



Airline Catering Services



FFL

Airline Catering

- HUNGRY FOR SUCCESS



Having recently expanded its facilities at the Brunel Centre trading estate in Crawley, less than a mile from London's Gatwick Airport, this independent catering company plans to add to its growing customer base.

Richard Maslen reports.

Global organisations such as LSG Sky Chefs and Gate Gourmet provide catering services to many of the world's airlines, while other carriers have their own food preparation arms, such as Kuwait Airways' subsidiary KASCO, or SATS at Singapore Airlines. However, as with most markets there is always a small niche for

start-up competition and in the UK, a small independently-owned caterer has proved that small can be beautiful when it comes to airline food.

BACKGROUND

FFL Airline Catering was formed in 1997 as an independent company based on the

Above and left • FFL Catering has a small workforce of just 50 staff, though others are hired on short-term contracts during the summer to cater for additional demand from its charter airline customers. A fleet of ten vehicles, including high-loaders and vans, supports the company's operations. A new high-loader will join the company's fleet later this year.

outskirts of London's Gatwick Airport. One of its founders and Managing Director Mark Matthews had a wealth of experience in the industry, having worked for a flight catering management consultancy, and believed the potential existed to develop a new independent and customer-focused company in the London area. In his former role, Mark had

been responsible for setting up food preparation agreements on behalf of small airlines and managing their requirements. During that time, he identified a number of airlines operating into and out of London – particularly at Gatwick – which were uplifting food on a regular basis, but only for a few flights per week.

"From our past experiences, I and my fellow directors had worked at Gatwick, so we had a good knowledge of how the airport operated," Mark told *Airliner World* during an exclusive interview at the company's headquarters in Crawley. "It offered the greatest number of airlines we could provide our services to, as a wide range of scheduled and charter carriers flew there, operating small programmes on a regular basis."

Unlike Heathrow, where the world's largest carriers – many with their own in-house catering teams or long-term contracts and associations with the larger companies – dominate the flights, Gatwick offered an array of smaller carriers operating just one or two weekly flights to London. "Due to the size and logistics of the larger catering companies, these airlines very often did not fit into their operation very well, which caused difficulties for both the airline and the caterer," said Mark.

"We could see that if we could establish a company to specifically serve the needs of

these smaller airlines, we would be able to offer them not only the same quality and standards of meals as the larger caterers could, but also a level of personal service that very often, due to their size, the larger companies could not. We were confident that if we aimed at this sector of the market, we could develop an effective and successful company, which whilst not technically a niche operation, would provide a different service."

CONTAINER CHANGES

The company set up its operation at a small business unit on the Crawley Industrial Estate, consisting of a small office and warehouse with a temperature-controlled kitchen area of approximately 800 sq ft (74.32m²) with one freezer and one fridge. Using the previous experience and valuable contacts of FFL's team of directors, it was able to attract several airlines, including Air Europa, Futura

the outbound flight. As a result, the catering company will load the inbound meals into the hold, packed with dry ice. (The temperature in the hold maintains a good level of coldness during the flight, keeping the meals chilled – consequently, this process is not commonly used on long haul flights).

When the aircraft arrived in London, the FFL team would be waiting to meet it with an empty high-loader vehicle (empty except, perhaps, for some wet ice). They would remove the containers of new food from the hold and position the truck beside the aircraft in preparation for the meal switch. Once the passengers had disembarked, the crew would open the service door, take the used meals out of the galleys, and replace them with the new ones from the hold.

This job is made easier by the airline using containers to hold the meal trays, stowing them in the galleys using special 'space frame'



As up to 300 identical meals need to be provided to some customer airlines, FFL has found that the most efficient method is to make use of a circular carousel for loading each meal tray. Each member of staff is responsible for loading an individual course on every tray.

After the inbound flights arrive at Gatwick, the catering trolleys are emptied and all the trays put through FFL's Flight Dish Wash machine for re-use on later flights. (All KEY - Steve Fletcher unless stated)

International and Lauda Air, all of which were seeking a change of catering on scheduled and charter flights to Gatwick.

The container change style of catering is regularly used by short-haul operators and enables them to carry food for both outbound and return flights from their home base. Airlines based abroad would ask their base caterer to provide meals for both the outbound flight to London as well as the return leg. However, due to lack of space in the galleys, short-haul aircraft only have room for

trolleys (trolleys with spaces for the containers to slide in and out of). As a result, the trolleys stay on the aircraft – only the canisters are removed. Once the correct number of meal trays has been loaded into the galley, the company stacks the same number of hot meals (entrees) into the aircraft ovens. "This loading of the ovens is known within the industry as 'pie packing,'" said Mark. This entire process is repeated for each respective galley, and the old meal containers and used trays from the outbound flight are returned to the hold and stowed securely with passengers' baggage for the return journey.

