

Healthful Meals On the Fly: The New (More Nutritious) Face of Airport Food

As the food on flights has gotten skimpier, if not nonexistent, with bag lunches and pretzels subbing for hot meals, the quality of airport terminal food has gotten decidedly better. In fact, a recent survey of the 15 busiest airports confirms that it's easier than ever to find lighter, more healthful fare while waiting for your flight. The survey, conducted annually by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), deemed a restaurant "healthy" if they offered at least one low fat, high fiber, cholesterol-free meal. Compared to two years ago, when only two out of five airports had 50% or more of their restaurants offering healthful fare, the most recent survey found two thirds of airports met the mark for more nutritious meals. For some airports the improvements were huge, like the survey's #1 ranking Denver International, which went from an already respectable rating of 61% healthy restaurants in 2001 to 83% in 2003.

To test this healthier airport food theory, EN escorted one seasoned senior traveler through Boston's Logan International airport to get his take on how times have changed. The verdict? While fast food is still plenty present, healthful dining options are much more abundant and easier to spot. In contrast to the past, we did not have to go digging for fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grain breads.

Where once there were only burgers and pizza, healthier fare is much more represented in the form of ethnic foods, vegetarian entrees, and wholesome, freshly made prepackaged meals made specifically for the time-crunched traveler. And with the demise of the in-flight meal, even the sit-down restaurants offer healthful food that they willingly package to go. One Italian restaurant we visited offered a number of light dishes, including grilled chicken Parmesan with marinara sauce, salads with shrimp or grilled chicken, and a vegetarian club sandwich. A deli-type restaurant next door was loaded with healthful burger alternatives, like salads with grilled chicken and light dressing; reasonably sized prepackaged half subs and wrap sandwiches made with turkey, ham and veggies; yogurts; vegetable soups; chili; fresh fruit and fruit salad. Legal Sea Foods, famous for its lobsters and super-rich clam chowder, has both sit down and express take-out restaurants at Logan, offering items like grilled chicken and smoked salmon sandwiches; vegetarian roll up; ground tuna burger; grilled tuna steak; grilled calamari and white bean salad; and a "Vegetarian Feast" that includes a mushroom falafel burger, marinated artichokes, grilled asparagus and a white bean salad.

According to the PCRM survey, much of the improvement in airport ratings can largely be handed to the omnipresent Starbucks cafes, which now offer veggie sandwiches, a turkey sub with brown mustard, yogurt and fresh fruit salad. On our airport outing, we found that even the airport "pub" restaurant had a veggie burger squeezed between the fatty sandwiches with steak fries. This airport has also established a "Meals To Fly" program (similar programs exist at airports across the country), where participating restaurants and cafes (including Dunkin Donuts and Starbucks) assemble attractively packaged meals that include a snack for the flight. Although vendors have flexibility on

what they offer, the day we visited most seemed to include some type of wrap sandwich with green leaf lettuce and tomato, fresh fruit, a Chewy Granola Bar and a towelette for after-meal clean up. And all were very reasonably priced.

One stand out in the take-out category was Au Bon Pain. Most notable for its coffee and croissants, Au Bon Pain – present in airports throughout the eastern US – also offers an array of colorful salads with light dressing options; vegetable soup; sandwiches on 4-grain bread; fresh fruit and fruit salad; and a low fat yogurt cup with fresh fruit and granola (which was admittedly huge). Another nice Au Bon Pain amenity is that they offer nutrition information on all their products, both on-site and on-line at www.aubonpain.com.

While we were clearly impressed with the healthier options, my senior traveler noted that there was still a lot action in the fast food seating area, including one distinguished-looking airline pilot fueling up on a Whopper. Fast food from chains like McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut and Sbarro's is still widely available. One reason may be that, aside from fast food, there appeared to be little available for children, who may be better catered to with food brought from home (see sidebar).

Also, while healthy additions to chains like Starbucks have boosted many airport ratings, others have seen their ratings slip by opening their doors to fast food outlets. Previously top-ranked San Francisco International (now number 2) dropped its rating from 96% to 83% due to an increased presence of burger, hot dog and fried chicken chains. This still ranks head and shoulders above the bottom-seeded Minneapolis-St. Paul International, however, where only about one third of the eateries offer anything nutritious.

Packing Snacks To Travel

Next time you travel, save yourself time – and money – and bring along your own in-flight foods. Here are a few EN simply snack ideas to go:

Peanut butter spread on whole grain crackers or a banana

Peanut butter and all-fruit spread on whole grain bread

Yogurt (also widely available in airports)

Granola bars

Reduced fat cheese and whole grain crackers

Low fat cottage cheese mixed with pineapple

Herbed cottage cheese and crackers

Whole wheat pita with reduced fat sliced cheese

Nuts

Homemade “trail mix” of dry cereal, nuts, seeds, raisins or dried berries, and a few chocolate chips