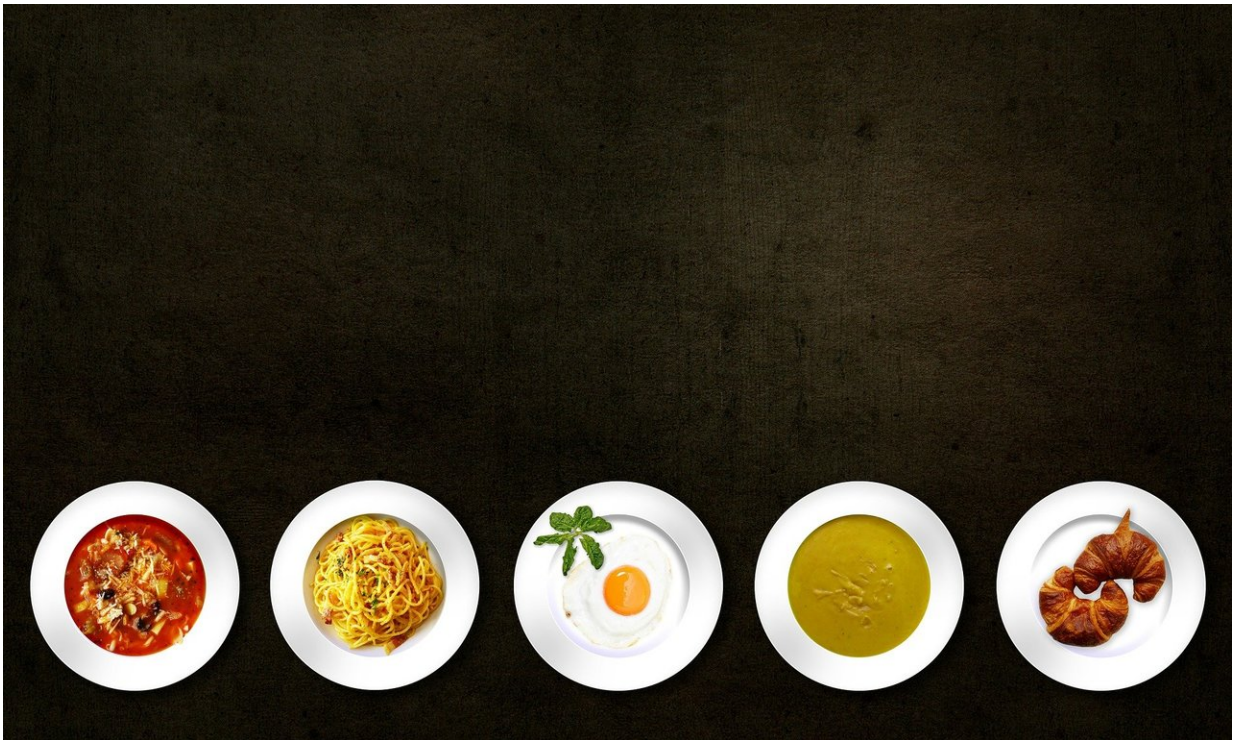


Alaska Airlines: the healthiest airline in the sky

November 21 2018



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There will be more than 30.5 million passengers traveling during the 12-day Thanksgiving season according to Airlines for America (A4A). Knowing the "best" and "worst" choices is a valuable tool for any traveler, so Dr. Charles Platkin, the executive director of the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center and editor of DietDetective.com once

again studied the best "Calorie Bargains" and "Calorie Rip-offs" at 35,000 feet.

The Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center at the City University of New York and [DietDetective.com](http://www.dietdetective.com) has released the [2018-19 Airline Food Study](#) rating foods for eleven (11) [airlines](#). The study assigned a "Health Score" (5 stars = highest rate, 0 star = lowest) based on eleven criteria including health and calorie levels of meals, [snack](#) boxes and individual snacks, level of transparency (display nutrient information & ingredients), improvement and maintenance of healthy offerings, menu innovation, [food](#) and [water safety](#) and cooperation in providing this information. The survey includes health ratings, average calories per airline, comments, best bets, food offerings, costs, nutrition information (e.g., calories and exercise equivalents.) See the full study at <http://www.dietdetective.com/airline-food-investigation/>.

"This year Alaska Airlines wins the top spot as the airline with the 'healthiest' food choices in the sky with Delta right behind, as well as Air Canada and JetBlue," says Charles Platkin, Ph.D., JD, MPH, the executive director of the Hunter College NYC Food Policy Center and editor of [DietDetective.com](http://www.dietdetective.com)

The average number of calories per menu choice in 2016 was 392, in 2017 it was 405 calories, and this year it is 373, a 32% calorie decrease over last year. Keep in mind, calories are not everything; the study also looks at the nutrients in these foods, as well as innovations moving towards healthy, tasty, inexpensive, sustainable foods.