"Airlines will generally operate in this way if they only have a limited schedule of flights per week into Gatwick," explained Mark. "It avoids the airline having to supply us, as the outstation caterer, with a full complement of equipment, such as trolleys, meal trays, containers, oven racks etc, which is a very expensive exercise."



All meals are loaded into standard airline metal trolleys, which are sealed with individually numbered security tags before they leave the facility.



Once the trays have been prepared, they are loaded into trolleys. The trolleys each hold 28 meals and are the standard configuration used by most of the world's airlines.



As part of its full catering contract, FFL provides wet and dry store services for charter operator Astraeus Airlines. Included are items such as milk containers, plastic glasses, stirrers and napkins.

"It also allows it to supply the same menus on all of its flights regardless of the destination. For these clients, we arrive and leave the aircraft with an empty truck. We are providing a service rather than a product."

INDEPENDENT COMPETITION

Alongside the container change services, it was common for the airlines to require additional food uptake in London, either due to last-minute passenger bookings or because an incorrect number of trays had been loaded onto the outbound legs. FFL was able to supply a limited number of meals to its client airlines. The company would also be contracted regularly by the major ground handlers at Gatwick to provide extra meals or full catering for airlines operating ad hoc charter flights to football matches or other special events.

At the outset meal production was not a core market for FFL. When one of these ground handlers contacted JAT Airways and recommended the company as a catering supplier for its two weekly flights into Gatwick, it represented a change in attitude for the directors.

"We successfully provided them with all of their requirements for the whole season – but to be honest, at that time it stretched

our resources," Mark said. "As a result, we realised that if we wanted to develop the company beyond supplying container changes and occasional uplifts, we would need to look at the facilities we had with a view to obtaining more space."

Facing intense competition from its established rivals at Gatwick, FFL was wary of expanding too quickly into full catering services. Over the following year, one or two additional container change contracts were signed with airline customers as the company focused on its original core business.

"Then in 1999," recalled Mark, "we opened talks with an airline operating three scheduled flights a week into Gatwick as we knew it was not happy with its existing catering arrangements. We managed to arrange a meeting with its catering manager, and during his visit it became very clear that he really liked FFL and what we stood for. However, it also became clear that he did not feel that we then

smaller. We needed a washing-up area, a hot kitchen, a cold kitchen and a tray set area, as well as fridge and freezer storage."

While this work was being completed, FFL continued to offer its basic container change services from its original facility. It was a difficult and hectic time for its managers, but in February 2001, building and fitting-out work on the new facility was finished and on the morning of March 1, the company moved across to its new home at the Brunel Centre.

The expanded premises provided FFL with the scope to greatly develop its business. It was able to approach airlines at Gatwick to offer them a full catering service in addition to the container changes.

Months later, the company's first contract was agreed with Spanish charter operator South Atlantic Airways. The Tenerife-based carrier was operating one of its Boeing 757s from Gatwick for the summer and FFL was tasked with providing meals on its flights to



Alongside traditional meals, FFL creates some wonderful desserts for South African operator Nationwide Airlines. Offered from a trolley, they include sponge cakes, trifles and a fruit basket.

had the facilities to cope with his operation.

"To be honest, he was right, but his comments heightened my belief that there was a need for a smaller caterer which could offer the same services as the global companies, but on a smaller scale. We immediately began to draw up a new business plan."

FULL CATERING SERVICES

Having made the bold decision to build a full flight catering facility at Gatwick, in April 2000 FFL's management set about looking for suitable premises. After studying a number of sites in the area, a lease on its current site was agreed in November that year and work started immediately to turn the 3,500 sq ft (325m²) warehouse into a full catering facility. To begin with, a mezzanine floor was constructed to increase the ground floor space: a full kitchen was developed on the ground level. "The brief to the kitchen designer was simple," said Mark. "We wanted all the areas you would find at a large caterer – only



As well as providing catering to airlines at Gatwick, FFL also offers basic container change services, including delivering toilet rolls and air fresheners to the aircraft.

many of the popular Mediterranean resorts – for four months at the peak of the summer schedules. "This was a good test of our new facilities as it meant providing 3,000 meals per week. We had a successful summer with them – they stopped flying at the end of the season but we had proved our facility could work," said Mark.

