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Airline Food Report

A review by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Fall 2003

Just in time for Thanksgiving travel, the doctors and nutritionists at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) have rated 10 of the top airlines for the availability of healthy vegetarian and vegan entrées.

Vegetarian and vegan (dairy- and egg-free) meals are naturally higher in fiber and lower in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Unfortunately, healthy food seems to be one of the first things to go when airlines seek to cut costs. As airlines have moved away from standard menus in favor of buy-on-board meals, passengers' access to meatless and dairy-free food has decreased dramatically.

At the time of PCRM's last Airline Food Report in 1996, most large airlines offered vegetarian or vegan meals. But today, such major airlines as Continental have discontinued their vegetarian options. With many healthy, cholesterol-free items now gone, passengers looking for wholesome meals often have two choices: pack their own food or go hungry.

Bad Timing

It is the wrong time to cut plant-based entrées from airline menus. More than 44 million adult Americans are now significantly overweight, and diet-related disease rates are skyrocketing. Seatbelt extenders are in high demand. And pity the traveler in seats B or E, those middle seats where travelers get squeezed by super-sized customers. While airlines can't stop the obesity epidemic—any more than they can make all smokers quit—they can model a healthier lifestyle by serving more healthful food.

A nutritional analysis of two meals demonstrates the difference between non-vegetarian and vegetarian fare. A ham sandwich (offered by United) averages 394 calories, 22.5 grams of fat, seven grams of saturated fat, and 59 milligrams of cholesterol. American Airlines' vegan bistro bag (featuring a veggie pita, baby carrots, pretzels, and an apple) totals 253 calories, one gram of fat, zero grams of saturated fat, and seven grams of fiber.

Travelers wanting to prevent diabetes, cancer, and other chronic health problems will look for vegetarian entrées. Unfortunately, these healthy options seem to be disappearing from the carts that roll down the center aisle of the aircraft.

The Rankings

Superb Service: Song.

This airline, which is operated by Delta, offers healthy vegetarian and vegan meals as part of the buy-on-board menu on all flights.

Plan Ahead: Alaska, American, United.

These airlines offer vegetarian and/or vegan options, but travelers must usually special-order such healthy meals before their flight.

Falling Behind: American Eagle, Continental, Delta, Midwest, Northwest, US Airways.

These airlines make only a rudimentary effort at providing vegetarian and vegan meals—or they offer none at all.

What the Airlines Offer

Airline	Vegetarian meals?	Vegan meals?
Alaska Airlines	Special order	No
American Airlines	Special order	Special order
American Eagle Airlines	Breakfast only	No
Continental Airlines	Breakfast only	No
Delta Air Lines: Buy-on-board	Yes	Breakfast only
Delta Air Lines: Standard meals	No	No
Midwest Airlines	Breakfast only	No
Northwest Airlines: Buy-on-board	Breakfast only	No
Northwest Airlines: Standard meals	Special order	No
Song	Yes	Yes
United Airlines	Special order	Special order
US Airways	Breakfast only	No

The Methodology

Research was conducted in October of 2003. Only domestic flights were considered. Meals served in first class were not considered. Some major airlines, such as Southwest, AirTran, and America West, were not reviewed because they do not offer any meal service for economy class. Many airlines now offer a buy-on-board option for travelers wishing to purchase a meal for their flight; others still provide standard meals on some flights. PCRM dietitians reviewed both types of meal service by locating menu information on airlines' Web sites when it was available and contacting the airlines for additional menus and information.

Buy-on-Board

Six reviewed airlines now offer buy-on-board meals. Four of these exclusively serve buy-on-board, and two (Delta and Northwest) offer buy-on-board on some flights and standard meals on others. Of these six airlines, only two offered vegetarian lunch or dinner options. Breakfast choices were a little better for vegetarians, although only the same two airlines offered a vegan breakfast item.

