

Helsinki's hunt for quality

In each edition of Consumer Focus we listen out for the travelling consumer's voice and assess how the industry is responding to it. Last October Helsinki Airport and Finnair teamed up to launch the Quality Hunters initiative, an online community aimed at generating ideas to enhance the passenger experience at the airport and in the air. **Genevieve Knevitt** reports on a pioneering, consumer-centric proposition.

INTRODUCTION: Last October, Helsinki Airport and national carrier Finnair launched **Quality Hunters**, an initiative designed to enhance the air travel experience through the Finnish gateway.

Eight representatives, or Quality Hunters, were chosen out of 2,000 applicants to travel the globe in search of inspiration, documenting their experiences on the Quality Hunters website and making suggestions for air travel improvements.

Crucially the public was also able to submit, comment on and vote on their favourite suggestions – and the best ideas are now being driven to implementation. Joined by the public, Quality Hunters formed an online community with a reach of over 9.1 million people. Working together with the Quality Hunters, the community has generated over 250 development ideas for the airport and airline.

Johanna Metsälä, who bears the appropriate job title of Customer Experience Manager at Helsinki Airport, says the concept was born

out of **Via Helsinki**, a partnership between Helsinki Airport and Finnair dedicated to encouraging travel between Europe and Asia through Helsinki.

“It all started with the goal of promoting Via Helsinki as the fastest way to travel between Asia and Europe,” she explains. “Instead of using only traditional marketing communications, we challenged ourselves to do something that really has an impact on the whole air travel experience. We took a strong service development angle

and the key point was not only to gather great ideas but also get people involved and jointly refine the small and big ideas – and finally implement the best and most feasible ideas with us.”

Sanjoo Malhotra, a food artist and founder of lifestyle-based travel company Out of the Box Travel, was chosen to be the food & beverage Quality Hunter.

Asked what made Malhotra so special, Metsälä says: “He had a broader perspective on food that raised our interest.



Quest-for-the-best: Quality Hunter Sanjoo Malhotra enjoys a beer spa and then it is time to hit the hay

He was interested in food & drink that celebrates a higher cause and is beautiful and responsible, as he wrote [in his application]. He had also created his own fresh organic cuisine, fusing Nordic ingredients with Indian ones, and he wanted to discuss how traditional food & drink can be used in modern ways.”

It was Malhotra’s mission to travel the globe in search of culinary inspiration to evolve Helsinki Airport’s and Finnair’s F&B offers. This passionate foodie’s 48-day quest-for-the-best covered a diverse range of ideas, touching on issues such as vegetarian fare, children’s menus, healthy options, organic produce, and

enhancing the customer journey through quality service. He hunted down quirky, unique restaurants in dark alleyways, slept on beds of straw, dined with celebrities and interviewed passengers to help inspire his suggestions.

Here we highlight some of Malhotra’s most popular ideas from his in-depth blog, all of which are being seriously considered by Finnair or Helsinki Airport.

Pan-Asian bistro

Inspired by a visit to the Coriander Leaf restaurant on Singapore’s Clarke Quay, Malhotra insists that a Pan-Asian Bistro is an absolute must for Helsinki’s Airport offer.

“Starting a high-end Pan-Asian bistro at Helsinki Airport will win it new clients and loyal clients from Asia,” he says emphatically. “The Asian heart lies in its stomach, and if you want to connect with it then go for the real authentic high quality food that Asia offers. A home away from home can only come with high-quality local cuisine.”

In his blog Malhotra describes the Coriander Leaf dishes that impressed his palate enough to put this idea forward so passionately. He was inspired by dishes such as Malay salt and pepper calamari, Vietnamese rice paper roll, smoked duck with mango salad, “heavenly” crab cakes with tomato chutney and tom yum soup with Thai shrimp.



The “heavenly” cuisine at Coriander Leaf in Singapore inspired Malhotra’s Pan-Asian Bistro idea

This was followed by a Middle Eastern dish of “succulent” Za’atar crust spicy lamb racks and fish molee with ginger, coconut, carrots and butter rice from Kerala.

Malhotra also suggests that a Pan-Asian bistro is a great way to enhance the vegetarian offer at Helsinki Airport by including a variety of vegan/vegetarian options in the menu.

Meat-free Mondays

Malhotra’s stay at the Nordic Light Hotel in Stockholm sparked the idea of introducing ‘Meat-free Mondays’ to Helsinki Airport and Finnair. The hotel recently introduced the initiative, serving fish but no red meat, and this caught his imagination.

“Imagine that Finnair took this big step to reduce its carbon footprint and also [that] of its passengers,” says Malhotra.



Meat-free Monday started as a movement in 2003, and is actively endorsed by Sir Paul McCartney, Oprah Winfrey and the City of San Francisco.

Advocates say that the concept helps in several ways to decrease the carbon footprint of F&B operations. It encourages healthier dining options, is more environmentally friendly since producing crops uses less earth resources than raising livestock, and reduces the higher costs associated with making food sourced from livestock.

“Profit, Planet, People – the winning triple bottom line!” enthuses Malhotra. “I think that this can be a great campaign for Finnair, and the first of its kind by an airline.”

But implementing an initiative like this is likely to provoke opposition from meat-loving passengers and restaurants with meat-heavy menus, so Malhotra suggests introducing the initiative on a voluntary basis.

