

## Travel

### Grabbing a Bite Between Flights



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Piquillo, a tapas bar in Terminal 5 of Kennedy Airport in New York.

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MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT is a dim, crowded, low-ceilinged affair, a J-shaped belt punctuated by security zones and boutiques hawking ersatz Cuban souvenirs, with all the appeal and glamour of a shopping mall that can't quite pay its electric bills. It is not a place where you hope to eat well.

And yet, on a layover in early November, I hoped. Though lacking in atmosphere, the Miami airport is much like Miami itself, with Cuban restaurants and cafes strewn throughout the

complex. Finding an excellent specimen of the Cuban sandwich — roast pork, ham and Swiss cheese with pickles on a roll, panini-pressed into gooey, crispy deliciousness — should, I figured, be easy.

Hardly. At Bongos Cuban Café, a sleek sandwich bar owned by Gloria Estefan, the Cubano was well-pressed but devoid of flavor. At the Casa Bacardi lounge, it was inedibly dry — which was probably the point. The drier your mouth, the more Bacardi rum mojitos you'll consume.

By the time I reached La Carreta, I was nearly in despair. Sure, this outpost of a Miami mini-chain looked appropriately shacklike, with a stand-up coffee counter and a cheap-looking backlit menu that included a host of tropical-fruit shakes. It certainly felt like Little Havana. But I'd been fooled before.

Not this time. The roast pork was juicy, garlicky and chock-full of real roasted flavor, and the cheese tasted as if it had actually been produced from the milk of a cow. La Carreta's was a Cubano I would happily eat "off-campus," as airline employees refer to the world outside the airport, even though the bread was oddly chewy and I wanted more pickles. Then again, I always want more pickles.

No one likes to eat in airports, but eat in airports we must, since we're spending more time there than ever. Around one in four air passengers experienced trip delays averaging an hour and 54 minutes in 2007, according to a report from the Center for Air Transportation Systems Research at George Mason University. And it only gets worse during the holidays, said Lance Sherry, the center's executive director, since airlines are running at maximum capacity and therefore can't easily recover from delays and cancellations.

"Small delays will have a big impact," he said.

At the same time, he added, the airports "perverse" benefit from the delays. By offering cheap leases to airlines, he said, the airports have to make money somehow, and they do so through concessions. Which is why that ice-cold turkey sandwich costs \$9, the bottle of water is \$3, and the delays never seem to get any shorter.

"They're incentivized to keep passengers longer," Professor Sherry said.

Still, there are bright points. In October, JetBlue opened a striking new food court in Terminal 5 of Kennedy Airport in New York (more on that later), and with another holiday season

approaching, it seemed appropriate to see if good restaurants might exist in other American airports, perhaps overshadowed by the Cinnabons and Sbarros but producing honest, edible food nonetheless. And so, over the course of four days, I flew between some of the nation's biggest hubs — Atlanta, Miami, Chicago, Dallas-Forth Worth, Los Angeles and, in New York, La Guardia and Kennedy, which together accounted for about 400 million passengers in 2007, according to Airports Council International, an airport trade group — and tried to discover food worth eating. But what to seek out? And how to find it?

First, I wanted to ignore the big chains and focus instead on local food. Each of these cities has a strong, distinctive food culture, and I hoped this would come through in the airports. Plus, I reasoned, local employees might have a greater connection to the local cuisine and thus a certain pride in seeing it done right.

By this measure, Dallas-Forth Worth International Airport was exemplary, with not one but three Texas-style barbecue joints, all branches of off-campus stalwarts. Cousin's Bar-B-Q was easily my favorite — the brisket had just the right balance of meat, fat and chewy, charred burnt bits — while Dickey's Barbecue Pit, whose brisket was watery and ribs dry, made an intriguingly spiced hot link. Only Railhead BBQ disappointed, perhaps because I was already stuffed and had to save my chopped-beef sandwich for a cold midnight snack.

Dallas even had nonbarbecue worth savoring. At the sit-down Reata Grill, an outpost of a local mini-chain, I ate the \$10.99 lunch special: tortilla soup and a big tamale bursting with beef and topped with pecan pesto. As I drank a Shiner Bock that was so cold the froth congealed, I overheard a woman at the bar tell her co-workers, with no hint of sarcasm, "I'm excited about my lunch." Was this really an airport restaurant?

Locating these dining spots was also a cinch, because the Dallas airport is so beautifully organized. All the terminals — and all the restaurants — lie within the security zone, so you never have to take off your shoes, and they're all connected by the efficient Skylink rail system. Directories were posted outside each Skylink stop, and friendly, green-vested locals occupied information booths, letting me know exactly where to find the next platter of ribs.

At other airports, however, I had to turn to the Internet for direction. Virtually all American airports have their own Web sites, complete with lists of every dining place in the terminals, which helped me narrow down my options. But discussion forums such as Chowhound.com, FlyerTalk.com and AirlinePilotsForum.com proved even more useful, and I found expert

travelers raving about everything from the cheeseburgers in Portland, Ore., to the employees' canteen in Singapore. (Neither Portland nor Singapore was on my list, unfortunately.)

