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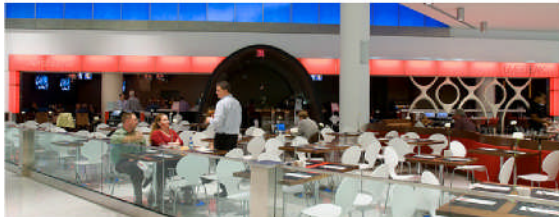
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Can Airport Food Get Off the Ground?

After some early snags, new restaurants at JFK show promise

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Rebecca McAlpin for The Wall Street Journal
Restaurants at Terminal 5, the JetBlue Terminal at JFK Airport in New York.

New York

While the economy continued to crash, JetBlue opened Terminal 5, its big and bright new headquarters, here last week at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Although flights departed mostly on time, the classy restaurants around the central atrium left us travelers impatient with their bumpy takeoffs and hoping for happier landings.

In a comic debut, kitchens around the central atrium couldn't cook hot food, because a fire alarm had cut off of gas to their stoves. Computers went down with regularity, making credit card transactions glacial, even after new hires figured out how to use systems they had apparently never seen before. Waitstaff were equally clueless about the complex menu items they had never served or even tasted. Larders were half full. But good cheer reigned, as barmen traded bottle openers and wine-fridge keys with next-door colleagues, items as scarce in these spanking new hostelries as the wild mushrooms and *huitlacoche* (corn fungus) advertised

as a quesadilla filling at the Mexican saloon *Revolucion*.

But everyone, or almost everyone, I observed on that unhappy day for the terminal's food service contractor, OTG Management, was cheerful and patient. No tarmac tantrums at T5, even when you couldn't get a cold dessert at *FiveSteak*, the meat place boasting a 24-ounce porterhouse for \$59. Sushi chefs at *Deep.Blue* sliced their meager supply of fish with resignation, and apologetic table servers scavenged soy sauce packets from less august providers of Japanese cuisine elsewhere in the building. You couldn't get lasagne at the Italian bistro *AeroNuova* (whose display menu advertised "lasanga" with porcini mushrooms), or much of anything else, except wine and liquor.

Yes, there was plenty of alcohol with which travelers -- and executives at OTG -- could drown their frustration. By my count, T5 currently contains 11 full-service bars, some of them in restaurants, others integrated directly into departure gates. The terminal opened with 21 of its 26 gates running, and many fully-functional Illy espresso bars, as well as a conventional fastfood food court and omnipresent *Cibo* stores selling carry-on yogurts, sandwiches and the like.

But if you wanted to get a hot and ambitious lunch, as promised in a din of pre-opening hype by the airline, *Piquillo* was your only bet. By some magic, this Barcelona-style tapas bar managed to cook, while its bigger and brassier neighbors threw in the napkin. Kenia, my server, fetched exemplary earthenware casseroles of Catalonia's version of *cannelloni* (

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canelones), along with up-pepping tripe (*callos*). There were three kinds of sherry. So, olé for Piquillo.

Despite all this starting friction in the rest of the restaurant mini-empire at JFK, we went home hungry but pretty sure that OTG, a Philadelphia firm known especially for decent food and reasonable prices in its Cibo Express concessions in airports across the nation, would right its new, glossy behemoth. Going way upscale for T5, OTG had wrangled together some glamorous modern menus to help JetBlue fliers in the age of security and traffic delays pass their stranded hours in the sterile zone. And the army of ID-sporting managers who at times seemed to outnumber passengers on that first day was not likely to let an uncontrollable gas interruption, inexplicable food shortages or the almost totally untrained front-of-the-house staffs in its restaurants keep it from getting its glitzy show on the road, PDQ.

So we booked another flight a week later (last Wednesday), and made the rounds of the T5 sterile zone once again. And we are happy to report that most of the rough places were now smooth. There were still no wild mushrooms or corn smut in the otherwise excellent quesadillas at Revolucion. A tiny French bistro-bar La Vie, (so unpatronized you had to resist the temptation to call it La Mort) couldn't make creme caramel and had no coffeemaker yet.

But generally things were looking up. AeroNuova delivered its porcini lasagne (correctly spelled on the computerized bill) hot and tasty, with real porcini. The designer pizzas looked as svelte as the slices at Spago.

They didn't have the jumbo porterhouse at Sivesteak yet, but the equally hefty 24-ounce cowboy (bone-in) ribsteak was more than I could eat; it was nicely charred and arrived speedily enough to satisfy someone with a plane to make. The Béarnaise sauce had all the classic elements, and made me forget I had first thought to order a tangy Argentine chimichurri sauce that was on the menu but not available.



Rebecca McAlpin for The Wall Street Journal

Deep.Blue, a sushi restaurant.

Most impressive of all were the banks of touch-screen monitors that allow travelers to order food out by the gates, which really do work. I punched in a panino with prosciutto and fig/sweet-onion marmelade, which arrived in less than 10 minutes as advertised. It was hot, and the jam contrasted nicely with the ham. Neurotic jetties like me can now confidently fortify themselves for their all-snack flight with something much better and more filling, while keeping a weather eye and ear on their gate.

For those with more time and more inner calm, I am happy to say that the attentive crew at Deep.Blue now has tubs of soy sauce to dispense, and their whole menu seemed on line, including such exotica as kobe-foie gras meatballs and kobe fried rice with chilies, both of which cried out for more seasoning, but, hey, wait until next week.

In the meantime, you can take the probably shrewder course and stick with Deep.Blue's excellent raw fish or refresh your palate with a cruet of its icy, clean Hawk of the Heavens sake. Three ounces of this splendid potion will send you off to the Blue skies with the confident swoop of a raptor ready for flight.

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