

## IN-FLIGHT MEALS

# Ex-Vancouver chef feeds world from Dubai

Veteran at the heart of operation turns mass meals into gastronomic glam for Emirates Airlines

SHANNON MELNYK

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

En route from Seattle to Dubai aboard Emirates Airlines, I am tucked away, quite literally, in business class. An attendant with crimson lips and a nurturing touch brings me a mattress and a hot mint tea before the lights dim and a thousand stars hover over my sleeping pod. Although I'm on fast-float to the Arabian Desert, this is not a mirage. Nor are the orchids in the washrooms, the welcome flute of Moët & Chandon or the Bvlgari compact totes stocked with luxury eau de parfum, emulsions and all the toiletries one may suspect would come in handy on a near 15-hour flight.

The West Coast's only direct flight to the Middle East is a convenient and intriguing new option for B.C. travellers who are sampling one of the world's fastest growing airlines for the first time. What began 27 years ago as a vision to turn a dusty speck of desert into an international hub with only two leased aircraft has burgeoned into a tour de force in the airline industry, now flying to 128 destinations in 74 countries across six continents. Emirates is cashing in on its glamorous approach to the inflight experience.

I feel like I'm sitting in command central, with high-tech options all around me. I wonder to myself if technology inundation is part of the Emirates strategy to make these long haul flights feel shorter, as it takes me about an hour just to figure out all the new toys I have access to. I'm holding Emirates' own answer to the iPad with a hand-held touch screen that works hand-in-hand with my 17-inch widescreen in offering staggering access to information, phone, texts and emails and over 1,200 international entertainment channels.

But making the biggest impression is the cuisine. Packages of Peak Fresh and modern TV dinners are nowhere to be found even in economy class, where portions are fresh and generous. I settle into a delicate yet hearty seafood biryani with roasted cashews and slow roasted tomato thyme soup with chive crème fraîche on what feels like a floating restaurant that will continue to feed me all sorts of delights until I leave the aircraft almost a day later. Fresh croissants, spicy snacks, international cheeses, colourful cocktails, and Godiva chocolates all come and go in a blur of what feels like the gastro-Olympics. No request seems ridiculous, which I had already gathered after I saw what at first I could not believe. Emirates offers an astonishing range of 23 special meals. Lacto-ovo diet? Not a problem. Western vegetarian is available, unless of course you prefer Asian vegetarian. Baby meals, diabetic meals. Low cal, low fat, low protein, Hindu, Kosher, gluten free. Have got it? Low Purine. In a life transition? Order a post-wedding meal. The sheer feat of its offerings, never mind the logistical, temperature



Executive chef Mukesh Tugnait goes over schedules and menus that feed thousands of passengers. The offerings on board include, top left, a fresh salmon dish, lamb from New Zealand, left, and a dish accompanied by Basmati rice that was selected from 16 varieties.

and time-sensitive nature of putting fine cuisine in the air boggle the mind. Exactly how do they pull off this miraculous, complicated symphony of sustenance? I discover it's with a Canadian conductor at the helm.

Executive chef Mukesh Tugnait is the picture of serenity under fire for a man that oversees 128,000 meals a day. He looks at his watch and makes light of the fact that he will soon have only minutes to prepare an elaborate tasters' menu for some special visitors. I'm now in Dubai at the massive Emirates Flight Catering facility, otherwise known as the kitchen that never closes. The former Vancouverite is all smiles and exuberance as he explains how 489 chefs freshly prepare 1,524 different menus. A Japanese chef creates a regional range of sushi for the Japanese routes; an Indian specialist prepares a myriad of different curries to cater for Indian sub-continent flights; and a chef from the U.S. advises on best menu options

for flights to America. "It's easy for us to include local cuisines in all menus," he says. "We have 50 nationalities here, so it's like the United Nations."

This is clearly not Tugnait's first gig. He commands the largest facility of its kind in the world by way of both a French classical fine dining background and inflight catering services stints across the globe. The 45-year-old jet-setting chef has built his considerable resume at the Hotel Taj Inter-continental in India, and Le Tire Bouchon and Le Champagne in Hong Kong. His skills that have reached the skies have been a part of inflight catering facilities in Singapore, Maldives and his home turf of Vancouver and Toronto.

Now at Emirates during its unprecedented expansion, it has been the challenge of his life and one that he accomplishes with a hands-on approach. "We are very precise in our selections and food sources. I sampled 16 varieties of Basmati rice to arrive

at the Basmati we felt was best. When we order lobster, it's Canadian lobster. P.E.I. mussels. The best lamb from New Zealand. Poultry from Brazil. Meals change every month — a gesture of exceptional service for our regular passengers."

Tugnait breezes through what he calls the "hot kitchen" and barks loudly at a fellow chef. In classic Canadian fashion, he apologizes if this sounds rude to an outsider, and explains this is how chefs communicate. I marvel at all the bubbling, steaming, and sautéing in this beat-the-clock environment that's obsessed with heating and cooling temperatures, fresh food sources, hygiene and presentation. If any pattern of imperfection is noted in passenger feedback, the item's process is heavily scrutinized from process to plate.

"No two days in the kitchen are alike," says the energetic, adrenalin-charged chef. I pass by a tiny taste of what amounts to an unspeakable

amount of food that passes through this uber-facility a year: 255 tonnes of beef tenderloin, 15 million croissants, 3 million fresh eggs and a whopping 220,000 litres of whipping cream.

The freezers, the ovens, the automated techno-wizardry, the paperwork, the volume of workers: It's inducing a stupor in me while Tugnait is excited and present, admitting he loves the buzz.

"If you love your job, then you don't work a single day in your life ... and I love it! I do, with a passion. I'm not afraid to fail and ask myself why not? It motivates me to take on bigger challenges."

Back on Emirates en route to North American soil, I eye my vol au vent, creamy seafood in a crunchy puff pastry shell with fresh dil pesto and sautéed mushrooms, as if we have a private joke between us. A new appreciation for what's on my tray takes hold and I bite down on what I still consider a small miracle.