



Translation at 35,000 Feet: The World of Airline Menus

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A specialized form of translation brings food, technology and project management together

There will always be a demand for in-flight meals, but the delivery of those meals is changing. And menus are evolving to match these changes. As the diversity of the flying public increases, so do the menus.

We now find formal, printed menus with gourmet cuisine moving primarily toward the higher classes of service. Fast-food-style menus common on low-fare carriers have moved to in-flight magazine pages or laminated cards. Some carriers have moved the menu to online systems. Still others are pioneering pre-flight ordering, thereby allowing maximum flexibility in dining and necessitating online delivery of the menu long before flight time.

The future of airline menus is moving toward divergence rather than convergence. Time-to-market is decreasing as the menus are increasingly offered to passengers pre-flight. At the same time, with passengers choosing their meals with increasing notice, catering will have additional time to prepare meals, even if the menus must be set much longer in advance.

Low-fare carriers, particularly in Europe, tend to offer a laminated menu, brightly colored, upbeat and busy, with the appearance and content similar to a cheery fast-food restaurant. Other times, the menu is a page of the in-flight magazine. Of course, it's food-for-purchase, and, no, you can't keep that menu — or the in-flight magazine. Both will be collected before you exit.

As technology advances, so does the delivery of the airline menu. Heiarii Robson, a purser for Air France based in Papeete, Tahiti, says, "ANA, a Japanese carrier, has a channel on its in-flight entertainment system with the menu." Other times, the opposite is true: "Once aboard an Air New Zealand flight from Papeete to Rarotonga and on to Auckland, the purser announced the menu over the PA."

It's been a while since I've seen an airline menu. It sounds almost quaint to talk about it since, in the United States and Europe at least, you're lucky even to get a meal these days, much less a presentation that involves a printed menu. About the closest most airlines come is the printed napkin with some advertising.

Food being one of my passions, I take note when an airline provides a menu. A printed menu is classy. It conveys a message of a higher standard of service. It evokes the past when air travel was an event you dressed up for and looked forward to. And it holds the promise of at least a decent meal, if not more.



Robson's enthusiasm brims: "I keep collecting them and just bought a UTA menu that was given onboard the defunct carrier's DC-10 on its short-lived route from New York to the French provinces (Toulouse, Bordeaux, Marseille, Nice, Lyon). A rare menu indeed."

Then there is the Airline Meals website (<http://www.airlinemeals.net>), run by a Dutch fellow named Marco who started off by photographing meals served on his way to Turkey to visit his girlfriend so he could show people back home the Turkish food. That site now claims to have more than three million visitors, 13,000 pictures, meals from nearly 460 different airlines — and to receive more than 200 new meal pictures per month.

On Airline Meals you can find, of course, those 13,000 pictures of airline food, in addition to pictures of some kitchens that produce the food, links to articles about airline food and even a collection of pictures of airline menus — 262 of them. The site is prominent enough to have been featured on CNN and in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*.

There is a host of "traditional" menus that are beautifully done, replete with original artwork, that seem to be printed on a cardstock. These menus are filled with appetizing and creative descriptions of meals, ranging from various regional specialties to the standard French-inspired "international" cuisine. In fact, I'm hard-pressed to find a menu that doesn't include this "international" French-inspired cuisine, usually consisting of a fish or meat covered in a pepper sauce, cream sauce or some other kind of sauce, a vegetable and a starch. "International" is a staple fare, complete with untranslated French terms such as *entrecôte*, *concassée* and *coulis*.

Beyond the French, however, lies a new world of "half-translations" as I call them, where the original word is "half-adopted" into English. For example, it's not unusual to find terms such as *chayote* squash, *zucchini* squash, *funghi* mushrooms, *chile* peppers, *chorizo* sausage and other redundant terminology including my favorite, cheese-filled *quesadillas*. To me, this is the cutting edge of localization — the gray area where the local and the international vaguely intersect. The terminology is known but not well understood, so we find that the "foreign" term is defined by its English meta-category, such as squash, mushroom, sausage and so on, preceded or followed by the original term in the source language. It likely won't be long before we find meat-stuffed tortilla tacos, French haricots verts green beans and maybe even seaweed-wrapped nori rolls.

Menus are usually flowery in their language, reflecting the high standards and sophistication that is supposed to accompany the meal. Localizing these menus requires a knack for reproducing this puffery in an appetizing and elite manner, sometimes compromising comprehension in the interest of maintaining the mystery and intrigue of the menu. I think that's why the odd unintelligible French term remains, as, I suppose, the glitterati of food-dom are intended to know these terms as members of the international elite who eat things that are *tournée*, *velouté* or *émincé* with some kind of regularity. Or, perhaps, *baguette au boeuf émincé* just sounds better than *hamburger on a bun*, especially when served with tomatoes *concassée* instead of *ketchup*.

