



AIRLINE TRENDS:

DELIVERING THE FUTURE
OF INFLIGHT CATERING

from Driessen Catering Equipment



With consumers expecting (and usually getting) everything they want, right at their fingertips, the need for service and manufacturing innovation is more urgent than ever. Nowhere is this more evident than onboard aircraft, where logistical limitations necessitate creative, high-tech solutions for goods storage and delivery.

Recent market research conducted by Driessen Catering Equipment, in collaboration with industry experts, highlights six key areas of current and near-future demand in the onboard catering industry. Our findings shine a spotlight on the points of greatest overlap between recent technological breakthroughs and present customer demand.

Our research was based on original data as well as insights derived from detailed interviews with twenty industry professionals, including high-ranking representatives from the airline, catering, airport, and OEM sectors. In addition to our findings for the aviation sector, the research also explores developments in long-distance rail catering, with implications for trolley

design and other onboard food storage solutions.

Meeting these evolving needs requires adaptable, high-performance catering solutions. As a global leader in onboard catering equipment, Driessen Catering Equipment is at the forefront of innovation, developing lighter, smarter, and more efficient solutions that directly respond to these industry trends. Below, we explore these key themes, and the solutions designed to address them.



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KEY THEMES IN THE ONBOARD CATERING SPACE

- **The Shrinking Galley**
- **Airlines as Retailers**
- **The War on Waste**
- **Smart Catering**
- **Modal Shift**
- **Take Onboard**



THE SHRINKING GALLEY

The first theme identified by the report is titled The Shrinking Galley – a reference to the effect of space considerations onboard catering sections and carts. Under pressure to maximize onboard seating capacity, airlines are making several changes. They are embracing stackable drawers, replacing full-sized meal trays with storage-friendly half-sized meal boxes, and unbundling free snacks and meals from standard economy flight tickets.

This seat-maximizing reduced catering strategy is proving to be popular with major carriers, as data from Airbus shows. Whereas just 6.4% of A321s were given high-density cabin layouts for increased seating in 2018. Flight attendants often need to reach down into tightly packed trolleys to retrieve food items during service.

Despite these changes, the smaller workspace still increases physical strain on flight attendants. They often need to reach down into tightly packed trolleys

to retrieve food items during service.

Driessen's **Hightop Trolley** addresses the challenges of shrinking galley space by offering increased internal volume within the same external dimensions. This innovative design allows airlines to carry more meals or service items without requiring additional trolley space, helping to optimize cabin layouts while maintaining service quality. The Hightop Trolley also supports greater configuration flexibility, enabling better adaptation to evolving galley constraints.



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AIRLINES AS RETAILERS

A related theme explored in research was: Airlines as Retailers. With free catering options removed or reduced for economy ticket holders on many flights, retail catering takes on a larger role, particularly on short-haul routes. The now-common decision to unbundle meals from air tickets reflects the downward pricing pressure put on the airline industry as a whole, because of the rise in low-cost carriers (LCCs). As of 2023, LCCs operate most commercial aircraft in Southeast Asia (52%) and South Asia (63%), and one-third of all commercial aircraft worldwide.

Ticket prices can be lower for passengers if food and beverages are not automatically included in the fare. At the same time, airlines can save galley and trolley space since only a fraction of customers will order from the menu. Attendants will also have fewer customers that need serving, and therefore – as we will see in the next section – less waste to organize and dispose of.

The onboard purchase rate for passengers on short-haul flights has been measured at 1 in 20, although some airlines achieve higher take-up rates by producing a more appealing menu.

Using this system of unbundled catering options, airlines can also advertise the benefits of pre-ordering meals to be served in-flight. Passengers can enjoy significant discounts on meals they order in advance. The pre-ordering system also helps airlines prepare exactly the meals they know they'll be serving, along with a smaller number of extra options for impulse buyers onboard. This arrangement delivers real time, labor, and material savings for service providers.

To support this shift, Driessen offers modular trolley configurations that accommodate a wide range of meal service models, from pre-packaged selections to full onboard retail operations. The flexible drawer systems and lightweight designs help airlines optimize space while ensuring passengers receive the meals they expect. Additionally, Driessen's specialized **Retail Trolleys** facilitate efficient onboard duty-free sales, enabling airlines to further enhance revenue opportunities and passenger satisfaction.



THE WAR ON WASTE

The next area of focus of our research was: The War on Waste. On average, each passenger generates 1.43 kg of waste per flight – 20% of which is untouched food and beverages. Switching to piecemeal F&B ordering can reduce the weight of uneaten food, the amount of used food packaging, and the number of trips passengers take to the bathroom, while also lessening the quantity of consumables needed for F&B service in the first place.