Here are the major airline food headlines:

Alaska Airlines pulls to the top spot this year as the healthiest airline and inherits Virgin America's (VA) top spot. The airline worked hard to inherit the food footprint of VA, and surpassed VA by offering better

individual snacks and healthier meals.

American and Delta are offering complimentary meals in economy class on domestic flights, something we haven't seen in more than 15 years.

Airlines are eliminating packages of snack foods and offering individual smaller packages or eliminating individual snacks altogether.

The "Shame on You" award goes to Frontier.

American and Hawaiian Airlines are most improved.

Eating lots of heavy carbs such as pasta with thick, dense sauces, breads, muffins or cakes will leave you feeling lethargic, cranky and not full or satisfied. Your blood sugar levels will spike and then fall, which will negatively impact how you feel. On the other hand, you will enjoy an immediate benefit from eating small meals, lots of raw or steamed veggies, and fruits. The fact that food impacts mood, attitude and behavior has been well documented in the scientific literature. Whether you're traveling for business or pleasure, eating healthier will leave you feeling sharper and more energetic rather than bloated and lethargic.

Research shows that people typically consume most, if not all of the food that's placed in front of them. So, avoid snack boxes unless you're splitting them with a few other people, or it is your main meal.

Water Watch: This year the study includes food and water safety criteria. It's probably best to avoid drinking water from the tap on a plane, which also means staying away from coffee and tea. Even though the EPA has instituted the Aircraft Drinking Water Rule (ADWR) to "ensure that safe and reliable drinking water is provided to aircraft passengers and crew," there are a couple of reliable researchers who believe there may be harmful bacteria in airline water. This is probably

because the water tanks are not emptied very often (you would think they'd be emptied and cleaned at least once a day, but this is not so). So water is just sitting for long periods of time in what appear to be not-so-clean tanks. Buy bottled water in the airport as well as coffee or tea; you can probably ask the flight attendant to heat it up for you.

Here are the food-service offerings from several of the more popular airlines, along with Diet Detective's comments, ratings (Health Score: 5 stars = highest rating), calories, exercise equivalents (amount of walking required to burn off the food consumed) and personal favorites.

Summary of Health Ratings (5 Stars is highest): Alaska 4.25 stars, Delta 3.7 stars, JetBlue 3.55 stars, Air Canada 3.45 stars, American 3 stars, United Airlines 2.75 stars, Hawaiian Airlines 2.65 stars, Allegiant Air 2.1 stars, Southwest Airlines 1.6 stars, Spirit Airlines 1.1 stars, Frontier Air .85 stars

[Alaska Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Extremely Helpful

Health Score: 4.25 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual snacks):
404 Average Snack Box Calories: 471 Average Meal Calories: 510
Average Individual Snack Calories: 271

Comments: The clear leader this year. Alaska Airlines purchased Virgin America, (named the healthiest airline over the last few years) and has definitely taken on some of VA's healthy approach to food. That said, Alaska has always been committed to food, just not the healthiest. Note that the transition has been taking place over the course of this year with the fresh meals program integrated in July and snacks integrated as of

Nov. 16. Exact meals from the original Virgin menu, such as the PB&J half sandwich, do not appear on the menu, but Alaska's meals are now on the lighter, better and healthier side, having gone from "Island hash" and teriyaki chicken bowls, for example, to Fall Harvest Salad on coast-to-coast flights. According to the airline, main cabin food options can be reserved from 12 hours to two weeks prior to your flight, which makes planning simpler. Also, the Alaska Airlines website says that all nutrient information is available on its app. However, food and water safety could be better for an airline focused on better-for-you food. It also needs to pay attention to the coffee and tea served on board.

Best Bets: Among the snack boxes, the Mediterranean Tapas hasn't changed much from last year and is still the healthiest choice. It has olives, hummus, almonds, dried fruit and even a dark chocolate bar. But keep in mind that 510 calories is a bit high for a "snack" (or even a meal), so it would be best if you either shared the box or had it as a meal replacement. For kids, the snack box may be tempting, but it's always better for children (and adults) to eat a real meal. Among individual snacks, the beef jerky is low in calories but very high in sodium. The Fruit & Nut Oatmeal has almost as much protein and is a higher calorie but healthier choice overall. The breakfast offerings are a bit heavy and rich. If you opt for the fruit and cheese platter on the snack box menu, skip the crackers and half the cheese. You could also choose the Fresh Start Protein Platter and eat only one third of the cheese for fewer calories and less sodium. There are fewer lunch/dinner choices this year, but the Fall Harvest Salad is a high-protein low-calorie choice. There are also fewer individual snacks on the menu this year, and a few reasonable ones (if you share) including the popcorn, the oatmeal (mentioned above), the Jerky and the nuts (only if shared).

