

# Back in the GAME



After nine years with a major U.S. retailer, Milt Liu has rejoined airline catering with Flying Food Group and is finding similarities with his former job and a more demanding industry **by RICK LUNDSTROM**

**O**n an early morning in Los Angeles, Milt Liu was starting his day with plans to meet an airline customer while his family faced yet another heavy February snowfall putting several inches of white layer on the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul that they still call home.

It had been one of those winters for the Flying Food Group network of kitchens. Winter storm after winter storm had been battering the northeast, canceling flights and interrupting airline operations in New York, Newark and the Flying Food Group's home city of Chicago. Not much can be done about the weather, but Liu, who joined the company in September, couldn't say enough about efforts of the employees.

"Our people take such pride in delivering great service under difficult circumstances. This winter, the schedules have been ever changing with numerous irregular operations. I love seeing e-mails from customers thanking us for adjusting to meet their needs. It's such great recognition for our teams," Liu said.

One of Liu's favorite jobs is visiting the company's 18 airline-catering units in the United States and spending time with employees. In his previous job, as Vice President of Food Operations at Target Corporation, also based in the Twin Cities, Liu said he often visited stores and learned from employees how to improve company operations. Now, as President and Chief Operating Officer at Flying Food, he does the same thing.

This exercise of continuous improvement is necessary because competition and the ever-present demands by customers have changed an industry Liu left in 2004 to join the big retailer. And though they may seem very different, he said there are many parallels between retail sales and airline catering. "There is a saying that 'retail is detail.' Well, that also applies to airline catering. It is the attention to detail that is the basis for great customer service and

superior product quality," he explained. "And neither happens without great people and teamwork. Whether it is in the kitchen producing food or on the flight interacting with the crew, we are dependent on our people. That is why we need to be focused on developing and training our people."

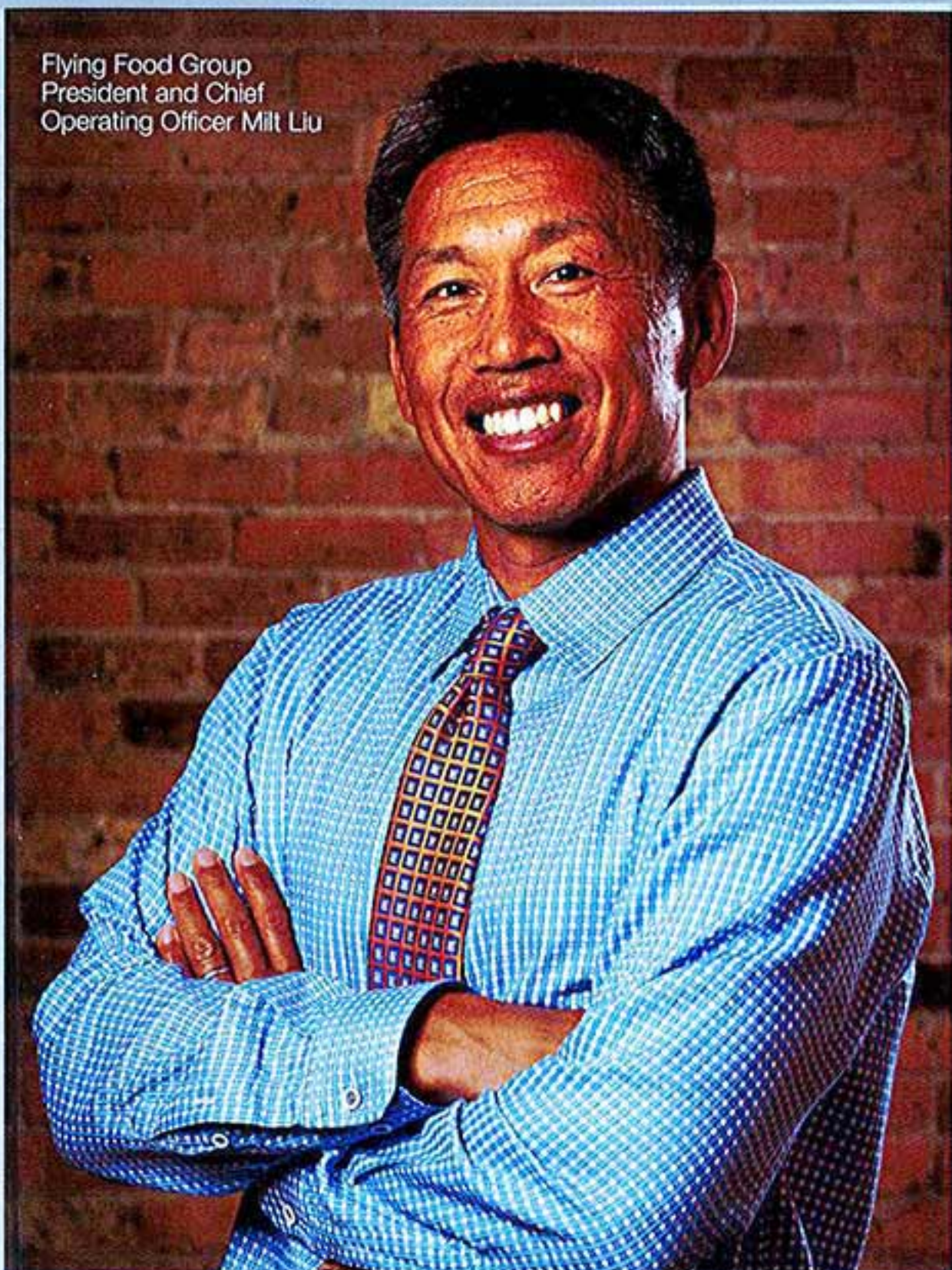
There is, of course other plans for the year ahead that has also excited the new executive. In the spring, Flying Food Group will open a new unit at Washington Dulles International Airport. The 48,000 square-foot unit at IAD will be FFG's 19<sup>th</sup> in the United States. Like the others, the Flying Food Group unit at IAD will be focused on catering for international long-haul carriers. The company's focus on high-end catering and ethnic cuisines has grown the business to sales of US\$435 million in 2013 and has made customers of 70 carriers, mostly overseas airlines operating flights to the major U.S. cities.

