

JetBlue terminal at JFK leads gourmet offerings at New York airports

BY Sindhu Sundar
September 15th 2009

As you take in the posh ambience at AeroNuova Italian restaurant and savor the handiwork of star chef Mark Ladner, it may feel like an elegant night out in Manhattan. But this isn't the Meatpacking District. Try Terminal 5 at JFK Airport.

The JetBlue terminal, which introduced nine full-service restaurants when it opened last year, is one of the growing number of unlikely places for upscale culinary adventures in Queens. Venues that once served less-than-inspiring fare to captive audiences have embarked on collaborations with some of New York's top chefs and brand-name restaurants - including JFK's Terminal 4, Terminal 8 and the new Citi Field stadium.

"Customers expect the best, so when it came to thinking of gourmet restaurants at an airport, it was more a question of 'Why not?' than 'Why?' " said Rick Blatstein, CEO of OTG Management, the food operator for the JetBlue terminal. Six celebrity chefs, including Roberto Santibanez of Rosa Mexicano, serve as consultants for the OTG-conceived restaurants.

"It is unprecedented that you can get this kind of food at an airport," said OTG spokesman Dave Allan. "Even with the recession, we've had record spending on food and beverage this year. I guess people that have decided to travel want to travel well."

Terminal 5 has the highest revenue per passenger in the history of U.S. airports, Allan said.

One AirTrain stop away, JFK's Terminal 4 recently introduced the acclaimed Seafood Bar by U.K.-based Caviar House & Prunier. It's famous for its variety of Balik smoked salmon and Caspian caviar. "Our customer base is largely international, and that makes a huge impact on our food program," said Janice Holden, chief commercial officer for JFK IAT, which manages the terminal.

Traveler Nicholas Torretti, 30, dined at the Seafood Bar recently after he missed his flight to L.A. "It's a six-hour wait at the airport now," said Torretti, an actor who lives in Manhattan. "But I'm making up for it right now."

Terminal 5's restaurants were developed specifically for that location. At Terminal 4, "We've taken the opposite tack, introducing name brands that are universally recognized," Holden said. Come January, the Palm Bar & Grille is set to land in Terminal 4, the first airport location for the classic American steakhouse.

Another unique feature of Terminal 4's gourmet fare is that it's accessible to nonpassengers, because the restaurants are located before the security clearance. "It's open to the entire Queens community - big families sending off friends and loved ones," Holden said.

Newark's Continental Airlines terminal pioneered the fine-dining trend in local airports when Westfield Concessions Management introduced Gallagher's Steakhouse in 2003. "The success of Gallagher's Steakhouse proved that the market for fine dining at our New York-area airports was strong," said Gerry Cecci, vice president of airport management for Westfield, one of the top airport concession developers in the U.S.

Emboldened by its success, Westfield introduced Bobby Van's Steakhouse in June at JFK's American Airlines Terminal 8. "They were looking for an iconic brand to represent New York," said Michael Levine, chief operating officer for Taste on the Fly, which manages Bobby Van's for Westfield. "This is a great restaurant for an airport, and people have come to expect that."

Gourmet eateries are venturing into unusual territory not despite the economic downturn, but because of it, to reach a wider customer base, a local tourism official said. "People are respecting the fact that there are all kinds of travelers who are willing to pay for good service," said Michelle Stoddart, director of marketing and tourism for the Queens Tourism Council. The success of fine dining at airports paves the way for the trend to expand, Stoddart said. "It's a great way to greet travelers. And it also gives them a great last look at their New York experience," she said.