“I believe that Meat-free Mondays should be given as an option to all passengers to choose from,” he suggests. “Why not at least start by offering this alternative, and build a marketing campaign around it?”

Malhotra says the popularity of the idea with the Quality Hunters public community will help see it introduced to Helsinki Airport and Finnair on a voluntary basis. “Voted the most popular idea by the



Sexy vegetarian cuisine: Elder pearl barley pudding and zucchini lasagne at Cookies Cream restaurant in Berlin

general public, Helsinki Airport too showed great excitement and interest in the idea. I know they are seriously looking into it, to find the right form and format,” Malhotra tells The Foodie Report.

But how will meat-loving passengers react to a Meat-free Monday campaign, even

if it is voluntary? Malhotra says you have to entice people, making the prospect of vegetarian food more alluring and so encouraging passengers to get involved in the initiative.

“One way to inspire everyone is by making sexy vegetarian food. I always felt that this was a niche, and that there is

a market for it. Singapore was a real haven for veggie food – but Berlin was the real inspiration,” he reveals.

With a tip-off from a “very important food editor” on his travels, Malhotra sought inspiration from a ‘secret’ restaurant in Berlin. Hidden down a dark alley behind a five-star hotel, he says Cookies Cream is a vibrant and bustling vegetarian restaurant. “I had always dreamt of making vegetarian food more sexy, more haute couture,” he says. “And here was an answer.”

Malhotra’s “above-heavenly starter” at Cookies Cream was taleggio cheese in puff pastry on a bed of oriental carrots with mustard fruit, and the “above-mouth-watering” main dish was a zucchini lasagne with vegetarian bolognese served with artichoke puree.

He says the restaurant’s allure is that it does not offer typical vegetarian food such as pasta, rice and potatoes but rather a varied, stylish and well-designed menu, with ideas which he believes can help evolve the onboard and airport vegetarian offers.

Malhotra says that the biggest challenge in implementing Meat-free Mondays and an enhanced vegetarian offer at Helsinki Airport and on Finnair flights is one of communication with passengers and F&B operators. He suggests communicating vegetarian offers through e-mail or

pop-ups when booking a flight to inform passengers of vegetarian options.

Play with your food

Malhotra conducted insightful interviews with young passengers, and observed that children are disinterested in their air travel food because it can sometimes be too adult, and children’s menus often contain too much ‘junk’ food. “Children are the future. It’s time to start a revolution,” he says passionately.

With the desire to take better care of this “VIP group”, he came up with an interactive concept called ‘Play with your food’. “Healthy eating and making children eat healthy food is one of the biggest worries for parents,” he says.

“Parents are always telling their children ‘Don’t play with your food,’ [but] maybe it’s time to change that.”

Inspired by the Japanese trend of making character bento boxes for children –

Charaben or Face Food, as coined by author Christopher Salyers – Malhotra suggests introducing this idea to the airport area as a parent-child activity.

He suggests the idea of interactive dining, through which parents and children will be able to design different Charaben characters together in a food playground.

“[It’s a] great way for children to play with food, learn to appreciate it and hopefully eat it. Parents can finally get all those nutrients into their children in a fun way,” he says.

“Not only will they be developing long-lasting relationships with this VIP group, they will make both Finnair and Helsinki Airport the preferred airline and airport for the discerning child and parent.

“This issue crosses all boundaries – it’s a common problem from nations to schools and individual

parents,” he continues. “Helsinki Airport has a unique opportunity to be one of the first movers in catering to the future (the children) in a fun, healthy and wholesome way.”

Malhotra says the concept was received with great enthusiasm and interest by Helsinki Airport. Its management are considering the idea seriously - but, he says, the challenge lies in finding the right location and creating an environment that will attract children.

Healthy, sustainable food

A cornerstone of Malhotra’s palette of food & beverage ideas is fresh, organic, sustainable produce. He enthusiastically encourages the use of fresh, sustainable food in airport F&B, and found his inspiration in Paris and Berlin.

Among his ideas focused on healthy eating is an organic juice stand, a farmer’s market inspired by an indoor market in Berlin, and the use of sustainable produce to make

cooked meal options onboard flights and in the airport.

“I found two great concepts on rue Montorgueil in Paris,” he says. “The first one was a fresh organic juice concept called Wanna Juice which I think is perfect for Helsinki Airport. [They serve] soups and salads, fresh juices of fruits and vegetables or a mix of the two.

“The second was a new organic tea concept called Lov Tea, which I think is perfect for Finnair.”

Malhotra believes that these teas can have therapeutic benefits for passengers who might face health and stress issues while flying.

“Not only are they organic but they also have these great infusions,” he says. “For example tea that can help you sleep, especially on a flight, or tea that helps you overcome your fear of flying or calms you down... all towards getting more peace of mind as you fly high above the clouds.



The Quality Hunters celebrate “beautiful and responsible” food

“Consumers’ attitudes and expectations are changing, and this has to be reflected in what products we are offered when we fly - and definitely when we land at the airport, all dehydrated and depleted,” he says.

Will such ideas succeed? Only the consumer can answer that, Malhotra replies. “What is important to find out is whether you equate organic food with high quality? How important is green food for you?” he asks his readers.

“Is this something you consciously look for in the airport or on the flight? Should this become the norm, or are we stretching this too far?”