FFL provides a complete range of meals for customers, depending on their needs and budgets, ranging from First Class 'a la carte' style

through 'tray-setted' Business Class to Economy and Charter-style meals. It also cater for different dietary needs, and with sufficient notice can prepare special meals, including vegetarian, vegan, diabetic, gluten-free, fat-free, child's and baby meals, and kosher dishes.

ASTRAEUS CONTRACT

With the South Atlantic Airways contract over, FFL began to look for additional work at Gatwick. British Airways was then starting to cut back on its activities there, consolidating its services at Heathrow.

Other airlines were also seeking to transfer flights to London's principal airport, due to the greater transfer links offered by its strong connecting traffic. These changes enabled a number of new entrants to enter the Gatwick market, picking up slots vacated by the departing companies.

One such entrant was charter operator Astraesus Airlines, then being established by former senior executives from British World Airlines and CityFlyer Express. In January 2002, its Commercial Director, Jonathan Hinkles, contacted FFL, alongside its larger rivals, to tender for a contract as the carrier's base caterer – and following discussions, the company was selected. "It was apparent that FFL, as a smaller company, would be much more focused on our needs than any of the larger caterers could ever be," Jonathan told *Airliner World*.



"Due to our independent status, we are able to offer our customers a first class level of service, with direct access to the company's senior management at all times." FFL Catering Managing Director Mark Matthews.



Each meal tray is individually created by FFL's team to a set specification provided by customers. This is a business class meal for Libyan carrier Afriqiyah Airways.

On April 6, 2002, Astraesus' inaugural flight took off for Malaga in Spain with a full load of 148 passengers, provided with meals prepared by FFL. The Astraesus contract represented the backing that the company needed, and as other airlines noted their successful business partnership, FFL began to be offered additional work. In July 2002, it was contacted by Red Air to provide food on its Douglas DC-10 services to West Africa: shortly afterwards a contract was signed with African Safari Airlines' for its flights to Mombasa and Nairobi in Kenya. "The contract with Astraesus represented a key milestone in our development. Having the backing of a major new airline, and our first full catering contract from a carrier based in the UK, provided us with a platform to further develop the business. Having agreed a medium-term contract with Astraesus, we also had guaranteed work for a set period of time and therefore no risk of having a lovely new facility without any clients," said Mark.

EXPANSION DRIVE

The strong relationship between FFL and Astraesus has grown further since the airline's formation. "It is now much more of a partnership than a straightforward contractual relationship," said Jonathan Hinkles. The original contract was to cater for just two B737s, but it now covers the airline's entire charter fleet of two B737-300s, two B737-700s and three B757-200s. As Astraesus has grown, so has FFL, and with long-term contracts in place with many of its customers, it took a major decision to expand at the beginning of 2004. "We evaluated the space and facilities we had available and decided that to further expand the company and take on new contracts, we would need more space, so we set about looking for a new unit," said Mark.

A number of sites were studied for possible

growth, although concern over the extra cost of working from two separate locations led the company to delay any growth until a suitable option presented itself. However, as luck would have it, Mark was contacted by the business occupying the unit adjacent to FFL, which was moving out. Asked if it would be interested in taking over that lease, FFL did not hesitate to put in a formal offer.

A formal agreement was signed in May 2004, and in a matter of weeks work had begun on integrating the two units into a single facility of 10,000 sq ft (929m²) by demolishing the dividing wall. Alongside this, a major refurbishment of the original facilities was completed, resulting in a 20% increase in both the hot kitchen and dish-wash areas. A brand-new Meiko Flight Dish Wash machine was installed. "The expansion was made all the more complicated by the need to maintain a fully-operational kitchen and production facility 24 hours a day throughout the refurbishment period," added Mark. "We are now proud to have a catering unit which is twice the size of our original. It is modern and efficient, and that impresses airlines – giving us the potential to actively seek more business."

Since the expanded facility opened in the second week of June 2004, FFL has added two full-service airline customers to its portfolio. That September, it began supplying food to Libyan operator Afriqiyah Airways on its four-times-weekly scheduled flights to Tripoli, and in February this year, it was contracted by Nationwide Airlines to provide catering for its three-times-weekly service to Johannesburg in South Africa, complete with a dessert trolley for all passengers. In June, FFL was selected by Air Namibia for its three-times weekly flights to Gatwick from Windhoek, the first of which departed the UK on July 1. Meanwhile, the company remains in talks with other airline operators. "We are

also already looking at alternatives to increase the size of our unit," added Mark.

