

# *the* HEIGHT *of* GOOD TASTE



AIRLINE FOOD – EVEN IN FIRST CLASS – GETS A BAD RAP, AND PERHAPS RIGHTLY SO. BUT, THANKS TO THE CULINARY EXPERIMENTATION OF HESTON BLUMENTHAL, THAT COULD ALL BE SET TO CHANGE. PAUL KAY HEADS TO THE [TASTE OF LONDON](#) FESTIVAL TO FIND OUT MORE

ILLUSTRATION BY [JEROEN BRULEZ](#)

# I'M NIBBLING on SOME

glazed veal shin, rocket pesto and white onion purée from Gordon Ramsay's Maze when I suddenly get a hankering for the terrine of goose liver, spiced pineapple and gingerbread at The Ritz. A few minutes later and I'm done with The Ritz and making eyes at the salt cod brandade, crisp squid and Espelette pepper from Roux at The Landau, making sure I leave room for the Jaffa Cake pudding at Rhodes 24. Thankfully, this culinary tour of some of London's most storied restaurants requires no taxi journeys or reservations; in fact, it takes nothing more than a leisurely saunter across the grass, passing burlesque dancers, a jazz band and a wine-tasting booth along the way.

This is the beauty of Taste of London, an upmarket food festival that takes place each June in the British capital's picturesque Regent's Park. First held in 2004 at Somerset House before moving to its current location the following year, the festival has grown from an initial 12 restaurants and 14,000 visitors to 40 restaurants and more than 53,000 visitors across four days at its most recent edition. The restaurants, which this year boasted 11 Michelin stars between them, are chosen to reflect the growing diversity and dynamism of London's dining scene, as Justin Clarke, managing director of Taste Festivals, explains. "The restaurant line-up is a mixture of the latest [hot new openings], greatest [the establishments] and most exciting [a restaurant doing something different or trendy] in London."

There's also a raft of boutique food outlets – from cheesemongers and bakeries to chutney-makers and chocolatiers – not to mention specialist bars serving everything from champagne to real ale, cooking demonstrations and classes, performances and much more. And, of course, there's a healthy celebrity element, too, with personal appearances by the likes of Gary Rhodes, Alain Ducasse and Michel Roux Jr, and a raft of cook-book signings, which this year included one by budding chef Gwyneth Paltrow.

And yet, one of the more intriguing elements of this year's Taste wasn't a restaurant or a chef at all, but something more akin to a science experiment. Earlier this year, visionary chef Heston Blumenthal (of three-Michelin-starred The Fat Duck fame), took on the challenge of trying to improve airline food as part of his TV show, *Heston's Mission Impossible*, which also saw him trying to up the eating ante at the cinema, in a children's hospital and on board a submarine. Teaming up with British Airways, which has been the lead sponsor of Taste of London since 2006,

Blumenthal employed all manner of molecular trickery and gastronomic know-how to liven up the menus. But while his attempts to create food to delight a savvy palate proved too impractical to be more than a one-off, Blumenthal did make a discovery that has real potential to change the way we eat at 10,600m.

Identifying that environmental factors such as altitude, cabin pressure, reduced oxygen levels and low humidity can seriously impinge on our ability to perceive flavours, Blumenthal set about finding ways to counteract this. And what he discovered was that, while tastes such as sweet and salty can be reduced in strength by up to 50 per cent at high altitude, one flavour retains most of its power: umami.

Sometimes known as the "fifth taste," the savoury umami occurs naturally in foods such as seaweed, tomatoes, mackerel and parmesan cheese, and so Blumenthal began to incorporate these ingredients subtly into various dishes. The results were so successful that British Airways have used his recommendations as the basis for their revamped menus, termed "Height Cuisine."

Although Blumenthal himself was not present at this year's Taste, the fruits of his work were

CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP  
RIGHT

Service with a smile at Taste of London; Kai Mayfair was one of the 40 restaurants represented this year; a selection of the delectable bites on offer





**“AT HIGH ALTITUDES,  
ONE FLAVOUR  
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ITS POWER: UMAMI”**

in full effect. In the heart of the Regent Park site was British Airways' two-storey Height Cuisine pavilion, an interactive display designed to demonstrate how the senses can be affected at altitude onboard an aircraft. "Creating food at 10,600m is a huge challenge," says Tony Smith, British Airways head of customer service design and development. "We wanted to share some of the science behind food at altitude and offer visitors the chance to give us feedback on some of the innovative new ideas British Airways is exploring."