Translating Menus

I translated my first airline menu on April 1, 1998. I didn't really give it much thought at the time. It was just a small project for TAP Air Portugal, if memory serves, for flights from Lisbon to Johannesburg, to be translated into Afrikaans. I thought it was a one-time gig, but the menus kept coming — and still do — mostly from what I thought was just an odd little translation agency in tiny, decidedly residential Carlstadt, New Jersey, perhaps with cats lazing about the office. I grew up near Carlstadt and had an aunt in nearby Hasbrouck Heights. The area is largely a collection of suburban, affluent bedroom communities of New York.



The “fast-food takeout” style menu offers food for purchase in English and Dutch

Carlstadt, however, is the headquarters of O’Sullivan Menu Publishing, which translates and prints more than 72 million menus into 54 languages each year. And they’ve been doing this since 1962. Today, O’Sullivan has 80 employees, and with printing facilities in the United States and United Kingdom, the company is one of the leaders in menu publishing worldwide.



Menu publishing is much more complex than it appears on the surface. Menus have to be printed and delivered to the right airport at the right time and for the right flight. Even if a menu is standardized for all flights, when it is localized, the complexity returns because the menu must be in the right languages for the right flights. It cannot be assumed that only two languages are involved, either. I remember a flight from Los Angeles to Johannesburg, changing in Kuala Lumpur, where the menu was in English, Malay and Chinese on the first leg — it stopped in Taipei — and Malay, English, Afrikaans and Spanish on the second leg. The flight was to continue from Johannesburg to Buenos Aires. I think I still have this menu, now 13 years old, in a drawer.

Given the complexity of printing, translating and delivering the right menus to the right flight at the right airport means that airlines must evaluate whether they prefer to handle this difficulty themselves or outsource the menu “program” to a third party. O’Sullivan provides just such a service.

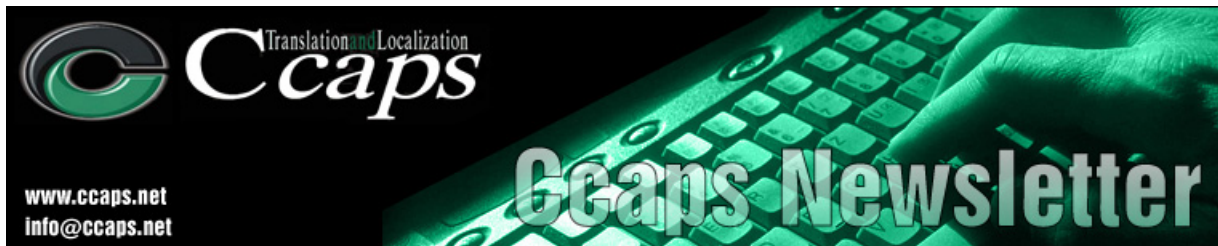
There is even specific software for the industry, products such as CALibre and MenusOnDemand, which provide, among other things, content and information management, along with a common interface between an airline and all the parties involved in the menu process, from choice of ingredients to printing, translation and delivery.

Another important aspect of airline menu translation is that the food descriptions have to be localized so as to be appetizing. You probably wouldn’t be tempted by *bottom-feeding North American lakefish steamed with stinkweed*, but *epazote-infused catfish au vapor* might sound attractive. The “appetizing” variable in menu translation sometimes means that a choice is made not to translate the entrée and to use the description area, if there is one, instead to convey the tastiness of a dish.

Along these same lines, even a “simple” term can create confusion. *Grouper*, *flounder* and *mahi mahi* may seem pretty familiar in the United States, but they may be unheard of elsewhere. *Grouper* is, more accurately, a Caribbean sea bass. *Flounder* is a variety of plaice, often called “American plaice” in Europe. *Mahi mahi* isn’t always as Hawaiian as it sounds. It also favors the Caribbean, where it’s also called *dorado* or even *dolphin*. A *winter flounder* is also known as a *lemon sole*. The same is true of cuts of meat, where a “filet” could be just about anything and a *milanesa* is just a thin slice of (often breaded) beef.

