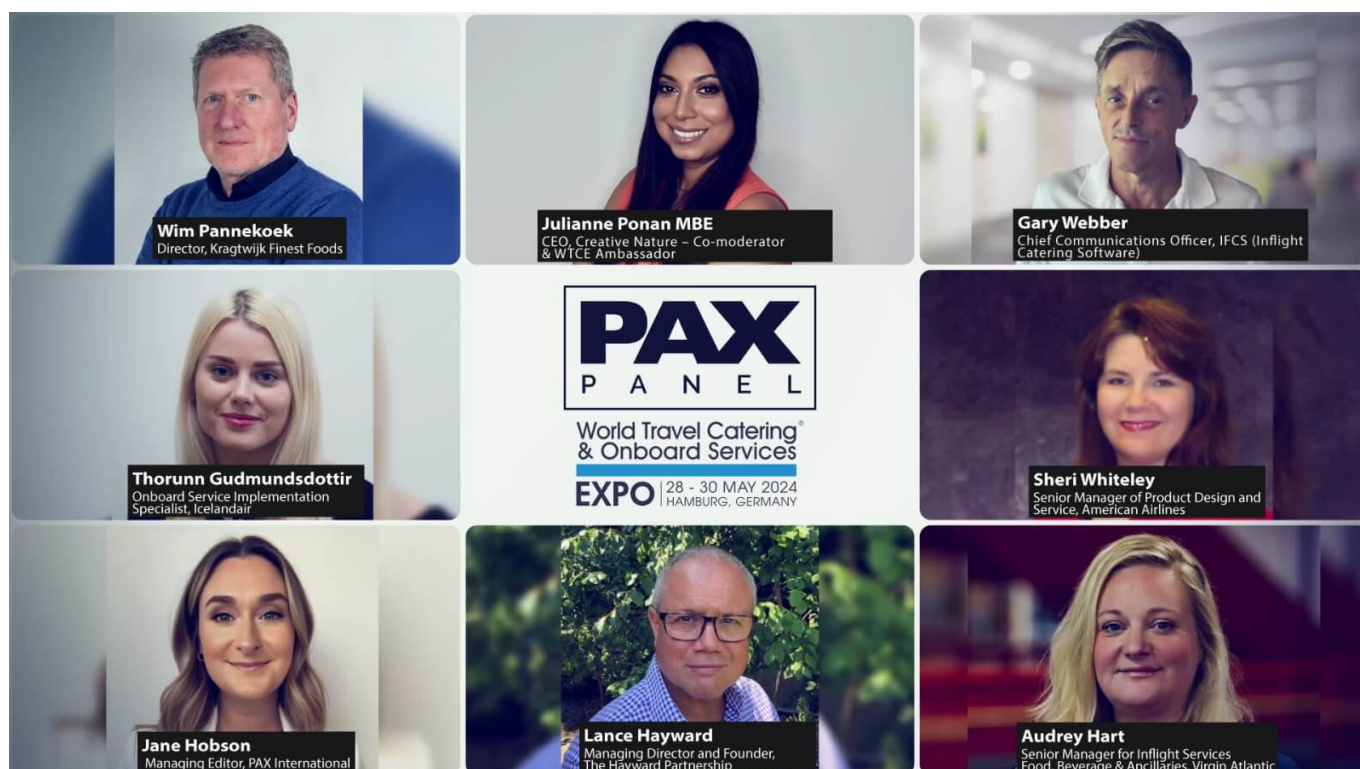


PAX Panel: Examining special meals with industry experts



The conversation around special meals is a complex and compelling one as airlines and caterers seek to delight passengers while keeping them safe and nourished. This spring, PAX Panel and WTCE ([World Travel Catering & Onboard Services Expo](#)) partnered to bring a group of industry experts together for an in-depth discussion on how airlines and suppliers can elevate special meals programs, keeping in mind dietary restrictions, allergies and lifestyle choices.

PAX International's Managing Editor Jane Hobson co-moderates the panel with Julianne Ponan MBE, CEO, [Creative Nature](#) and WTCE Ambassador. Panelists include Sheri Whiteley, Senior Manager of Product Design and Service, [American Airlines](#); Gary Webber, Chief Communications Officer, [Inflight Catering Software](#); Lance Hayward, [The Hayward Partnership](#); Wim Pannekoek, Director, [Kragtwijk Finest Foods](#); Thorunn Gudmundsdottir, Onboard Service Implementation Specialist, [Icelandair](#); and Audrey Hart, Senior Manager for Inflight Services Food, Beverage & Ancillaries at [Virgin Atlantic](#).