[Delta Air Lines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Excellent

Health Score: 3.7 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks):
499 Average Snack Box Calories: 556 Average Meal Calories: 588
Average Individual Snack Calories: 179

Comments: Yes, Delta is still doing a good job in trying to improve its food profile. However, the airline took a step backwards by taking the menu items and nutrient information off its website. I'm sure Delta will claim that it is changing the menu too often, and as a result it is too complicated. But if food is important to the airline, transparency of food should be as well. Last year Delta eliminated many of its individual paid snacks. The free offerings are relatively low in calories but are still not the great choices except for the peanuts (BTW, I wish they didn't change from the almonds). Delta continues to work with Luvo, which has a very strong commitment to healthy eating. All the calorie information for the Luvo items are listed on Delta's menu (and online); I'm just not sure why the airline doesn't put all nutritional information for all its food on the website and pocket cards. Why not list ingredients, as well as fats, proteins, carbohydrates and sugar. We love what Delta was doing, and the airline is on the right track, but it must be regrouping on food this year.

Best Bets: For a snack, the peanuts are the best choice—even better than the Kind bar or the lower-calorie pretzels. Within the box the best bets are the Multi-seed Crackers, Snapea Crisps, dark chocolate, almonds, hummus, and apricots. You can pass on the rest.

[JetBlue Airways](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Somewhat Helpful

Health Score: 3.55 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks):
323 Average Snack Box Calories: 414 Average Meal Calories: 430
Average Individual Snack Calories: 142

Comments: This year, JetBlue has changed its selection of EatUp snack boxes—all but the PickMeUp are new offerings. The EatUp Cafe, which comprises all of their fresh meal options and was previously available only on limited routes, has been refreshed and expanded to more flights. This is a great step toward having healthy options for all travelers, but they should definitely have this offering on all flights of more than 3 hours. The individual snacks are relatively low in calories as well as nutritional value (so not very good for you). The airline continues to post nutritional information for its snack boxes and meals on its website, but they don't post the nutritional information for individual snacks. It is on the packaging, but it should be on the website too (no one is looking while they're passing the snacks out—trust me). Again the airline should offer actual meals on more flights. As far as food and water safety, no exceptional additional procedures.

Best Bets: There are no healthy or better-for-you individual snacks. Also, as a constant reminder, the individual snacks are free, and the JetBlue team is generally friendly and will not say no to requests for extra portions. As for the EatUp boxes, the PickMeUp is lowest in calories but not necessarily the most nutritious. The SavorUp box features hummus, multigrain crackers and bean dip with Greek yogurt, and while it's high in calories, it's loaded with good nutrition (e.g. fiber and protein). Also the FuelUp box is pretty good, with the almonds, dried apricots, apples, and an RX bar. Have it as a meal though, not as a snack, and skip the biscotti to reduce low-nutrient calories. If you're on a flight that offers the EatUp Café, the Chia Seed Pudding and the Mediterranean Salad Shaker are good choices. Skip the Ham & Cheese Croissant, which is very high in calories and sodium.

[Air Canada](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Very Helpful

Health Score: 3.45 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals and Individual Snacks): 346 Average Meal Calories: 351 Average Individual Snack Calories: 324

Comments: Not too many changes this year. The meals are relatively healthy and available for trips that are more than 2 hours long. Providing real meals after only 2 hours is not typical; most airlines start offering real meals after 3 or 4 hours. I appreciate that Air Canada has its menu (exactly as it appears in the air, see [here>>>](#)) online; however, they should add nutritional information and ingredients. Also, it's nice that they offer meals but no snack boxes. People tend to eat the entire snack box, which is typically high in calories and low on nutrients. The airline has ended its relationship with the food company, Luvo, and replaced them with a company called Freshii.

Best Bets: For breakfast, the Greek yogurt is still a good option and will probably fill you up. The Avocado Smash Box with fresh guacamole, hard-boiled egg, green apple slices, and multigrain muesli bread sounds amazing and also offers 23g of filling protein to keep you energized. Honestly, that is the kind of food every airline should be offering. Skip the egg sandwich. The Chicken Soup is a low-calorie choice for a snack that will fill you up, but be wary of the 950mg of sodium if you are salt sensitive. The Celery & Carrots with Ranch Dip (if you use no more than half the dip) is still an OK choice. The hummus is an OK choice if you share it, and the guacamole appears to be healthy, but the Tostitos offer little nutritional value. The almonds are a large portion, but still a better choice than most of the individual snacks.

