

## 2016-2017 Airline Food Study results revealed

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There will more than 38 million passengers traveling during this holiday season. Knowing what are the 'best' and 'worst' choices is a valuable tool for any traveler, so Dr. Charles Platkin, the director of the NYC Food Policy Center at HUNTER COLLEGE and editor of DietDetective.com, once again studied the best 'Calorie Bargains' and "Calorie Rip-offs" at 35,000 feet.

NYC Food Policy Center at HUNTER College ([nycfoodpolicy.org](http://nycfoodpolicy.org)) and DietDetective.com releases the 2016-17 Airline Food Study rating foods for twelve (12) airlines. The study assigned a "Health Score" (5 stars = highest rate, 0 star = lowest) based on ten criteria including health and calorie levels of meals, snack boxes and individual snacks, improvement and maintenance of healthy offerings, menu innovation and cooperation in providing nutritional information. The survey includes health ratings, average [calories](#) per airline, cost, comments, best bets, food offerings, calories, and exercise equivalents. See the full study at <http://www.dietdetective.com/airline-food-investigation/>

"This year Virgin America wins the top spot again with the "healthiest" food choices in the sky with Delta and Air Canada tied for second, says Charles Platkin, PhD, JD, MPH, the executive director of the NYC Food Policy Center at HUNTER COLLEGE and editor of DietDetective.com

The average number of calories per food item was 360 in 2012; in 2013 it was 388; in 2014 it was 397, 2015 it was 400, and this year it's 392, an 8 calorie decrease over last year. Calories are not everything; the survey

also looks at the nutrients in the foods when they are provided, as well as innovations moving towards healthy, tasty, inexpensive, sustainable foods.

Below are the surveyed airlines' "Health Scores" (Health Score: 5 stars = highest rating, 0 stars = lowest).

**Summary of Health Ratings** (5 stars = highest rating): Virgin America 4.25 stars, Delta 4 stars, Air Canada 4 stars, Alaska Air 3.75 stars, JetBlue 3.5 stars, United Airlines 3.25 stars, American 3 stars, Southwest Airlines 2 stars, Allegiant Air 1.75 stars, Hawaii 1.75 stars, Spirit Airlines 1 star, Frontier Air 1 star

## **Virgin America**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Excellent  
Health Score: \*\*\*\* 1/4  
Average Calories Over All (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 337  
Average Snack Box Calories = 394  
Average Meal Calories = 406  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 256

**Best Bets:** Avoid the individual snack if you can. Even the nuts, which are the best choice, are high in calories if you consume the entire package. Always choose a real meal if you can, even if it's slightly more calories it will keep you full longer.

For breakfast try the Udi's Granola with Yogurt and Fruit, which is a bit high in sugar but overall low in calories at 330. The best snack box is the Protein Meal with hummus, nuts and tuna; the others are a bit high in calories and are not really worth it. For kids, skip the Jet Set Kid Pack if you can, and go for the half peanut butter and jam sandwich (which unfortunately jumped 60 calories from last year). It's still a better choice.

In general, almost all the meals (as long as they're eaten as meals and not snacks) are good choices. I was sorry to see the Salmon Ginger Salad go. However, the Ginger Chicken Soba Noodles at only 328 calories are a good choice and high in protein, which will help keep you full longer. If you like tuna, the Provencal Tuna Sandwich is a reasonably good choice with a nice amount of protein and low-fat mayo, The Protein Plate is also a good choice, as is the Vegan Wrap with veggies and humus - powerful from a health perspective. Again, these are meals that will fill you up and help you avoid the junk. The good news is that none of the food goes overboard in terms of calories, so you really can't go too far wrong.