The panel focuses on the challenges of special meals, the opportunities they present, the role of passenger expectations and the possible future of special meals catering. Below is a snapshot of what is covered in the discussion—watch the virtual roundtable to hear it all!

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Challenges of special meals

Special meal programs are not a new concept, but they are evolving. While there are codes in place for identifying special meal requirements, new and complex food allergies and health conditions are introducing meal intersections, forcing airlines and caterers to change their approach. For example, a passenger may need a meal that is gluten-free, dairy-free and low-FODMAP due to allergies and lifestyle choice, but it may not be possible to request all three requirements when selecting their special meal.

Another challenge is the logistics of delivering the special meal to the passenger in the cabin.

“You've got to have clear information coming through,” says Hayward. “You know who the passenger is, what flight they're on, their name. It can all be labelled clearly. Ideally, you know where they're sitting as well.”

It is a long chain of communication, explains Virgin Atlantic's Hart.

“There are multiple stakeholders in the supply chain. There is complexity in the fulfillment, with multiple food handlers throughout that journey. There is a significant lack of alignment at the global scale in standards, regulation and practices,” she says. Nonetheless, she adds, special meals can no longer be a side thought for caterers and airlines given the scale at which demand is growing.

Icelandair's Gudmundsdottir agrees that from selecting a special meal to actually receiving it on board remains an obstacle that can affect not just the passenger, but the inflight crew as well.

“We want to meet the needs of our passengers, but at the same time, we also want to deal with this on the ground and not on board. We don't want to put our cabin crew in the position of having an unhappy passenger,” she explains.

Anticipating passenger needs for satisfaction

Webber, of Inflight Catering Software, points out that forecasting using AI is a tool that all airlines and caterers should take advantage of.

“It's incredible what just two or three meals per flight does to your bottom line when it goes in the garbage and you're doing hundreds of flights a day. It's amazing, it's millions of dollars annually,” Webber says. “We have not seen an airline yet that is doing well with special meals unless they've got a pre-order [system].”

For both Virgin Atlantic and American Airlines, referencing historical data as a supplement to the pre-order system proves to be a step in the right direction.

Whiteley says AA relies on forecasting for routinely placing special meals on specific routes.

“We do have protein and vegetarian options as standard, but we have some routes where we have to put a couple of kosher meals on—and they are above and beyond,” she says. This is necessary since some passengers do not use the pre-order option.

Building passenger confidence

The challenge with special meals also extends to instilling confidence and ensuring passenger safety. As Creative Nature’s Ponan knows all too well, flying with severe allergies, like anaphylaxis, means relying on labelling and delivery of special meals.

Hayward adds, “There is a duty of care aspect to this whole thing. [What responsibility does the airline have,] when the first thing they say when you get on board the aircraft is ‘We are here for your safety.’ You’ve got people who are fairly vulnerable—has the airline done everything in their power to make sure that person is catered for? This is not a lifestyle choice.”

Pannekoek agrees, pointing out the difference between products with gluten-free labels versus products that are certified gluten-free and contained in a gluten-free environment until they reach the passenger.

Beyond protecting passengers with dietary restrictions, airlines and caterers are also tasked with providing an inflight dining experience that feels inclusive, even when the meal itself is different than those of other passengers. At Icelandair, this is a huge consideration when creating special meals.

“We want them to feel happy with the tray they are receiving, and at the same time, of course, feeling safe and feeling the trust with us that they can consume the meal,” Gudmundsdottir explains.

The future of special meals

Ponan asks the panel if a solution could be more inclusive special meal codes and reducing common allergens from the airline menu altogether. For example, she suggests replacing sesame oil with sunflower oil to be suitable for more people.

“Most of our passengers are lifestyle-related vegetarian or vegan. Perhaps we can play around a little bit with the ingredients instead the codes that are medically related or the gluten-free codes,” Gudmundsdottir says, “We have been working closely with our cabin crew and passengers to find a good balance there recently.”

“I can’t wait to see how this grows in the industry over the next two to three years, as the previous five years have been quite tough to get people to listen and understand that there really is a need for special meals,” Ponan says.