

TAKEOUT / EXECUTIVE TRAVEL

Airlines are cooking up lighter, nutritional fare

By TONI BRETT

While flying Trans World Airlines first class from Athens to New York, telecommunications consultant Gligor Tashkovich enjoyed an eight-course meal including shrimp bisque soup, chicken Kiev with potatoes au gratin, sliced carrots in an artichoke heart and Greek-style ice cream cake.

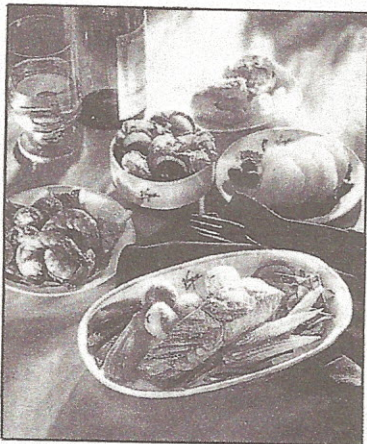
Before landing, Mr. Tashkovich sampled the international picnic: shish kebab, spanakopita and moussaka. Mr. Tashkovich, who has flown TWA a dozen times since March, calls this meal "the best of the 12."

Although frills remain at the upper end and some airlines now offer upper class passengers gourmet meals from prestigious chefs, today's trend in airline food is toward lighter, wholesome fare. Airlines are responding to nutritional concerns the way they've long responded to religious dietary laws, which is good news for executive travelers: experts say eating healthier reduces the risk of jet lag.

Dr. Bradley Connor, a gastroenterologist at New York Hospital/Cornell Medical Center and medical director of travel/health services, says passengers should avoid overeating and drinking alcohol. "Don't feel obligated to eat every time flight attendants bring something by," Dr. Connor says.

Drink a lot of water

Abstain from meats, sweets and caffeine, and drink a glass of water or juice for every hour of flight in order to prevent dehydration. "Vegetarian meals are ideal for airline travel and are better than steak



Virgin Atlantic Airways' meals show the trend toward lighter, healthful airline fare.

for a long trip," he says.

Not many business travelers opt for vegetarian and other "special" meals, however. A spokesman for Delta Air Lines says that less than 2% of the carrier's meals are special meals, and this is representative of the industry.

Virtually all the major airlines offer kosher, Muslim and Hindu meals, as well as low-calorie, low-cholesterol and other medical choices. Choosing a special meal usually requires 24-hours' notice and can be done through reservations or a travel agent. Although these meals meet religious and dietary requirements, some may be more healthful in one way than another. A vegetarian dish, for example, might have nuts, seeds and oil, so it may not be low-calorie or low-fat.

"One airline has a spectacular fruit plate but another packs its fruit in syrup, and seafood won't be low in cholesterol if it's in a butter sauce," says Riska Platt, a registered dietician and chairperson of the nutrition committee of the American Heart Association in New York City.

Although tendencies are toward

lighter eating, "We always think of the passenger who may wish to indulge," says Kurt Hafner, chief of catering standards in London for British Airways. "Consumers sometimes say, 'It's wonderful to have healthy options, but we really want to spoil ourselves.'"

To this end, British Airways invites teams of award-winning chefs, including Michel Roux of the Waterside Inn in Bray, England, to design new, lighter menus that are geared for Concorde commuters.

Well-known chefs excite senses

United Air Lines Inc. and Virgin Atlantic Airways Ltd. also provide upper-class fliers with meals devised by prominent chefs. United's new entrees were developed by a team of experts led by corporate executive chef Herman Rothweiler. "The emphasis is to create excitement for the senses," says Patrick W. O'Brien, vice president of United food service.

Virgin Atlantic Airways' upper-class service includes gourmet meals and a guest dish from Raymond Blanc of Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Oxfordshire, England. "We try to provide a simple but tasty dish," says Fiona Wood, Virgin's catering coordinator.

Considering what airlines spend on food each year, their culinary interests aren't surprising. A spokesman for the Air Transport Association says that on a quarterly basis meal costs are about 3.9% of total operating expenses. For the first quarter of 1992 that's a major airline expenditure of \$608.9 million, or an average of 59 cents per revenue passenger mile.

More specifically, American Airlines spent \$142.8 million, or 69 cents per revenue passenger mile in the first quarter on meals.

During the same period, USAir spent \$63.1 million, or 81 cents per revenue passenger mile. These costs, like others in the airline industry, have gone up from year to year. ■