

Flying Food Group has three catering units in Hawaii including one it has recently opened in Honolulu

# Solidly alternative

Flying Food Group is continuing a years-long expansion effort as its best customers, foreign airlines operating into the U.S., add routes and competitive caterers follow the growth

by RICK LUNDSTROM

**W**ith headquarters in Chicago – the “City of the Big Shoulders” – Flying Food Group’s history is written from the heart of the American Midwest in a city known for music, sports, roughnecks and, of course, transportation.

But look around any of the 15 U.S. airports where the company now has catering units (20 in total) and it’s a good bet that the airlines with foreign names and aircraft with exotic-looking tails are carrying trolleys filled with the product of Flying Food Group’s chefs and production employees. The caterer has built its reputation on its ability to handle any type of cuisine and to stock any aircraft for a return trip home, no matter how long the haul.

This places the caterer in what appears to be a solid position this year and justifies the company’s aggressive expansion, with planned openings of new units on the U.S. West Coast and Hawaii as well as expanded capabilities in other parts of the country. The growth plan is keeping pace with foreign airlines’ interest in the United States as a destination and international

route expansion of domestic carriers.

In 2017, foreign airlines logged 732,244 flights into the United States, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), which is up from 690,703 the previous year, and flights into the United States by foreign airlines have grown steadily since 2010. Numbers from last year indicate the trend continues, as the BTS reported 636,093 flights by foreign airlines had been completed during the first 10 months of 2018.

Passengers on foreign airlines surpassed the 100 million mark in 2016, and in 2017 increased to nearly 116 million by the end of the year. During the first 10 months of 2018, international passenger arrivals by air stood at more than 103 million.

A privately held company, Flying Food Group experienced revenue growth of 8.5% in 2018 and is moving ahead with expanding unit capacity and efficiencies to accommodate what Nicolas Rondeau, Executive Vice President Sales and Marketing, sees as a continuing interest from airlines that make up the core of its customer base, coupled with the increas-



Nicolas Rondeau, Executive Vice President Sales and Marketing at Flying Food Group

ing attractiveness of the U.S. market.

“Over the years, we have seen a tremendous growth in both international routes of domestic carriers and also in the expansion of networks of foreign carriers,” he says.

By the time the industry gathers in Hamburg, Flying Food Group expects to be catering its first meals from a new unit in the Hawaii capital of Honolulu. Hawaii, and by extension Hawaiian Airlines, has been a steady source of business for Flying Food Group. This past summer, the caterer opened its third unit in the state, in Lihue on the island of Kauai. It also operates a kitchen in Kona on the island of Hawaii.

Flying Food Group is moving its location off the tarmac at Honolulu’s Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL) to make room for Hawaiian Airlines at the gates and to also take advantage of a facility with a greater capacity to serve its

airline customers. One of those customers, All Nippon Airways, will soon be operating A380 service into HNL.

Two other openings will be taking place on the west coast of the United States. In the summer of this year, Flying Food Group will open a new catering unit in San Francisco, and by the end of the year it will move into a new operation in Los Angeles. Rondeau said both facilities will have better efficiencies and a moderate increase in capacity.

Both catering units in California

are devoted solely to transportation food service operation. However, the company is also expanding what it calls a “hybrid” catering unit to take care of growth in Fresh Food Solutions, its retail catering operation. Flying Food Group started the business nearly 20 years ago and has expanded its production to a selection entrées, snacks and ready-made meals that are distributed to retail operations around the country. Four of the units have production facilities catering to both airlines and retail customers,

one of which, located in Miami, is undergoing expansion with the addition of two production lines. First phase is set for completion in the winter of 2019.

While moderate expansion and increased efficiencies are important, they do not garner the attention of anything that could resemble a world record. But the caterer found itself in the middle of media coverage in October of last year when television cameras descended on its unit at Liberty International Airport in Newark (EWR) to watch crews cater the newest, longest flight in the world.

Five times per week, Flying Food Group caters the A350-900ULR operated by Singapore Airlines for its return trip of 9,000 nautical miles, covered in 18 hours and 45 minutes. The aircraft is laid out in a two-class configuration with 67 seats in Business Class and 94 seats in Premium Economy.

The launch of the service brought camera crews and media coverage to the catering unit at EWR. And though the reporters have left, the challenge of catering a flight that long remains and will only increase as Singapore Airlines launches daily service during the summer months.

“We are always cautious on food safety and preparation,” says Rondeau, “But we take additional caution with the fact that you can make absolutely no mistakes with this flight, because the length of the flight makes it more difficult if you forget something.”

Even as foreign airlines take interest in the United States, so too has there been interest by foreign caterers. In the past year, Newrest opened a catering unit in Salt Lake City, Utah, while Emirates Group Caterer dnata is building a catering unit in Vancouver, expanding its stake in Canada.

These companies will be joining competition in the country with Flying Food Group, a caterer that was born when its founder, Sue Gin, first told the CEO of Midway Airlines that she could greatly improve the carrier’s food service. That beginning gave birth to a network of kitchens that live on after her death in 2014.

Flying Food Group’s independence and focus on customer service as an airline catering and retail service provider will continue, says Rondeau, even as the industry around it consolidates. □

Flying Food Group’s New York facility (JFK) began catering daily Aerolíneas Argentina flights between New York City and Buenos Aires in December

