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Airlines elevate luxury travel with exclusive fine wine partnerships in premium cabins

Major carriers shift focus to curated wine experiences, targeting elite passengers and redefining in-flight status symbols and brand identity

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Airlines are changing the way they approach luxury service, with wine now playing a central role in how they attract and retain high-paying passengers. In recent months, several major carriers have announced new partnerships with prestigious wineries, signaling a shift in what is considered a status symbol at 35,000 feet. United Airlines is among the latest to join this trend, revealing a multi-year agreement with Demeine Estates, a fine wine importer representing boutique Napa Valley producers. The wines will be served exclusively in United’s Polaris business class cabins, reflecting a broader industry move toward exclusivity and provenance over simple brand recognition.

This change comes as airlines recognize that their most valuable customers expect more than just comfortable seats and premium amenities. The focus is now on curated experiences that reflect the tastes and values of elite travelers. Wine lists are being reimagined to highlight origin, winemaking style, and rarity, rather than relying on

mass-market labels. The goal is to make in-flight wine service an integral part of the journey, not just an afterthought.

Philana Bouvier, president of Demeine Estates, says that serving premium wines at altitude transforms the experience for passengers. She notes that while ordering wine on a flight has often been unpredictable, offering selections from top producers turns it into a memorable treat. Airlines are responding to growing demand: United Airlines alone served more than 20 million glasses of wine system-wide in 2024, outpacing both beer and spirits. Even in domestic economy cabins, over 3.2 million glasses were poured.

However, serving wine at altitude presents unique challenges. The pressurized environment of an aircraft can dull aromas and flatten acidity, making it difficult for some wines to show their best qualities. For wineries used to strict quality control, these conditions require careful selection of wines that can withstand the rigors of air travel. Bouvier explains that wines with balanced acidity and moderate tannins tend to perform better in flight.

Other airlines are also investing in their wine programs. British Airways has expanded its English sparkling wine offerings to include top cuvées from Nyetimber and Gusbourne. Delta Air Lines now serves Champagne Taittinger in its Delta One business class cabin. Emirates stands out as the only airline pouring LVMH’s trio of prestige champagnes: Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot, and Dom Pérignon.

These moves reflect a deeper strategy focused on curation and scarcity. Aaron McMillan, United’s managing director of hospitality programs, describes the airline’s approach as both selective and adaptable. The partnership with Demeine Estates allows for annual menu rotations through 2028 while maintaining variety with other luxury labels throughout the year. This level of planning is new for many airlines, which have traditionally relied on bulk suppliers for their wine lists.

The logistics of scaling boutique wines across a global fleet are complex. For some wineries, supplying enough bottles for even one menu cycle can mean allocating an entire vintage. But the exposure is valuable: these producers gain access to a global audience of affluent travelers who may seek out their wines at restaurants or estate

properties after their flights.

For airlines, these partnerships are about more than just offering better drinks—they are about reinforcing brand identity and meeting the expectations of discerning customers. Bouvier points out that Polaris business class passengers are looking for premium beverage service as part of their overall experience. The collaboration with United marks the airline’s first long-term wine deal and follows broader upgrades to its food and beverage offerings since late 2023.

Not all wineries are eager to participate in airline deals due to concerns about volume and brand perception. Historically, such agreements have been associated with commodity wines rather than cult producers. However, attitudes may be changing as airlines limit these offerings to business and first-class cabins where they reach a targeted demographic willing to pay for luxury.

Bouvier believes that partnering with United’s Polaris service offers clear benefits for her brands. The high ticket prices ensure that the wines reach consumers who appreciate quality and are likely to seek out similar experiences elsewhere. For both airlines and wineries, these collaborations represent a new way to define luxury travel—one where what’s poured into the glass is as important as any other amenity on board.