Buy-on-board programs do not offer the option of special meals (including vegetarian or vegan, kosher, low cholesterol, low sugar). Also, many available options—such as ham or roast beef sandwiches—are high in fat and cholesterol.

Song, a new low-fare carrier operated by Delta, stands out in the buy-on-board category. It not only offers a variety of vegetarian and vegan breakfast items, but also consistently serves vegetarian and vegan lunch and dinner items. The current menu offers a vegetarian Garden Greek Salad and a vegan Rock n Roll Sushi meal. Veggie sushi is a healthful meal that averages 286 calories, three grams of fat, zero grams of saturated fat, and two grams of fiber. Those looking for a healthy meal will find it easily on Song.

Many buy-on-board meals are far from healthful. But Northwest serves one of the worst: a ham, salami, and provolone cheese sandwich on ciabatta, plus chips and a chocolate bar. This meal totals approximately 800 calories, 40 grams of fat, and 20 grams of saturated fat.

Standard Meals

Of the airlines reviewed, six still offer free in-flight meals, depending on the length of the flight. Vegetarian meals never appear on most airlines' standard menus. Travelers are usually stuck choosing between one high-fat, high-cholesterol entrée and another.

In the past, many health-conscious travelers called ahead to airlines to request a vegetarian or vegan meal. However, such special-order meals are no longer widely available. On four of the seven airlines offering free in-flight meals, a special meal (such as vegetarian) can be ordered in advance. However, only two of these airlines—American and United—offered a vegan option.

Continental Airlines recently eliminated all special meals. This leaves a traveler with special dietary needs, or anyone simply looking for a healthier meal, without any options other than packing their own food.

Top choices in this category include American Airlines' special-order vegan bistro bag. But passengers flying American should be careful to call ahead. Those who don't special-order this meal will be stuck with a turkey and cheese sandwich, chips, carrots, and a cookie, which total 705 calories and 33 grams of fat.

An In-depth View

<u>Airline</u>	Type of meal service	Vegetarian or vegan breakfast option?	Vegetarian or vegan lunch/dinner option?	Special order vegetarian/vegan meals available?
Alaska Airlines	Standard only: on flights longer than three hours	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	Vegetarian but not vegan
American Airlines	Standard only: on flights longer than four hours	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	Both vegetarian and vegan
American Eagle Airlines	Buy-on-board on all flights	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	
Continental Airlines	Standard only: on flights during meal times and longer than two hours	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	No.
Delta Air Lines	Buy-on-board: testing began August 11, and the program has continued since then on select flights	Both vegetarian and vegan	Vegetarian but not vegan	
	Standard: on flights without buy-on-board or on flights longer than 1750 miles or four hours in coach	No	No	No
Midwest Airlines	Buy-on-board on all flights	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	
Northwest Airlines	Buy-on-board: on flights between two and four hours long	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	
	Standard: on flights longer than four hours	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	Vegetarian but not vegan
Song	Buy-on-board on all flights	Both vegetarian and vegan	Both vegetarian and vegan	
United Airlines	Standard only: on flights longer than 3.5 hours	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	Both vegetarian and vegan
US Airways	Buy-on-board only: on flights longer than 700 miles	Vegetarian but not vegan	No	

Recommendations

The doctors and nutritionists at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine urge all airlines to include one option that is both vegan and kosher in buy-on-board and standard meal services. This one option should be designed to satisfy all special meal requests. This would mean people looking for vegetarian, heart-healthy, kosher, or high-fiber meals would always have an appropriate menu item available when they fly. Many tasty, healthy options would fulfill this requirement. Possible menu items include:

- roasted veggie hoagie with hummus
- bean burrito with pinto beans, rice, and salsa
- hearty green salad topped with chopped vegetables, baked tofu, and beans
- whole grain bread with almond butter and strawberry preserves
- curried tofu salad sandwich with lettuce and tomato in a pita

Offering such meals would both increase customer satisfaction and save the airlines money. In addition, these vegan items would provide an optimal choice for any passenger looking for a healthy meal.