It was Chowhound's contributors, for example, who guided me through Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson, the world's busiest airport, where just under 90 million people passed through in 2007, the most recent year for which there are records. For Southern food, the 'hounds recommended Paschal's, which had several concessions both inside and outside security. Arriving in the morning, on my way to Miami, I ate a nice cafeteria-style breakfast: the scrambled eggs may have been bland, but the sausage was juicy, the grits buttery and plump, and the biscuit so light, warm and moist that I would've eaten three or four if I hadn't had Miami to look forward to.

On the way back home to New York that night, I had another layover, two and a half hours, in Atlanta, so I decided to follow another Chowhound lead. Leaving the airport by the north baggage claim, I turned left and walked precisely seven minutes down a dark highway to the taxi assembly, the parking lot where cabbies await the call to pick up passengers. At the rear of the lot lay their break room, which doubled as their cafeteria. When cabbies wait, they get hungry, and since the vast majority of Atlanta's airport-taxi drivers happen to be African immigrants, the cafeteria serves food to fit their tastes: Ethiopian injera, Somali rice and Nigerian fufu, with halal meats and vegetables cooked every which way.

At a little after 7 p.m., the break room was humming. Dramatic games of checkers and dominoes were under way at the long indoor picnic tables, and men crowded around TVs tuned to MSNBC and CNN, raptly following analyses of Barack Obama's potential cabinet picks. At the food window, I ordered a bit of everything — the only choice, really, as the kitchen was almost out of food. (The best time to eat, I'm told, is 1 p.m.) My Styrofoam container held a bread roll, two simple sautés — one of chicken, onions and peppers, the other of beef, both spice-coated and peppery — plus a meaty hunk of fish in a memorably smoky tomato sauce.

It was food of refreshing honesty, made for people who need nothing but nourishment, a taste of home and a reasonable price (my meal was \$5.35). As I ate, I was joined by a cabbie — Amir, a Sudanese man in late middle age — who told me about his daily grind: all-day shifts, three-hour waits between fares, long strolls around the lot to stay fit. Cabbies are susceptible to heart trouble, he explained, particularly the Nigerians, who “eat too much grease.” Amir, however, walked four miles a day. His heart was strong.

This experience in Atlanta opened my eyes to another facet of airport dining: eating at the airport doesn't have to mean eating inside the airport. Often, you can venture just a few minutes outside and find a worthy meal that won't make you miss your connection. It's a lesson travelers would do well to heed at Los Angeles International, where all but one of the terminals are closed off to those without boarding passes. Only the half-dozen spots at the Tom Bradley International Terminal are accessible before security.

Not that you'd necessarily want to eat in the purgatorial gloom of the mezzanine food court. Hamada of Japan Orient Express served a deep-fried pork cutlet on rice that lacked any recognizable flavor, quite an achievement for such a no-brainer dish. And at El Paseo, the carnitas burrito was appropriately porky but still disheartening.

The best options were not in the terminals. Encounter, a 1960s-vintage restaurant, was the most obvious, a purple-windowed flying saucer standing atop a pillar right outside Terminal 2. The dining room was a modern take on space-age chic — undulating blobs of color on the ceiling, a lava lamp on the bar and hardly a right angle in sight — with 1980s hits like “Smooth Operator” playing on the sound system.

Not all Encounter's patrons were on layover. A dozen young people were celebrating a woman's birthday — one of them was wearing a tuxedo, and I thought of him as I ate my fresh market salad. It, too, was a bit overdressed. Encounter's food straddled the borders of Airworld and the real world. Were I spending \$27.50 for the flatiron steak off-campus, I'd be annoyed, but with airport-lowered expectations, I was satisfied. Never mind that my martini lacked kick, the waiter kept calling me “chief” and “boss,” and my side of broccolini was devoid of flavor. (Does the T.S.A. confiscate flavor along with nail clippers?) After paying \$71 (!) for the meal, I marched to the elevator, and the birthday party chose that moment to leave as well. And as we descended, they gave me a brilliant suggestion.

Down on the arrivals level, I boarded a yellow van with black spots that took me — absolutely free and in less than 10 minutes — to an off-campus garage called the Parking Spot. Next door lay salvation: In-N-Out Burger, the West Coast's all-local, all-natural fast-food chain. It was packed with college students, hipsters in silly fedoras, a British couple with a baby, Indian 20-somethings figuring out how to ship saris back from London. I ordered a cheeseburger and fries, and dug in as if I hadn't already eaten three dinners that night. Now that was a cheeseburger: a sublime agglomeration of complementary flavors and contrasting textures. A worthy airport meal, if it wasn't technically in the airport.

At some airports, however, you throw up your hands in defeat. At La Guardia, the only place I found worth eating at is Figs, the upscale restaurant from Boston celeb-chef Todd English. But Figs, like almost every other concession in the central terminal, closes at 8 p.m., so only those with early flights can sample the lovely pizza bianco — fresh mozzarella, arugula lightly dressed in balsamic vinegar, and sweet tomato slices on a crust rich with olive oil — and the awkward, unconcerned service.

