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# Food for THOUGHT



Three rail interior designers address  
the challenges faced in creating  
a successful buffet car

Words by Izzy Kington



**WEIWEI HE**  
**DIRECTOR FOR CHINA**  
**AT TANGERINE**

## China Rail is trialling a new service tactic to supply food and beverages on board

ABOVE: A catering car concept for a high-speed train, created by tangerine

What food/beverage solutions have featured on your latest projects?

As a strategic partner of CRRC Changchun, the world's biggest rolling stock manufacturer, tangerine has designed five high-speed trains for the domestic Chinese market and international services over the last year. The catering car has been an area our designers have been closely considering as part of the design projects.

We are always looking to create stunning train designs that incorporate the latest innovations, enhance passenger experience and support seamless onboard service. From our experience working in the Chinese market, we have learned about the shifting habits of consumers and innovative new service solutions that operators are adopting.

What trends have you seen in food service?

Due to the current market standard – offering relatively poor choice, low quality and high prices for food and drink on board trains – China Rail is trialling a new service tactic to supply food and beverages on board.

Restaurant chains such as KFC and McDonalds, as well as smaller local outlets, register with the service to deliver food to customers. Trials are running at 27 stations across China, allowing people to use an app to pre-order the food of their choice, which is then delivered to the platform and brought straight to the passenger's seat by onboard staff.

How will these trends influence train design?

This is an example of an innovative service solution that improves the customer experience through added convenience and choice.

This also potentially has profound implications for the physical design of trains. If you no longer need dedicated catering carriages, the space allocated for meal preparation and service can instead be repurposed to accommodate more seats or alternatives such as zones for relaxation or socialising.

We think this is a good thing, as operators can concentrate on what they should do best – delivering a world-class train service at a good price, rather than trying, and often failing, to be a good caterer.

**How are passengers' eating habits changing?**

Like any service on board, food service in buffet cars must evolve to meet operators' and customers' new requirements. The offer has been restructured around new eating habits. Customers want to have a proper choice, and they want genuine, organic and good food.

Pleasure is a key word for today's consumers; they want this break during the trip to be pleasant.

**What challenges are operators up against in making a success of onboard food service?**

The offer has developed a lot in train stations, on the platforms, in a similar phenomenon to the evolution of motorway rest areas. New actors enter the market, such as market chains or suppliers with very specific offers, such as sushi, pasta, traditional meals or coffee. Just like street food, the food available on platforms is bought easily, consumed quickly, and can be good, healthy and cheap. The demand for choice and quality must be met on trains too, for passengers who want a quick meal or snack.

The challenge for tomorrow's onboard catering is to offer attractive and tasty food equal to the food you'll find at the train station, but also for operators to meet the challenge of consumer diversity, providing traditional, vegetarian and vegan options. Consumers' demand for comfort and service are getting higher.

**What design solutions do you propose?**

The concept of the buffet bar can be rethought to meet this diversity of demand. A new type of self-service facility could be created that is more adapted to the current mode of consumption. The customer would make their selection in a self-service area, then make their payment with a barista, who also coordinates the smooth running of the service. The key is to offer a quality service with shorter waiting times and more empathy.

This type of buffet bar would not be exclusively a dining/lunch area. Passengers would grab their lunch and return to their seat or sit down in the buffet car in a simple but comfortable way. From an ergonomic point of view the design should remind the customer of a bistro more than a restaurant.

**The challenge for tomorrow's onboard catering is to offer attractive and tasty food equal to the food you'll find at the train station**

**RÉGINE CHARVET PELLO**  
**CEO AND FOUNDER**  
**OF RCP DESIGN GLOBAL**





**ANDREAS VOGLER**  
**FOUNDER OF ANDREAS**  
**VOGLER STUDIO**

**The passenger wants honesty and authenticity, not camouflage and fakery**

ABOVE: Andreas Vogler Studio is finalizing a dining car for its AeroLiner3000 demonstrator, which would have a similar mood to the rest of the concept pictured, with atmospheric dimmed table lights

LEFT: A buffet car design by RCP

What trends have you seen regarding food service?

Food service on trains is at its lowest point of development at the moment. It has fallen from being a noble restaurant with white tablecloths to a low cost (for the operator), easy-to-clean, dingy environment. These cars remind me of homes for the elderly, what says a lot about how our society treats the elderly. Operators are trying to camouflage the poor quality by pushing dishes developed by TV chefs. They grin into your face on the menu, which doesn't make the menu better.

What do passengers and operators really want from a buffet car design?

The passenger wants honesty and authenticity, not camouflage and fakery. Operators have to take a decision: either they invest in staff who can cook and serve, not just press the button on a microwave and open a bottle; or they can install a high-quality vending machine. Both approaches are honest and worth their cost.

What challenges are involved in meeting these requirements?

Treat the passenger as a guest who is paying for the experience of travelling,

and not as a carriage case. Be honest about your service with your guests.

What design solutions would you suggest to meet these challenges?

Design is a process, where the solution evolves at the end, not at the beginning. Each operator has a different set of problems and realities. First be honest about what you want and then develop the solution you need together with the design team. However, please, why is it seemingly so difficult to get design basics like illumination, seating comfort, colours and materials right?

What food/beverage solutions have featured on your latest design projects?

The airline catering industry provides great convenience food solutions all over the world, which are easy to serve and yet may offer something different to the chocolate bar you can buy at the station. Surprise people and you will be surprised.

Eating is not just about nutrition, it is social, cultural, psychological and emotional. There is nothing that can lift the spirits more than good food and nothing that can spoil it more than bad food served in an unhappy environment following a long wait. ☹️