

Kiwi dining at 30,000 feet

Travel & Dining Adventures

By David Rottenberg

I have a new appreciation of "airline food." For years, I heard people snicker about the meals that were served during flights. In the past few years, forced by a need to cut costs, many airlines stopped serving anything substantial except on long flights.

Last week, I enjoyed airline food that could more than compete with some of the best cuisine I've experienced anywhere. I took a flight from Los Angeles to Auckland aboard Air New Zealand (PNK: ANZFF). From the moment I entered the plane, I was treated to astonishing "kiwi" (one of the symbols for New Zealand) service and hospitality.

I got lucky. I managed to fly business class. I've always questioned whether it pays to spend the extra money to enjoy the luxuries that come with the "better class." My experience on this flight was so good that I may never be able to go back to coach.

That is not to say that there is anything wrong with coach. In fact, the entrees are similar. Although the seats are closer together, it is still very comfortable to sit on the other side of the green curtain. But Air New Zealand provides wider selections of entrees, wines and desserts, comfortable seating and a choice of entertainment in business class that make the extra tab feel reasonable.

When traveling to a foreign country, flying the national airline often provides a good introduction to the new peoples and culture. When flying to New Zealand, I decided that a flight on Air New Zealand would be most appealing.

I soon learned that New

Zealand is a tranquil, peaceful land. Its two large sections, called North Island and South Island, are home to only 4.5 million people (together with 80 million sheep). Everything feels unrushed, uncrowded and genteel. For example, airports are usually bedlam. I've seen crowds all over the world at terminals hurrying, shouting, pushing and jostling. The scene in Auckland was totally different. When I cleared customs, people waiting for arrivals were all seated quietly, scanning the arrivals as if watching a performance.

As soon as I buckled myself in to my comfortable seat, I was greeted by a smiling attendant with a soothing glass of sparkling wine. I was then presented with a two-page menu, listing choices for dinner, supper (we had two meal services during the long flight) and wines.

Air New Zealand employs award-winning chefs all over the world to create its outstanding cuisine. The menus on flights between Los Angeles and Auckland are created by Chef Katsuo "Suld" Suguira from the famous Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The meals he designed reflect the flavors of his restaurant as well as those of New Zealand. Chef Suki has won numerous industry accolades and awards.

Menus change every four months. Peter Walsh, vice president, The Americas, for Air New Zealand proudly stated, "The dining experience at Air New Zealand Business Class and First Class is specifically styled on the same standards as a luxury hotel or contemporary brasserie ... The chefs we invite to join our consultancy program are all highly acclaimed for their innovation and use of fresh products."

Dinner began with succulent blue crab cake with fennel salad and a paprika aioli. The crab cake was mild in flavor and tast-



A passenger on Air New Zealand enjoys a wider selection of entrees, wines and desserts from award-winning chefs all over the world.

ed as if it had just been plucked from the sea.

Entree choices included a wonderful orange roughy, a soft fish whose wholesome taste was brought out by a well-matched watercress sauce. My favorite entree was sauteed lamb cutlets accompanied by a curry cilantro mint sauce.

New Zealand also has a large dairy industry. Its cheeses are excellent. Both dinner and supper were capped by outstanding choices for dessert, followed by cheese and fruit plates. The brie and stilton cheeses were creamy, tangy and very satisfying.

The selection of wines was formidable. The wine list consistently appears in the "Best Cellar in the Sky" rankings, competing with more than 30 other airlines. Both the reds and the whites have received high marks.

Almost all the wines offered

were produced in New Zealand. The sauvignon blancs were delightfully crisp. The chardonnays were rich and had a full finish. I greatly enjoyed the pinot noir, Paliser Estate 2001, which had a superb finish after savoring its dark cherry and plum flavor. My absolute favorite was the dessert wine, BridgesWestend Golden Mist semillon 2002, with its strong, sweet, fruity character.

Peter Walsh concluded, "We research our in-flight cuisine options with frequent travelers to ensure we provide an in-flight dining experience that is exciting and appealing to our customers."

It sure worked on me.

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