If meals are available, the Pangoa Bowl and the Kale Caesar Wrap are high-nutrient/ low-calorie choices. The California Roll is a light offering that's low in fat and calories. It would also make a great snack! The Greek Chicken Wrap is also a high protein, lower calorie option, but very high in sodium.

[American Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Helpful

Health Score: 3 / 5 Stars Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks): 416

Average Meal Calories: 589 Average Snack Box Calories: 415 Average Individual Snack Calories: 191

After Dec 1: Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks):496 After Dec 1: Average Meal Calories: 626 After Dec 1: Average Snack Box Calories: 530 After Dec 1: Average Individual Snack Calories: 191

Comments: American has taken a page from some of the other airlines and started a partnership with Zoes Kitchen. The new items will be available for purchase on most domestic flights longer than 3 hours beginning Dec. 1. Zoes is a clean food company focusing on a Mediterranean diet. This is an amazing step for an airline that has been completely asleep when it comes to food. Nice job, American!

Here is the bad news: When Zoes comes onboard, the food is cleaner, but higher in calories, something to note. The airline is still not publishing any food or nutritional information on its website—absolutely nothing. This is a strange move leading to even less food transparency and providing travelers with no ability at all to plan their meal. Also, for the

food and water safety question, American's spokesperson provided a lame response. January 2019 calorie information will be added to the menu onboard.

Best Bets: The Continental Breakfast offering with Chobani Yogurt is a good choice (only until Dec 1st, after which it's a high calorie Belgian waffle), the Breakfast Sandwich is OK, and the Breakfast Plate is also good nutrient-wise. If you purchase a lunch or dinner, the Gruben Sandwich seems to be the best option. The Humus Dou is high in calories but a good choice to share with two or three people. It may have a few extra calories, but they're mostly high-quality. As for the Fresh and Light meals, give away the cookie; it makes the "light" part of the meal disappear. None of the snack boxes are recommended. Avoid the free or paid individual snacks, and probably avoid the coffee or tea until a more relevant statement is issued by American.

[United Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Helpful

Health Score: 2.75 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks):

360 Average Meal Calories: 532 Average Snack Box Calories: 462

Average Individual Snack Calories: 199.5

Comments: United is still not paying attention to the call for good, clean, nutrient-dense foods. It is the 4th largest airline in the U.S. but has very few good choices for passengers. Also, while they at least have the foods they serve (with photos) on their website, there is still no nutritional information available. The good news is that they do have an ingredients list. You can take a peek here—but they're not very "clean." The individual snack choices are generally not healthy, the snack boxes could

be much more food/healthy thoughtful, and the meals are average to OK. I do like the fact that the airline has started to offer oatmeal for breakfast and the Mezze sampler for lunch (which is vegan by the way). Also, nice that the individual snack calories have decreased, but why go from a grilled chicken to a breaded (or fried) chicken sandwich? Not the right direction.

Best Bets: Among the individual snacks, the hummus is the best choice, and it would be a good idea to avoid the other choices. Get the Tapas snack box, which is high in calories but has many healthy foods, including almonds, olives, hummus and bruschetta; just toss out the cheese spread. You should also share it unless you're eating it as a meal. Skip the Classic and Select snack boxes. For breakfast, the Overnight Strawberry Almond Oats is an OK (to reasonably good) choice, but leave out some of the granola topping if possible. Avoid the other breakfast choices. For Lunch/Dinner, the Mezze Sampler is your best bet and should keep you full. Avoid the Chicken Parmesan Sandwich; it looks processed and the breading implies fried. The Banana Bread Pudding is NOT a meal, it's a full-on dessert and not something you want to eat on the plane. Parents should avoid the Kid's Snackbox. Not sure what the airline is thinking with these snack choices. And the free snacks may seem free, but they're not; there is a physical cost to eating them.

[Hawaiian Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Somewhat Helpful

Health Score: 2.65 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks):
419 Average Meal Calories: 502 Average Individual Snack Calories: 389
Average Snack Box Calories: 342

Comments: This year the media spokesperson tried to help get us some information. However, much of the nutritional information still had to be estimated by Diet Detective nutritionists. The airline's individual snack calories decreased from 582 last year to 389, but are still generally foods to be avoided. The Kitchen & Love foods are nice exceptions. The airline's meals are also lower in calories, down from 971 to 502. Finally they are moving in a better, healthier direction over all. Nice work. Now we need to get more accurate information, and the airline needs to offer even more healthy meals.