The demands of these airline customers has been one of the changes that Liu said he's noticed most since returning to the industry. It has also driven the company to implement innovative process and systems to effectively compete with the two large airline caterers that can offer a larger network and discounts for exclusive agreements.

"Whether you are talking about retail consumers or airline catering customers, they are all demanding more from their store or supplier," he said. "And for FFG, superior customer service and culinary quality is how we differentiate ourselves from the competition. We need to earn our customers' business every day by meeting and exceeding their expectations."

To help Flying Food Group deliver on a scale approaching that of the world's two major caterers, the company will rely more heavily on its association with Servair. Since joining the company in September of last year, Liu said he has met regularly with Servair executives. "One thing that is clear is we can better leverage our relationship," he said.

Flying Food Group  
President and Chief  
Operating Officer Milt Liu



In the months to come, Flying Food Group will be working with its French partner to share operational and financial best practices. In addition, FFG/Servair will market the two company's capabilities to offer a broader network of stations to potential airline customers.

"In Hamburg, we will launch the FFG/Servair brand," said Liu. "We want customers to see how our combined capabilities and international network can meet their needs."

But airlines are not Flying Food Group's only customers. The company's Fresh Food Solutions group supplies numerous retail customers. The company services more than 3,500 Starbucks locations with fresh products such as sandwiches, salads, and yogurt parfaits.

"We think the businesses are very complimentary. They both take advantage of culinary and production skills and we have transferred knowledge from one side to the other, and vice versa," Liu said.

Liu works closely with the company's Founder and CEO, Sue Gin, who continues to be actively involved in the business. "Sue is the heart and soul of Flying Food Group," Liu said. "She drives us everyday to be better for the customer and our employees."

"We are thrilled to welcome Milt back to FFG," said Gin, in the September announcement of his appointment. "He knows us well and brings additional customer focus and leadership experience to the company."

Both the leadership and experience will be important tools that Liu clearly plans to use in the months ahead as he visits the company's kitchens to stress the importance of that customer service to the 3,500 employees whose numbers swell to 4,000 seasonally.

"We can always get better, and it begins and ends with our people," he said. □

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