## **Delta Air Lines**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Excellent  
Health Score: \*\*\*\*  
Average Calories Over All (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 527  
Average Snack Box Calories = 560  
Average Meal Calories = 628  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 153

**Best Bets:** For a snack, the nuts are the best choice—even over the lower-calorie pretzels. The vegan, gmo-free Tapas Snack Box is a good healthy choice if you share or make it a meal (it's too high in calories as a snack). For within the box, the best bets are the Super Seed Crackers, Snapea Crisps, dark chocolate, almonds, hummus, and quinoa with pepper dip, you can pass on the rest.

For morning travel choose the continental breakfast (fruit and yogurt). It's 331 calories, but save the Kind bar for a snack later in the day. If you're on a transcontinental flight, your best bet is the LUVU Fresh Breakfast Medley. For Lunch/Dinner on regular westbound flights, choose the LUVU Southwest Grilled Chicken Wrap (without the cookie), and on eastbound flights the LUVU Sesame Grilled Chicken Wrap is a good choice. Again, you can skip the cookie to save calories.

For Lunch/Dinner on transcontinental flights, the LUVVO Mediterranean Whole Grain Veggie Wrap is a good choice and will fill you up (without the cookie). Pass on the Mesquite-Smoked Turkey Combo and the Black Angus Burger.

## **Air Canada**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Excellent  
Health Score: (\*\*\*)  
Average Calories Overall (Meals and Individual Snacks) = 337  
Average Meal Calories = 342  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 331

Best Bets: For breakfast, the Greek yogurt is still a good option- and will probably fill you up. And while the egg sandwich has bacon, it's low in calories and has slightly more protein than the yogurt. 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 have high blood pressure. The Celery & Carrots with Ranch Dip (if you use no more than half the dip) is still an OK choice. While the hummus and the new guacamole options sound healthy, the pretzels and Tostitos offer little nutritional value, and you'd be better off having a meal if meals are available. If meals are available, the newly added LUVVO Orange Mango Chicken is a good low-calorie choice. The California Roll is another a light offering that's low in fat and calories. It would also make a great snack! The Roasted Vegetable Sandwich is also a healthy, low calorie option.

## **Alaska Airlines**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Extremely  
Helpful  
Health Score: (\*\*\*)  
Average Calories Overall (Meals and Snack Boxes) = 521.6  
Average Snack Box Calories = 432.8  
Average Meal Calories = 572  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 240

Best Bets: Alaska does not have individual snacks - a good thing. 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 519 calories is a bit high for a "snack" (or even a meal), so it's best if you either share the box or have 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 than it is to "snack" aimlessly. FYI, the beef jerky is low in calories but very high in sodium. As far as breakfast goes, you can pick the Breakfast Scramble; it's high in calories but will keep you full longer. If you opt for the fruit and cheese plate, skip the crackers and half the cheese. There aren't too many dinner choices, but the Miso Chicken will suffice as long as you consider it a meal.

## JetBlue Airways

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: HelpfulHealth Score:  
\*\*\*  $\frac{1}{2}$  Average Calories Over All (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 330  
Average Snack Box Calories = 441  
Average Meal Calories = 483  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 161

Best Bets: Still not too much in the way of healthy individual snacks. So keep in mind, 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 meal boxes, we still like the Pump Up, which has healthy ingredients (Mary's Gone Crackers-Original, olives, hummus and bean crisps), but remember that it's a meal and should not be eaten as a snack ( skip the olives if you are sodium sensitive). Skip the other meal boxes, which are high in calories and fat and offer little in terms of nutrition. If you are on a flight that offers the Eat Up Café, the Yogurt and Granola (you might want to limit the honey), the Kale & Quinoa Salad and the Spicy Soba & Korean-Style Chicken (unless you're sodium sensitive) are all good choices. Skip the Grilled Chicken and Brie Sandwich, which is

very high in calories and low on nutrition.