The use of recyclable food packaging and utensils can also positively impact airlines' ESG scores, while waste separation trolleys and non-electric trash compactors can make the most of the limited storage space for onboard waste.

Other ways to reduce waste include adding more fresh fruit and vegetables to the menu. These require little to no packaging but should be kept in temperature-controlled spaces.

Driessen's **Waste Trolleys** help airlines implement smarter waste management strategies. Designed for separation and compaction, they reduce onboard clutter while making recycling more efficient.



Designed for separation and compaction, our Waste Trolley reduces onboard clutter while making recycling more efficient.



SMART CATERING

The next concept to help improve efficiency and reduce waste is Smart Catering, also highlighted in our research. By collecting historical data on individual passengers as well as on different air routes, airlines can use AI to predict likely F&B needs and even optimize menu offerings for any given flight. Attendants, if given foreknowledge of a given passenger's previous orders, can likewise suggest that same item on their next flight, increasing sales.

KLM has found that 3–5% of its passengers miss their flights. The airline's AI system also monitors flight schedules to predict which passengers are likely to miss their connections, allowing staff to reduce food and beverage loading accordingly. This process alone allows KLM to reduce its food waste by over 100,000 kg per year.

For passengers that do come onboard, individualized data collection becomes easier when they place orders through the airline's own app. Incentives such as discounts can further encourage pre-ordering. Someday, the trolley itself could function as a connected node in a smart catering platform. If so, it may come to operate like a vending machine, with orders taken and paid for via phone app.

With around 1 million trolleys in circulation worldwide, catering operations require precise coordination across hygiene, loading, refrigeration, transport, and security to ensure on-time departure. Managing these logistics across numerous destinations adds layers of complexity. Driessen's **CLEO360** digital platform simplifies this process, giving stakeholders a complete operational overview to drive data-driven decisions and ensure consistent quality in every onboard experience.



MODAL SHIFT

Airlines are not the only venue for the kinds of advances outlined above. Our research highlights a Modal Shift toward catering on other forms of transport, like long-distance trains. The very same concerns, and opportunities, characterize F&B service on railways as well – though with less of a premium on trolleys made from lightweight materials.

The building and upgrading of high-speed, long-distance lines across Europe and Asia could radically transform travel within the next 5–10 years on both continents, particularly as travelers tend to prefer rail on routes where both modes of transport are available.

Driessen's catering solutions extend beyond aviation, providing lightweight, durable, and customizable equipment for **rail operators** looking to enhance onboard service while maximizing efficiency.



// **The report rightly highlights a Modal Shift toward catering on other forms of transport, like long-distance trains.**

TAKE ONBOARD

The final key theme of our research, Take Onboard, refers to passengers buying food and beverages at the airport and bringing them on as they board the plane. Passengers could theoretically pre-order food via smartphone, and have that food delivered to them at the gate just prior to boarding.

Though promising as an idea to help ease the catering burden for airlines, this strategy runs into numerous practical obstacles. Airports, for example, have different F&B partners than the individual airlines that operate from their terminals, and so promoting food or drinks from any given airport-based outlet could cause a conflict of interest. Bringing additional food and drink items onboard also increases waste on the aircraft.

Still, if such arrangements could be made, and special waste-minimizing packaging developed for 'take onboard' consumables, airline catering could be reduced with more trolleys used instead for waste processing and disposal.

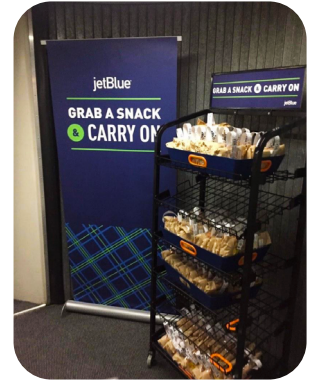
READY TO SERVE

Taken together, the above themes and innovations serve as a detailed guide to the next generation of onboard catering, sourced straight from the mouths of industry leaders. The products they describe deliver major efficiency improvements for transportation providers, while adding convenience for trolley operators and passengers alike.

At Driessen, we recognize the importance of these industry shifts and are committed to delivering solutions that support airlines in maximizing efficiency, reducing waste, and enhancing passenger experiences.

Best of all, this fully optimized line of onboard catering equipment is available today from Driessen.

Get in touch to learn more.



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SHAPING THE FUTURE**



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