The Importance of Accurate Translation

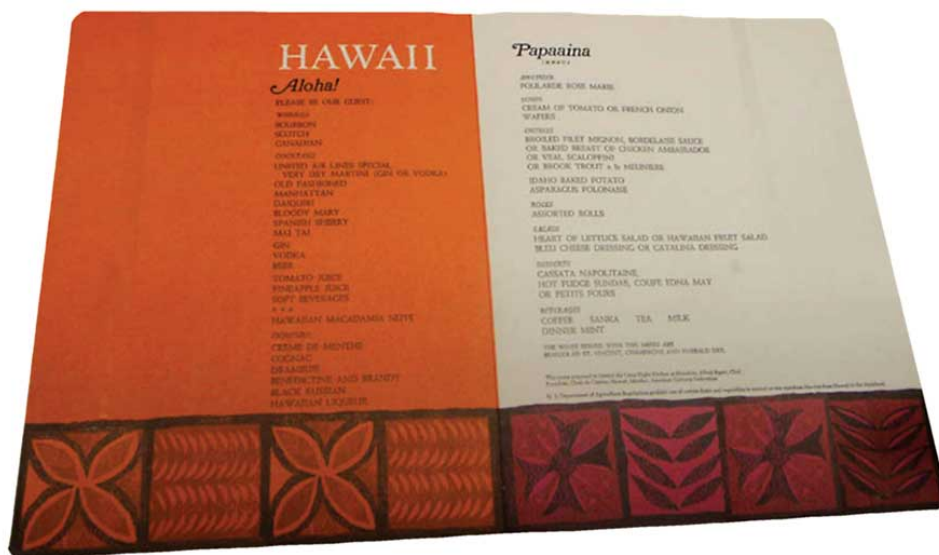
Adriana Marton, a seasoned project manager at O’Sullivan, provides some examples of the importance of the accuracy of the translation: “A translator misunderstood *fanned zucchini* and translated it as *ventilated zucchini*; expressions such as *Russian salad*, *Cuban sandwich* and *French Fries* can pose great problems because outside of the United States these items are referred to in a completely different way.”



“Chefs also like to use French or Italian expressions,” she says, “which might be difficult to transcribe — into Chinese or Japanese in particular — if written incorrectly.” She offers the example, “*ricotta saltata* instead of *ricotta salata* — the client insisted on using *saltata*, which means *sauteed/jumped*, while *salata* means *salted*.” In this instance, if *saltata* gets translated, it is important to know exactly what the dish is, regardless of English inaccuracies, or maybe just leave the term in Italian as given, and insisted on, by the client.

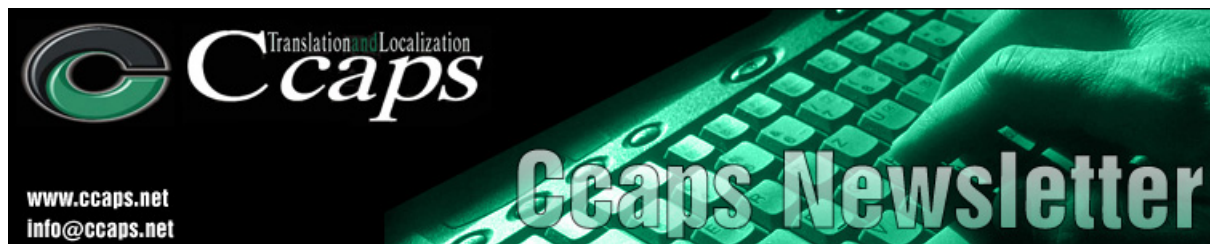
Marton goes on to say that file conversion presents problems at times because many languages are not supported in QuarkXPress. Arabic, Chinese and Japanese are done in a different system as well.

“The availability of various freelancers, especially for ‘unusual languages’ also presents a challenge,” she says, and when a client makes a last-minute change, all of the affected languages must be turned around on time. Deadlines are rigid because the menu must, of course, be on the flight before it departs.



A menu from a Hawaiian flight incorporates island-style art motifs

Orla Ryan, technical translator and coordinator for Fasttranslator.com (unaffiliated with O’Sullivan), is just such a freelancer based in Dublin, Ireland. She regularly translates American English menus to Irish Gaelic.



Ryan observes, "It has certainly been a fun project, and it has had its challenges — coining new words in Gaelic being one of them — always in consultation with native speakers and researchers, of course. There have been cases where I have had to 'gaelicize' new words, as no translation existed in Gaelic or perhaps the word was used in English in an Irish conversation.

"If I had to gaelicize the word, I would add an accent called a *síne fada* (long vowel sound) to a vowel to facilitate native Irish pronunciation. For example, *mango* becomes *mangó*. The meaning is still understood. For non-Anglo food such as Italian and Mexican cuisine, it is usually OK to use the original word."

