APAC, gategourmet

The airline catering industry is an incredibly fast-paced business where changes occur steadily and the business itself evolves even faster. From specific meat choices to an absence of meat altogether, and from dietary requirements to medical restrictions, the culinary teams at gategourmet take all of this into account when crafting special meals.

“Not only do these meals have to satisfy the passenger’s needs, but they must also be interesting, delicious, and something to remember,” says Chef Dave Minten, gategourmet Regional Executive Chef, APAC, who oversees choices made for special meals. His experience in retail and hotel equips him with fascinating insights into the latest food trends. He says recent data shows an increase of 30 percent in passengers pre-ordering meals.

“In hotels or restaurants, you can meet the guest and talk to them directly, work together. But with airline catering, it’s a meal ordered online, and you must deliver that without meeting them. The directions are way more specified, and they need to be very clear, because you don’t have that personal interaction,” he explains.

For airline catering, gategourmet’s culinary team says special meals can be categorized into several varieties: religious meals, medical meals, lifestyle meals and children meals.

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Religious meals
Religious meals must meet certain criteria due to religious beliefs. This includes halal, one of the most requested special meals according to Minten, and kosher, along with any other direct requests from passengers.

Halal meals make up to 80 percent of religious meals that gategourmet produces. The caterer has 26 Malaysian halal certified kitchens across its units globally, a certification that requires the highest level of quality and assurance.

“With airline partners that fly to and from the Middle East, carrying millions of Muslim passengers, we are responsible for making sure those passengers receive the highest quality meals that meet their religious requirements and culinary expectations,” explains Minten.



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In a typical month, gategourmet can prepare and send aboard up to 30,000 halal meals per day from its kitchens globally. Some of its partners, including its latest Qatar Airways, offer a full menu of halal options where no special request is necessary. With these menus, gategourmet chefs get to flex their creative muscles, crafting up delicious, memorable meals that respect the rules and beliefs of the passenger. This creativity is also adapted for other special meals, as the chefs continually look for new and exciting ways to present options to the airline customer.

“To accommodate the requirements for kosher meals, not only do we acquire certified kosher products—we currently have four kosher kitchens in our units at Toronto, Canada and Boston, USA—but we have a rabbi on staff in the kitchens to oversee the preparations and in some cases, do the actual purchasing of ingredients,” says Minten.

Medical meals
Medical meals are extremely important as the guidelines and rules for these meals must be followed or there could be health repercussions for the passenger. These most often include gluten-free,

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lactose-free and specific food allergen options. No salt, low fat or low carb meals are easier to prepare and experiment with, but with specific allergens, it can be tricky for chefs to find new and exciting dishes to prepare. However, as newer products are produced with more specific allergens in mind, gategourmet crafts new solutions that are both safe for the passenger and delicious, Minten says.

Lifestyle meals
Lifestyle meals are meals that have restrictions or guidelines based on choices a person makes. This includes vegetarian and vegan and can sometimes include gluten-free when it is not chosen for medical reasons. Minten tells *PAX International* the most popular special meal that gategourmet serves is the Asian Vegetarian Meal.

“It covers a lot of bases for lifestyle meal requests, as well as other special requests. Currently, we see around 30 percent of special meal requests falling under this category,” he says.



gategourmet produces innovative and delicious special meals for passengers

Children meals
Children meals are special meals for the very young passengers on flights. Minten says offering quality children meals is an opportunity to build brand loyalty from a young age.

“Together with our airline partners, we want to give these children a wonderful experience, especially if it is their first time flying. They should enjoy the experience, get excited about not only flying but having a special meal onboard as well. Something that is both healthy and delicious. When we can give them that experience, not only does it make them smile now, but they will remember it in the future when they decide which airlines to fly with.”

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Looking to the future

Based on his past work with five star-plus hotel groups where he created menus that were up to 30 to 35 percent vegan or vegetarian, Minten says he hopes to see airline catering move in the same direction.

“These dishes were incorporated directly into the menu, not just as a separate part. It’s part of the vision to have meals like this that use sustainable practices.”

Furthermore, he says the airline catering industry should focus more on making special meals truly special. To encourage this, gategourmet invites its chefs to continually present ideas for enhancing special meal options.

Oliver Fischer, gategroup’s Director for Culinary Excellence, adds that there are already plenty of airlines that offer menus with meals that would be considered “special requests” but are readily available without a special order. He says eventually, airline menus will ideally be able to offer passengers all three options as standard: meat, fish and vegetarian.

“We see that around seven to 10 percent of passengers on intercontinental flights order special meals. Going forward that number will rise, and we will continue to meet the demand, crafting new, innovative and delicious meals for passengers, making them feel like the special ones, not the meals,” Fischer says.

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