Among the experiments on show were taste and smell tests that replicated the way we perceive various types of flavours differently at different altitudes, and another that demonstrated what a big part visual clues can play in fooling our tastebuds by changing around the colours of fruit jellies. Visitors were also able to sample

dishes that the airline is currently developing, and to influence future onboard menus.

But while this makes for a fun exhibit, and a great marketing exercise, it's not some flight of fancy that might not see the light of day for months or years. Indeed, British Airways has already introduced the umami-based dishes to its First and Club World menus, and, says Smith, the feedback so far has been encouraging. "Our umami-based dishes started appearing onboard our flights from June this year and, to date, the response has been extremely positive. For example, in First and on our Asian routes in particular, we have noticed customers being especially receptive to the sautéed salmon and gilthead bream with soy sauce, shiitake and asparagus, as well as the steamed sea bream and salmon with ginger and spring

onion, served with chargrilled vegetables and mushroom sauce. In Club World, our business class, the pear barley risotto with sun-blushed tomatoes is a favourite, and on our Indian routes the chaat masala with onion and chicken kebab with chillies has been extremely popular."

More research into the science of eating at altitude is ongoing, says Smith, and the onboard menus will continue to evolve in tandem with their understanding. Such care, deep thought and attention to detail may be at odds with most people's idea of airline dining, but it's symptomatic of a larger trend that has seen passengers becoming much more discerning about their dining habits, whatever the altitude. "Customers do and should expect the very best from airlines when it comes to in-flight dining," says Smith. "It is no longer a peripheral or secondary consideration for customers. If we want people to have a memorable experience with us, quality in-flight dining plays a significant role in helping us to achieve this."

And while it may be a long time, if ever, before the culinary alchemy on show at Taste of London is matched in the air, it's good to know that onboard dining is heading in one direction: up. **✈**

**PALATE PLEASERS**

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Guests indulged in champagne; freshly flame-grilled steaks; comfort food with a molecular twist; gourmet offerings; budding cookbook author Gwyneth Paltrow; cooking demonstration by Gary Rhodes

**On the Fly**

Of course, British Airways is not the only airline striving to improve its onboard dining experience. Here's what five other airlines have on the menu:

**AIR NEW ZEALAND**

Kiwi chefs Peter Gordon, Geoff Scott and Rex Morgan use their knowledge of New Zealand produce to design menus that reflect the best ingredients the island nation has to offer, while the airline invites New Zealand's leading wineries to submit their tipples for blind tasting twice a year in an ongoing effort to refresh their list. There is also an emphasis on the option of shared dining with chef's tasting plates and dessert platters, and the ability to order mid-movie snacks to be delivered to their seat via touch-screen.

**CATHAY PACIFIC**

Hong Kong's own airline recently partnered with Miramar Group to bring some of the city's favourite dining experiences to the sky. More than 90 dishes from restaurants including the two-Michelin-starred Cuisine Cuisine at The Mira, Tsui Hang Village Restaurant, The French Window, Whisk and Yamm were available between May and July.

**EMIRATES**

The Middle Eastern carrier recently enhanced its onboard dining experience with the addition of Royal Doulton fine bone china and Robert Welsh cutlery to the service for its first- and business-class passengers.

**SINGAPORE AIRLINES**

An International Culinary Panel of eight lauded chefs from four continents oversees the menus on Singapore Airlines, including Alfred Portale, formerly of New York's Gotham Bar & Grill, former Gault & Millau Cook of the Year Georges Blanc, and TV chef and cookbook author Sanjeev Kapoor. The latest addition to the team is Los Angeles-based Suzanne Goin, whose menus debuted in August.

**TURKISH AIRLINES**

Turkish Airlines has introduced a "Flying Chef" programme to better serve its first- and business-class passengers. This sees a highly trained chef joining the cabin crew on long-haul flights to ensure that the same standards you'd expect on the ground are met in the air. There are more than 100 flying chefs in action.