Ryan further reports that Forás na Gaeilge (<http://www.irish.ie>) has published a comprehensive glossary called *Lámhleabhar Bia & Dí* (Food & Beverages Handbook) to address the ever-growing vocabulary used in Ireland for foodstuffs.

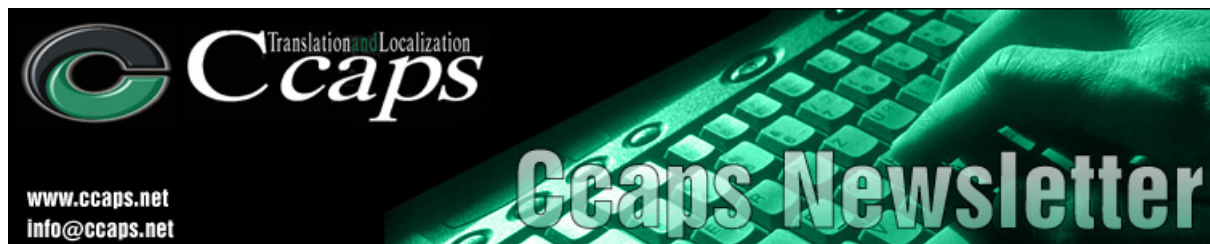
"It may have originally been used to encourage restaurants to use Gaelic in their menus," she says, "but I find it extremely useful for my translation work."

Roomy Naqvy, freelance translator and lecturer in English at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, India, started off translating menus for Austrian Airlines and Alitalia. He says, "I know that cuisine translations including wine translation is a major business in some languages, but in Hindi I haven't seen it to be such."

"One of the earlier menus was for Alitalia," he recalls, "and the text contained *smoked salmon served with vegetables julienne and black bread and grilled and gratinated Mediterranean vegetables* and I was supposed to translate them into Hindi. The problem in the first line is *vegetables julienne* and to a certain extent *black bread* — *julienne* of which vegetables? Or is it just a mixed vegetable dish? In which case, why not just cut out *julienne* and use the term *vegetarian preparation*?" The latter term, he says, would be more suitable to India where vegetarianism is common.

"As a freelance translator working for a translation agency that works for Alitalia or works for another agency that works for Alitalia, I cannot really make Alitalia understand these finer semantic and nuanced differences," Naqvy says. "If, for example, you translated *black bread* as *kaali double roti* in Hindi, probably nobody would eat it because it would seem as if the bread had gone so bad and so stale that it became black!!"

His solution is to "simply put the term as *black bread* transliterated into Hindi and expect that the end readers who travel on an airline might be rich enough and might have exposure enough to understand what it means." Now that low-fare airlines have caught on in India and with the economy booming, it's not such a safe bet that the passengers will be familiar with the terminology.



Naqvy recalls that he had transliterated *dessert* in Hindi but the translation agency re-translated it as *mishtaan* which only includes those sweets that are sold by a sweet shop and does not include soufflé, quiche, or even fruit salad and so on. The client replied that its editor was “an old hand in the cuisine business and that his versions were liked by the client.” Menus are tricky, and they require not just knowledge of the two languages but also a deep sense of localization. They require the translator to understand how to best negotiate between cultures, and translating menus requires knowledge of the semantics of the target language.

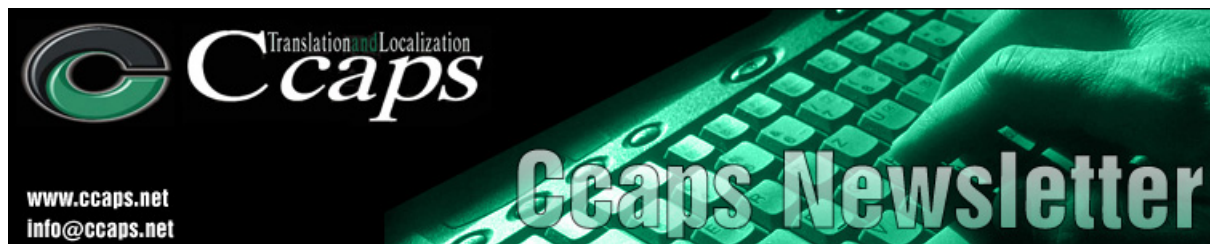
Some Examples of Difficult Wine Descriptions

- + Fresh and fruity fizz brimming with finesse and delicious aromas of gingerbread and pear.
- + Wine with delicate aromas of fresh hay and green apples.
- + A desirable mix of gooseberry and passion fruit.
- + Big, rich and creamy - not for the faint hearted!
- + Full bodied, dry and well structured with fruit, spice and lots of vanilla and oak.