Although the low-cost airline revolution in Europe has resulted in a number of new entrant carriers dropping meals from their flights and has influenced other established operators to introduce similar cost-cutting measures, according to Mark, there is still a high demand for FFL's services. "Low-cost airlines have had a big impact on the airline industry. However, the in-flight catering industry is a very innovative one and we have developed new products aimed specifically at this market."

The inflight catering industry is now work-

a secure setting and then transported through security check points: food storage and preparation areas need to be totally secure.

One specific section of the DfT direction deals with securing food storage areas to avoid the risk of unauthorised ingress and contamination of food. This states that if such areas are not covered by surveillance systems, all doors must be locked upon exit from them.

In order to comply with the ruling, FFL recently selected InCam Digital Surveillance to install a network of Axis Communications cameras, which were recently positioned throughout its Crawley facility. In all, 25

get the importance of security over to them since the system went in."

FUTURE GROWTH

During the summer months, FFL produces approximately 20,000 meals per week (compared to the 1,500 or so meals a reasonably-sized restaurant will prepare during the same period), all to a standard outlined by its customers. "The meals do vary from customer to customer, though their quality does not – I know, as I get to sample them on a regular basis!" said Mark. "We have been approached in the past by airlines asking us to provide meals for an unachievable cost, but we have declined as we do not wish to compromise our quality."

It has been a busy eight years of development at FFL and despite the recent expansion of its facilities, the company is looking at further business opportunities. In August this year FFL is opening a new bonded goods facility, expanding on the company's current activities in this field. From here it intends to provide a full range of alcohol, cigarettes, gifts and bonded goods for consumption and sale on its customer airlines' flights.

"We now have several contracts that our larger competitors would quite like, but I can assure you that FFL is as committed today as



InCam Digital Surveillance has installed 25 cameras at FFL's facility to comply with stringent Department of Transportation security guidelines. (Axis Communications)

ing more closely with retailers and packaging companies to develop specific food products with long shelf lives, for sale on board. And are also working with customers on the supply of other items, such as confectionery and hot drinks, which could be sold to passengers, thus replacing some income lost by serving no meals on board.

Although the growth of no-frills airlines is impacting the short-haul market, there still remains a high demand from carriers for meals on longer flights. "I believe that airlines operating long-haul flights will always want to offer their passengers a good on-board service," said Mark, "and that for the health and safety of passengers, there will always be a need for meals and beverages as part of this service."

SECURITY

Like all catering companies, FFL must adhere to the stringent security regulations imposed by the UK Government. As these companies have full access to airside areas of an airport, regularly driving vehicles inside its perimeter while delivering supplies to a departing aircraft or picking up empties from an arriving one, they are required to conform to tight UK Department for Transport (DfT) security restrictions. All supplies must be packed into tamper-proof metal containers in

cameras have been put in, covering some 90% of the building.

"Without them to monitor key areas like our chiller and freezer units, we would have had to employ an extra member of staff just to act as a door man for these units," said Mark. "It was not workable for us to ask staff to lock and unlock them each time they used them, as one DfT directive requires. Some of our staff are in and out of these areas up to 40 times per hour – the sheer wastage of time and impracticality of carrying heavy loads and using keys to open doors made camera surveillance the answer from management's perspective."

Alongside the security aspect, the cameras have also proved useful in eliminating occasional fuel thefts which occur when FFL's lorries are parked at the front of its unit, and are also in use to ensure staff maintain the company's stringent health and safety and security procedures. "The cameras act as a constant visual reminder that all security checks and procedures need to be adhered to all times to ensure that we operate a secure and safe operation," Mark said. "The sensitivity of our privileged position as a caterer to airlines at Gatwick needs to be properly understood by all staff and we have found it much easier to



it was back in 1997," Mark said. "However, like all companies, we have to look to the future and cannot rest on our laurels. We obviously hope to continue to grow with our existing customers, but we are also in talks with several other airlines with whom we hope to sign contracts in the near future."

When FFL started out, it was just a small organisation offering a niche service in container changes, with just a small number of meal uplifts. It has become a fully-fledged independent unit supplying a cross-section of scheduled and charter airlines at Gatwick with all their catering needs. "FFL is always the first supplier waiting on the ramp for our aircraft to arrive. We have not had a catering delay in three years of operation – an exceptional achievement – and the product quality FFL provides has been consistently high since day one," said Astraeus' Jonathan Hinkles. This kind of customer endorsement proves that with a comprehensive knowledge of the market you are operating in and a sound business plan, you can be successful even in the face of the strongest competition.