## United Airlines

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: HelpfulHealth Score:  
\*\*\* 1/4Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 444Average Meal Calories = 508Average Snack Box Calories = 502Average Individual Snack Calories = 376

Best Bets: Among the individual snacks, the humus is the best choice. Or else share the Sweet & Savory Bistro Blend Trail Mix with at least a few others if you can. It's better than 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, your best bet is the Chicken Sausage Egg Skillet, but skip the chicken sausage to save calories.. Also, skip the ham baguette. For Lunch/Dinner, the airline removed last year's best bet, the wrap and salad combo. The new options are not great; however, the Mediterranean Chicken Wrap is your best bet and should keep you full. For kids, the Ben Flyin is better than any of the other airlines' kids boxes and might be worth getting to keep your kids smiling, but probably will not fill them up.

## American Airlines

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: GoodHealth Score:  
\*\*\*Average Calories Overall (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 367Average Meal Calories = 511.75Average Snack Box Calories = 497Average Individual Snack Calories = 246.5

Best Bets: For individual snacks the hummus and chips are still your best choice. Skip the snack box unless you toss the salami and cheese. The

Thai Ginger Chicken Wrap is a good choice, but skip the sesame-ginger dressing. For breakfast on flights of more than two but less than three hours (see below) there's not much to eat; and while the trail mix may seem like a healthy choice, it's very high in calories, so you would need to split it with at least one other person. On flights of three hours or more, the Breakfast Sandwich is an OK choice as long as you go light on the honey mustard dressing. The fruit and cheese plate has fresh fruit and the cheese can be OK if you share it with your seatmate.

## **Southwest Airlines**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Very Good  
Health Score: \*\*Average Calories = 190.4

Best Bet: The peanuts are the best, even though the pretzels are lower in calories. There haven't been many healthy changes to the menu, and don't be fooled by the word "veggie" in the wheat thins.

## **Hawaiian Airlines**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Somewhat  
Helpful  
Health Score: \* 3/4  
Average Calories Over All (Meals, Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 497  
Average Meal Calories = 841  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 426  
Average Snack Box Calories = 487

Best Bets: Among the snacks, choose the Hummus & Pita Chips - it's really the lower calorie choice, and better than any of the individual snacks, which 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. 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 are OK healthwise, it's still high in calories and should be shared or eaten as a meal.

For the complimentary meals try to go light on the breads, treats and dressings. In the end, it would be best to eat before you board the plane; otherwise else you might wind up feeling lethargic and cranky after one of these calorie-heavy meals. The meals and accompaniments look very heavy and unhealthy. Just say no, and bring your own food.

## **Allegiant Air**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Very Helpful  
Health Score: \* 3/4  
Average Calories Overall (Snack Boxes and Individual Snacks) = 395  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 379  
Average Snack Box Calories = 435

Best Bets: For the individual snacks, the nuts might work if you share 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 just calorie-wise). Avoid the Deli Snack Pack, and while the Wingz Kids Snack Pack is not healthy, if you're nagged by a child into purchasing it, at least a \$1 of every sale is directly donated to Make-A-Wish.

## **Spirit Airlines**

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Terrible  
Health Score:  
\*Average Calories Overall (Individual Snacks and Snack Boxes) =  
383  
Average Individual Snack Calories = 366  
Average Snack Box Calories = 520

Best Bet: The cup of noodle soup at 290 calories is still the only choice



that will feel like a real meal, but it is very high in sodium, so it is not the best bet for someone who is sodium-sensitive or has high blood pressure . All the muffins are at least 400 caloriesnot the best choices unless you split one (if you're the type of person who can do that). Bringing your own food is actually the best option. The chips and salsa are the lowest calorie choice of all the snacks but probably won't fill you up. Skip the [snack](#) box.

## Frontier Airlines

Cooperation in Providing Nutritional Information: Terrible and Rude  
Health Score: \*Average Individual Snack Calories = 380

Best Bets: Perhaps the trail mix—but we had to estimate the calories and don't know the nutrient values - share it and you'll be safe. Also, if you're not sodium sensitive you can grab the jerky. Bring your own food is the bottom line.

Provided by The City University of New York

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