“Another difficulty that I encounter while doing menus,” Naqvy says, “is translating wines and cheeses. Due to government restrictions on the import of foreign liquor along with high prices, not many people, including informed and knowledgeable translators, may have ever tasted, seen or heard about many wines or cheeses, much less understand the subtle nuances and intended meaning of the flowery language used to describe the taste of these Western delicacies.”

An Elusive Industry

Menu translation is not only a big industry, but also a rather elusive and artistic one. The frontline of the airline industry — the in-flight staff, the ground crew, reservations and so on — generally have little or no information about the menus, who decides on them, who prints them or even where they come from. Those airlines that responded to my requests for information either did not know or asked me to write by postal mail to their catering divisions. In various interviews with in-flight staff, most were suspicious of my motives, asking if the translation was bad or if I worked for the quality control division of their airlines.



What information I did glean, however, was intriguing. Printed menus seem to be completely outsourced and far distant from the front line of passenger service. Oddly, the menus are often no longer distributed and left with passengers. They are collected after the passenger makes a decision, much as in a restaurant, and then may be reused on later flights. If you ask, you can probably keep one.

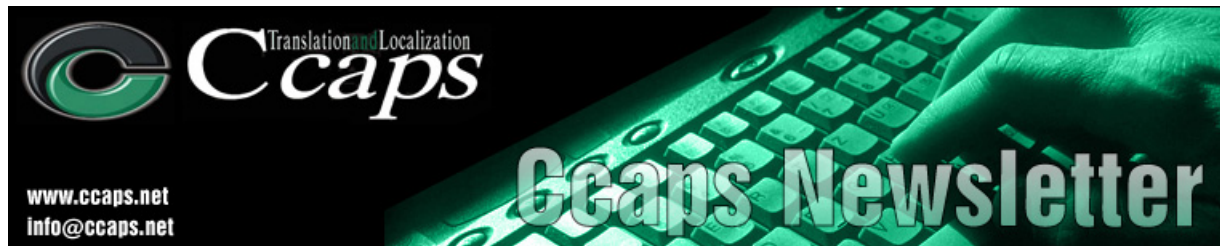
There is little "fine print" on a menu — no clues to where it came from — just the route on which it is used, using three-letter airport codes and the two-letter airline code, maybe a date and probably a part number. A part number is a numerical identification system, like a bar code without the bars.

In the United States, printed menus are only available in first or business class — and even then, only on flights exceeding four hours, meaning that only transcontinental flights have them domestically these days. Internationally, US-based carriers, as far as I can tell, only offer printed menus in classes above coach. Foreign carriers vary, with some still offering printed menus in coach.

Artistically, menus range from the bland white cardstock with black, often scripted, writing, to "studies" worthy of a gallery installation. Air France's butterfly series is a stunning collection with close-up, high-quality photos of the insects in their natural environments. The airline had other interesting series as well, such as lithograph-like scenes depicting events of the French Revolution on the 200th anniversary of the event in 1989; vintage photo equipment; and French book bindings over the past 500 years. In order to appreciate the artistry in a series, however, one has to be a frequent international flyer, log on to Airline Meals or perhaps visit the Menu Collection of the New York Public Library — 26,000 (not just airline) menus strong and growing.

Robson, who professes to have a huge collection of airline menus, reports that, sadly, Air France "doesn't change the menu covers much in coach anymore." He remembers that "for a while we used to give out menus in coach that were paid for by the different regions of France, whose cuisine was then featured onboard. The Regional Tourism Bureaus paid for it and put an ad about the region on the back cover. Inside, a famous chef from the region would feature a recipe, such as in the summer of 1998 when the June menu featured Roquefort cheese and was titled 'Summer in the Country of Roquefort Cheese.' The recipe in that menu or as it was labeled, the 'gourmet idea,' is a Roquefort tart!"

"One of the most unusual menus," continues Robson, "was the Air Tahiti Nui First Class menu cover, made out of tree bark with traditional motifs and a logo in mother of pearl. I managed to keep one, but they are usually collected back by the crew."



The printed airline menu marks an occasion and collecting them is easier than ever. As I write this article, more than 100 airline menus are up for bid on eBay, including a rare handwritten one from Middle East Airlines and a Currier & Ives lithograph series from erstwhile Pan Am. As an art form, menus excel; and for the localizer they are an interesting glimpse into the fineries of nuanced translation, the challenges of planning and executing a project, and even the detail-level intricacies of fonts. Airline menus, however they emerge in the future, will always provide a fascinating look at the interaction between language and culture, often on the same page.

Tim Altanero is associate professor of foreign languages at Austin Community College.