Best Bets: Among the snacks, choose the Hummus & Pita Chips or the new Kitchen & Love farro or quinoa options. They are really the best choices among the individual snacks. All the others are very high in calories. You might think the Salted Macadamia Nuts would be a good choice, and they do have healthy properties, but only if you split them with 5 other people or have them over the course of a few weeks. The two oatmeal options are lower in calories but are probably high in sugar, while the beef and cheese sticks (the lowest-calorie individual snack option) are high in saturated fat and sodium.

Also, keep in mind, you will probably get a very high calorie, unhealthy free meal on your flight, so go light on those snacks. Don't be fooled by the Gluten Free Box; while many of the individual items (such as the hummus and roasted chickpea snacks) are OK healthwise, it's still high in calories and out-of-touch with current food trends.

For the complimentary meals, try to go light on the breads, treats and dressings. Your best bet calorie-wise, if it's available, is the Penne Pasta Bolognese Sauce and green salad, but skip the cookie. The breakfast/brunch options are also OK if you skip the macadamia nuts. In the end, it would be best to eat before you board the plane; otherwise you might wind up feeling lethargic and cranky after one of these calorie-heavy meals. Just say no, and bring your own food.

[Allegiant Air](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Very Helpful

Health Score: 2.1 / 5 Stars Average Calories Overall (Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks): 335

Average Individual Snack Calories: 390 Average Snack Box Calories: 263

Comments: Allegiant has dropped its overall and individual snack calorie count by almost 17 percent. That's good news from an airline that has not previously shown any sign of improving its food profile. Allegiant has reduced the size of the nuts offered by more than 300 calories and are now serving almonds and cashews. They have also reduced the overall caloric content of the Deli Snack Pack by 130 calories since last year. Allegiant is moving in a much better direction; however, it would be wonderful if they added a few more nutritious food items to the menu. I bet they would sell. The good news is that in terms of food and water safety the airline is also on target.

Best Bets: Among the individual snacks, the nuts might work if you share them with at least one other person. The hummus snack pack is your best bet if you're mid-flight, but the snack boxes are not great in terms of health (and not only calorie-wise). Avoid the Deli Snack Pack, and the Wingz Kids Snack Pack is not a healthy choice.

[Southwest Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Very Helpful

Health Score: 1.6 / 5 Stars

Average Calories: 138

Comments: Not much variety and not much in terms of nutritional value. However, they are always helpful—that's nice. I wish they would add some healthy snacks, at least on a trial basis. This is one of the larger carriers in the US, so it would be great for Southwest to set an example and show that healthy food can sell if it is tasty and curated with consciousness. Of note, Southwest Airlines announced that it plans to stop serving peanuts in order to protect people who are allergic to them; American Airlines and United Airlines already have this policy in place. Unfortunately, the nuts (which were the best bet last year) have not been replaced with another "real" food item.

Best Bet: The pretzels are the only choice. Southwest typically has short-run flights. More than on any other airline, you need to bring your own fresh, nutrient dense, healthy food.

[Spirit Airlines](#)

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Not too helpful

Health Score: 1.1 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Individual Snacks and Snack Boxes): 378

Average Individual Snack Calories: 366 Average Snack Box Calories: 430

Comments: The media spokesperson, who joined the airline in 2017, was helpful last year but this year took almost two months to respond to our request for nutrition information, and he did not respond to our food and water safety questions. Spirit, which is all about the bottom line, should see some grander opportunity in selling healthy food (e.g., better margins, increased revenue, improved customer satisfaction, etc.). Also,

the airline is not keeping up with the major carriers, who have learned that large size snacks are not the best option for travelers.

Best Bet: The Quinoa with Artichoke & Roasted Peppers is one of just a few changes Spirit has made to its menu, and at 250 calories it is probably the best choice for a satisfying snack. The cup of noodle soup at 330 calories may also feel like a real meal, but it is very high in sodium, so it is not the best bet for anyone who is sodium-sensitive or has high blood pressure. The cheese tray at 130 calories is a much better choice than the Cafe Snack Box.

Frontier Airlines

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Not Too Helpful

Health Score: .85 / 5 Stars

Average Calories Overall (Individual Snacks and Snack Boxes): 372
Average Individual Snack Calories: 387 Average Snack Box Calories: 300

Comments: Frontier's communications team didn't do a great job responding. We reached out multiple times before we finally received confirmation that nothing had changed on the airline's menu since 2017. Additionally, Frontier did not answer the food and water safety questions.

Best Bet: As with last year, the trail mix could be the healthiest option, but travelers would be best off bringing their own food.

Provided by The City University of New York

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