

Swissair Kitchens behind Customs Barriers : Swissair Food at the London Hilton

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SWISSAIR KITCHENS BEHIND CUSTOMS BARRIERS

SWISSAIR FOOD AT THE LONDON HILTON

International agreements on fares allow comparatively little competition amongst air companies. The individual types of aircraft on comparable routes are much the same. So there remains the comfort of the passenger, the service and the courtesy he is shown.

Swissair lives up to the Swiss tradition of gastronomic excellence. Headquarters of Swissair hospitality are situated at Kloten. We learn from an article in the official periodical of the main Swiss airport "Zürich" that some thirty companies running regular air services make use of Zurich airport. More than half of these obtain the food for their passengers from the Swissair flight kitchens, the largest catering establishment in Switzerland, working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The kitchens are housed in new premises inaugurated in April 1961. The building consists of two parts connected with a covered vehicle park and drive-in. On the road side are stores, kitchens and offices. On the airport side are the halls where non-culinary material is prepared, such as newspapers, cigarettes, toilet articles, toys, blankets, cushions, leaflets and such like. The same building houses a modern laundry. Apart from the office block, all departments are extra-territorial. All employees and food which does not arrive by air have to pass Swiss customs.

Straight from the aircraft, containers with dirty dishes and soiled linen are brought into the building on trolleys, unloaded and distributed for cleaning. The same trolleys are loaded again further on with fresh linen and food. Every wagon receives clearly marked goods to be used only for its own particular aircraft according to a carefully worked out plan. Incidentally, Swissair still use silverware and real china on board their aircraft — not stainless steel cutlery and plastic plates.

There are two separate kitchens, one for cold, one for warm meals. There is also a large bakery and pastry kitchen. All pastries, cakes and sweets are now prepared by Swissair's own staff.

The Swissair kitchen deliver some five thousand meals a day, about two-thirds for Swissair aircraft and the rest to other companies. Thirty-two chefs and about 250 staff, as well as fifty office staff are employed. In an article in the August issue of "Nelly's Kalender", the well-known Swiss magazine propagating healthy living and balanced feeding, we read that the kitchens use 500 litres of coffee, 300 litres of orange juice and 150 chickens per day. 48,000 pieces of cutlery and crockery are cleaned daily by machine. 15,000 bottles of champagne and a ton of caviar are needed per annum. At the bakeries a daily minimum of 5,000 rolls of one kind or another are baked, 70kg. of sliced bread for toast and sandwiches, 800 ham rolls, 500 cheese tartlets and 2,000 pieces of pastries, apart from specialties such as Danish breakfast pastries, meat pies and "Filets Wellington" — all prepared with specially enriched flour, the secret why Swissair bread tastes so good.

Outside the Swissair flight kitchens a Swiss customs official is on duty day and night, for the kitchen is technically speaking "abroad". When he locks the door the chefs can travel to any of the four corners of the earth, but can no longer go back to Zurich. This is much

easier than having every boiled egg and every ham sandwich go through the customs. This extra-territorial status has the added advantage that Swissair's kitchen can import special foodstuffs from all over the globe without customs formalities. In the above mentioned article Charlotte Peter describes the practical aspect of this. Flight 463 brings a first class piece of beef from Buenos Aires; this is transformed in the Swissair kitchen into "Entrecôtes Swissair" and dispatched to Athens a few hours later by flight 352. Similarly, fresh shrimps are landed from Amsterdam and used immediately for tasty shrimp cocktails consumed on the next flight to New York. Prime chickens from Denmark are prepared and are served again on the next flight to — Copenhagen. The Swissair chefs' job is to give the international raw foodstuffs a typically Swiss flavour.

Air passengers are spoilt customers and ever expect something novel. Swissair found that champagne and caviar alone don't do the trick, and Swiss specialties have been introduced with tremendous success on longer flights. One may be served a "Bireweggli" over Accra, a ham crescent over Rio, a "Bratwürstli" over Tokio and "Zuger Kirschtorte" over Chicago. "Wähe", "Bündnerfleisch", "Moscht" and "Buurebrot" — the Swiss passengers are touched, and the "foreigners" consider it original.

Swissair have been organising food festivals in some of the Hilton Hotels all over the world. Such a festival had also been planned for London last September, only to be cancelled at the last minute owing to the air disaster at Duerrenaesche.

But now it has successfully been done; it was held at the London Hilton Hotel from 20th to 26th January after having been organised in Istanbul, Berlin and Rotterdam, and before going to Athens, Rome and Madrid.

There is nothing out of place in an airline holding a food fair, say Swissair. "More than ninety per cent of our traffic is by jet, but we don't think that just because we can whisk people quickly to their destinations we have nothing else to worry about", said a spokesman. "Service is now more important than ever. Good or bad service can make the difference between a big loss and a healthy profit."

The Hilton's International Restaurant was taken over for the Festival. Diners were able to order dishes such as "Bündnerfleisch", "Gschätzlets", William Tell's Apple, "Bernerplatte", as well as the great favourite "Fondue". Swissair flew over three of their chefs to help the Hilton Staff, and each tea-time air hostesses modelled clothes made from Swiss materials.

The Swiss Food Festival by Swissair was officially opened on Monday, 20th January, when London Swissair gave a reception and luncheon. A chalet had been erected, there were Swiss flags, posters, calendars and other exhibits. Guests sat at small tables, and there were no speeches. The atmosphere in the elegant restaurant overlooking Park Lane traffic, though most pleasant and animated, could not

exactly be called typically Swiss, what with a three-man band in *lamé* jackets strolling around in gipsy-band fashion, an oriental cigarette seller and a team of slick waiters in an impressive variety of natty uniforms of unusual colours. The food, however, which guests were free to select, was deliciously Swiss, and so was the wine. "Fondue" was already served during the reception as an appetiser.

Mr. M. Keller, Swissair Manager for the U.K., and Mr. L. Del Coma, General Manager of the London Hilton, had received the guests, among whom I noticed The Mayor and Mayoress of Westminster, Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Farmiloe, the Swiss Chargé d'Affaires Monsieur J. de Stoutz, Monsieur M. Heimo, Monsieur F. Ansermoz, Dr. E. Bircher, Consul Tosio, Messrs. H. Knoll and M. Schneebeli of the Swiss Bank Corporation, Mr. E. Bonvin, as well as such prominent personalities as Mr. Tom Arnold and Mr. Stirling Moss.

A few day and evening gowns made of exquisite Swiss fabrics were displayed by a Swissair hostess, and other pretty Swissair girls in national costumes distributed small souvenirs. Altogether it was a very pleasant occasion.

One of the Swissair/Hilton festival leaflets said "ROMANCE . . . à la Suisse. One of the greatest love stories in the world is the ardent romance which has existed for centuries between the Swiss and their inimitable native cuisine. Passionately dedicated to the culinary art, they are a warmly generous people, always anxious to initiate

the curious palate into their gastronomic delights and the exotic secrets of their cooking".

I do not know who is responsible for such exalted and exaggerated praise. I should imagine that a stolid Swiss housewife standing hot and bothered in front of her stove, frying a "Röschti", would be more than mildly surprised at such a thought. I doubt whether she even thinks of that well-tried cliché of the way to a man's heart going through his stomach. She just does her job, and she tries to do it well. And that is, after all, what Swissair are doing — looking after the interests of their passengers. If, in so doing, they also make propaganda for Swiss food, well and good. They certainly have something really worthwhile to advertise.

Mariann.

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