

# FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

AS FEATURED

## Front Burner

EDITED BY BEVERLY STEPHEN

**Winged cuisine** Minneapolis – He can't do much about the legroom, but chef Paul Lynch is making the flight home from the Radisson Plaza Hotel more than just a gastronomic wasteland. Under the marquee First Class To Go, the chef has teamed up with the Ardea Beverage Company to develop a plethora of gourmet options for the traveling guest to carry on.

"The cornerstone is the packaging," says Lynch, who serves as a chef for both banqueting at the hotel, the flagship of the Carlson group, and the hotel's FireLake Grill and Cocktail Bar. Rather than using the standard cardboard fold-ups common to sack lunches, his concoctions come zipped inside and insulated vinyl case provided by Ardea. Tucked away is a can of their Airforce Nutrisoda, a no-calorie soft drink sporting names like Radiant (pomegranate/blackberry) and Slender (pink grapefruit/guava), plus a variety of treats for well-rounded noshing. Lynch has designed such options as the Minnesota Salad (mesclun topped with smoked salmon, bacon, tomatoes, corn, cucumber, and goat cheese dressed with sweet onion/balsamic vinaigrette and served beside an apple crumple) or the French Picnic (a chilled roasted chicken breast with a wedge of Brie, melon, and grapes; green bean/fingerling potato salad; and a lemon macaroon. "With this, you can get a nutritional option that's more than just a bucket of vegetables," he explains, and the packaging holds everything safely chilled for up to four hours.

While other hotels will gladly pack a lunch upon request (the kindly concierge at Manhattan's St. Regis on Fifth Avenue even offers to call in a heap of pastrami from the nearby Carnegie Deli), Ardea president and CEO Joe Heron saw gold in establishing a revamped internal operation. "We developed the idea to enable hotels to provide an extra service for their guests," he says, "and to drive some incremental revenue to them that would in most instances go somewhere else."

Lynch first found success selling the lunches through the banqueting department to large corporate gatherings. He is now in the second round of testing, offering the meals individually to rooms through door hangers that guests can fill out and turn in at the restaurant. Other hotels implementing the program include the Hilton in Short Hills, New Jersey, and branches of Hyatt, Westin, and the Four Seasons.

As for the bottom line, Lynch is laughing all the way to the bank. Sales of box lunches, at about \$20 a pop, are on track to rise 400 percent this year, while clients are hungrily clamoring for more. "I've sold more meals, at a higher price, in this format than ever," he reports. "It's just amazing." — M.D.