But O'Hare — the nation's second busiest airport, with 76 million passengers in 2007 — was easily the worst airport I visited, particularly disappointing since Chicago is one of America's great restaurant cities. Instead of Air Alinea or Tobolobampo to Go, however, diners will find: Chicago-style hot dogs so poorly assembled as to cast doubt on the city's architectural heritage; collard greens so bland and peach cobbler so mucoid they'd start riots on the South Side; and greasy, flavor-free cheeseburgers whose only claim to fame is that they inspired a "Saturday Night Live" sketch featuring John Belushi, a comedian renowned, of course, for his discriminating palate. I watched my fellow diners with envy: a woman who pulled a packet of Alka-Seltzer from her purse; a bald, beefy man in handcuffs who was no doubt looking forward to decades of prison food.

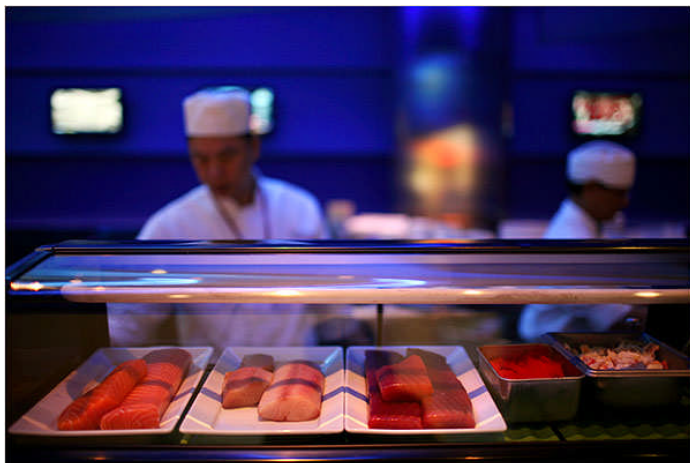
Even the Internet couldn't help me find good O'Hare eats. The Sky Bridge Restaurant, a Greek diner praised on [AirlinePilotsForum.com](http://AirlinePilotsForum.com), was miserable. The meat on the gyro platter ("awesome!" wrote ghilis101) seemed to have come from a "Jungle"-era slaughterhouse, and the pita ... not awesome. Why did the pilots rave? Sky Bridge gives 15 percent discounts to crew members.

In fact, airline employees were the least useful source of dining tips. Once, I asked an American Eagle pilot for advice on eating in airports.

"Advice? Don't eat!" joked the hefty fellow, who gave his name as Tito and pointed out that airline employees just want something cheap and filling. "A cheeseburger is a cheeseburger is a ..." he said, trailing off. "You know, if I'm getting a free cheeseburger, I'm happy."

Thankfully, Kennedy Airport serves those with higher aspirations. In Terminal 1's pre-security-area food court, Jikji Café specializes in Korean food; its pure and spicy kimchi soup would be a great post-red-eye restorative. And at Vino Volo, the post-security wine bar in Terminal 8, you can slouch in a soft leather chair, listen to good 1940s jazz, sip a 2004 Rioja and nibble an earthy duck confit and lentil salad. Ah ...

It's JetBlue's new \$800 million Terminal 5, however, that's the real stunner — airy and futuristic, with the kinds of restaurants you'd expect to find in New York City itself. La Vie, a narrow French cafe with canary-yellow tiled walls and a wide mirror behind the bar, served a lovely breakfast. My cappuccino was mellow, the scrambled eggs on a warm croissant admirably light, and the grilled asparagus tasted sweet and delicate, especially because they were so expertly charred.



Piquillo, a tapas bar, had fresh, plump olives and a just al dente tortilla Española, and the elaborate tiles on the arcing ceiling bent light into oily rainbows. Deep Blue, a sushi restaurant that resembled a nightclub for dolphins, went well beyond your raw-fish standards to offer golden Thai snapper sashimi (lush and fatty) and yakitori-style duck-and-foie-gras meatballs (lush and fatty, yet in a

totally different way). There was also a steakhouse and a hip-looking Italian restaurant, both designed with the same modern, plasticky angles and fancy lighting.

All were developed and operated by the same company, OTG Management, but none, however, was flawless. Service could be slow (a serious problem at an airport), Piquillo's manager didn't know if he served any Catalan wines, and Deep Blue's crispy rock shrimp were way oversalted. But these faults dissipated in an atmosphere of hope and sophistication that recalled the glamorous spirit of air travel long ago. Even the passengers seemed better dressed, as if they were ready for a night out on Park Avenue South and not a cramped flight to Phoenix.

"I love this place," Cliff Donenfeld, a blue-blazered Realtor from Naples, Fla., announced at Deep Blue. "I'm so happy it's here!"

He was speaking to no one in particular, I knew, but at the same time, he was speaking for us all.