

Stuck at the Airport with Harriet Baskas

For this issue's Personality Profile, The Foodie Report caught up with Harriet Baskas, a writer and radio producer based in Seattle. Baskas is the author of travel blog *StuckAtTheAirport.com*, is the *At the Airport* columnist for USAtoday.com and author of its *50 Airport Guides*; she also contributes to a number of travel guides and websites. We asked the jet-setting journalist for her views on the airport F&B offer, how it has developed, and how it could be improved.

THE FOODIE REPORT:
What inspired you to devote so much energy to airports?

HARRIET BASKAS: I was travelling around the US working on a radio project about unusual museums – another one of my passions. At the end of my tour I was very homesick, so I went to the airport early, thinking I would return my rental car and get on the next plane home; but the next flight was not for eight hours. After four hours in this very small airport I started rattling doors and opening things, and eventually I found an unmarked lounge. I thought to myself: “I could have been sitting in these lovely leather chairs instead of the yellow plastic things in the waiting area.” When I got home at 1 or 2am I woke up my husband and said there needs to be a guide to all the things in airports. And that’s when I decided to do it.

Can you describe your relationship with airports?

Well, people make fun of me, even my husband and my friends, but I really love airports. As a child I used to

enjoy going to Grand Central Terminal in New York City – not so much to go anywhere but to see all the people coming and going. And that’s what airports are for me – a crossroads of people, humanity and possibilities. I

like thinking about where all these people are going. Airports are places in their own right – cultural places, business places – and they’re evolving. We’ve seen them change a lot, especially in the past ten years.



Baskas says airports combine “people, humanity and possibilities”

How do you feel airports and their F&B offers have changed in the past couple of decades?

When I started doing airport reporting I was doing airport guides for Expedia. This was five or more years before 9/11 and there was much less to talk about in airports, at least not in the US. After 9/11, of course, there were more security issues, so people spent a lot more time in airports and the operators changed in response to that, mostly because they had all these people hanging around for longer. They also needed to find more ways to generate income, so they had to get creative. In the US the joke was that you could always get something to eat at the airport, but it was an \$8 hotdog. If you weren't into that, there really wasn't much else. People expected to eat at the airport but they didn't have a lot of choice. It seemed like contracts were given for 40 years at a time, so there was no competition. But as people were spending more time in airports they wanted more choice, so airports needed to develop more dining options. And I think at that time, too, a lot of those long contracts were rolling over so operators could re-evaluate what they were doing with the amenities.

Which airports do you think have made most progress with their F&B offers?

Here in the US, [travellers] had assumed that if you were going to buy something at the airport then you would pay a



lot of money – more money than you would pay anywhere else. I think it was Pittsburgh Airport that first started ‘street’ or ‘market’ pricing, promising people that they would not be gouged at the airport.

Which airport F&B offers around the world do you think are the best, and why?

If you had to be stuck in any airport around the world, which would it be?

In the US, San Francisco Airport, because they have a really good museum programme. But I really love Amsterdam Schiphol. I spent a lot of time in that airport, at least four trips, before I ever went to visit the city.

It's definitely a destination; you never know what will be there next.

What is your most bizarre airport experience?

When I did my airport guides for Expedia I used to walk from one end of the airport to the other making notes, and it would take me several hours, no matter what size the airport was. One time I was walking through Washington National Airport and as it was after 9/11 I could not put anything in a locker – they don't have those here anymore – so I was toting my luggage behind me as I walked down a long hallway of shops. I got to the luggage store and realised I didn't have my luggage with me. I had stopped to take a note and left my bag behind – in the most highly secure airport in the country! I did that thing you see in cartoons when the character jumps up and their legs whirl around in a circle and I ran back to where my bag was. The police were there and they said they were just about to call in the dogs. So I almost shut down Washington National Airport... It was very embarrassing and bizarre, because you'd think I would know better. ■