

## Restaurateurs, Caterers See Rise In Demand For Sustainability

Local Eateries, Hotels And Vendors Shift To Eco-Friendly Practices

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**D**espite concerns of high-priced commodities due to inflation and rising fuel costs, consumers are still willing to pay more for quality food these days, and savvy restaurateurs and caterers are heeding the call, say industry experts.

Gus Sverkos, co-owner of KafeNeo, located at the corner of 4th Street and Temple Avenue, said the attitude toward eco-friendly practices has changed dramatically since he first opened his restaurant about four years ago. "Sustainability and eco-friendly is no more out of the mainstream," he said. "It's actually how things are going to get done."

From using a low-flow dishwasher to integrating LED lighting and installing large windows for natural sunlight, the small

restaurant took minor steps toward becoming environmentally friendly. Sverkos said he tries to use seasonal organic produce from local farms as much as possible in his Greek and American-style dishes, and is planning to soon offer biodegradable to-go packages in coming weeks.

In an industry that relies heavily on resources, small changes can often have a large impact. In fact, more and more restaurants and catering services say they are integrating greener practices into their food, their restaurants, their supplies and their overall business plans while staying cost effective. Prices for sustainable commodities have somewhat leveled as more vendors respond to a rise in demand, Sverkos said. "I speak to a lot of my vendors and they've been really feeling the pressure of needing to go with more organic lines and more sustainable type of products," he said.

The shift toward eco-friendly dining in the last few years is partly driven by a more environmentally conscious customer base, in addition to more willingness from business owners themselves, said Mike Hickerson, vice president of LM Consultants, a national restaurant consulting firm based in Thousand Oaks.

"While sustainability as a concept has been around as long as the ecology movement, growing public acceptance of the notion has led to savvy restaurateurs getting on board," he said. "Consumers are willing to pay that extra cost to eat in an environmentally-friendly manner. Surveys show that consumers will cut costs elsewhere in order to afford organic or local food."

With negative publicity surrounding factory farms and corporate over fishing, the most prevalent trend this year is restaurants buying foods from local sources, Hickerson said. There's more attention to locally grown produce, free-range meats and sustainable seafood, mostly to provide better quality and healthy practice. "People are noticing things like the difference between free range and factory meats," he said.

### Sustainable Dining

Cooking with seasonal produce doesn't always provide for what costumers want all year round, but some restaurants have become creative in finding practical approaches to serving sustainable dishes.

Michael Poompan, assistant sous chef for SIP restaurant at the Renaissance Hotel in Downtown Long Beach, has jumped on to the idea of utilizing fresh local produce, locally caught seafood and beef from local farms. "We go to the market to find out what's going on and how to build menus," he said. "I like to support our own state's economy."

In fact, having a sustainable menu has become so successful that the hotel is now integrating the options on a larger scale, helping to boost sales at banquets and large meetings. Today, roughly 70 percent of the hotel's food products come from local California farms, with anything from local garlic to raspberries and mint for cocktails.



Michael Poompan, assistant sous chef for SIP restaurant at the Renaissance Long Beach Hotel, holds a plate of produce and meats from local farms. He has spearheaded efforts to use sustainable seafood, meats and vegetables in the restaurant's dishes. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)



Gus Sverkos, co-owner of KafeNeo, located at 2800 E. 4th St., is seen here below a set of LED lights, which he installed to reduce energy and save money at his restaurant. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

The restaurant was one of the first in the area to start “going beyond just farmer’s markets,” by actually driving out to full service farms, such as in San Diego, he said. Dishes include what he calls “the perfect portion,” where entrees, such as local beef, might come in smaller portions due to price points, but tastes “better than any beef you’ve ever tried.”

It’s not necessarily organic that’s important, Poompan said, but the reliability of the source of where the food comes from. “It’s more important for me to know the farmer that’s growing the stuff and have a conversation and be able to talk about their practices, then be able to rely on organic certification and things like that,” he said.

Poompan also goes to events at local farms in Long Beach and partners with culinary and public schools, teaching children about the importance of nutrition and sustainable practices. The SIP Restaurant was also one of the first to partner with the Aquarium of the Pacific’s sustainable seafood program, in which free admission is offered to customers who buy seafood from sustainable sources at local restaurants.

Andrew Gruel, program manager for the Aquarium’s “Seafood for the Future,” which was started in 2009, said a total of 10 restaurants participated in the annual sustainable seafood event and chowder festival last month. Sustainable seafood, which he said often tastes better, refers to anything from fish to clams that are either caught in a regulated and managed sustainable way or from fishery farms.

The United States restricts how much fishing companies can catch each year in order to allow fish populations to reproduce, in addition to outlawing practices that are harmful to ecosystems. Other countries, however, have near non-existent regulations on the practice. This is why one of the primary recommendations is to buy U.S. seafood.

“It’s really important because there’s a huge part that the ocean plays in every piece of our lives,” Gruel said. “When it comes down to it, most people, when they go out to eat, they don’t want to think about this stuff, they just want to go out and get a good meal.”

Breck Dockstader, co-owner of Zephyr Vegetarian Café, a vegan-vegetarian restaurant in the East Village Arts District on 4th Street, said doing away with meat all together often has the most positive effect on the environment. “The amount of waste that goes into producing meat and dairy is incredible compared to the amount that goes into a plant-based meal,” he said.

Being vegetarian doesn’t always automatically mean green, however, such as if produce is being shipped overseas to support a desire for an out-of-season product. In addition, Dockstader said locally grown organic produce, while more expensive, reflects the true cost and cheaper products can cost more in other ways such as in “health and the environment.”

### **Greening Restaurants**

The largest concentrations of green restaurants in the United States are in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, Chicago and Southern California. Nationally, the restaurant industry alone takes up 13 percent of energy usage in the retail sector, also accounting for a large chunk of the nation’s waste, according to Jennifer Fleck, spokesperson for the Green Restaurant Association (GRA), based in Boston.

“The restaurant industry is not only very large and very profitable but it also consumes a lot of resources,” Fleck said. “Not only because you have all of your lighting fixtures, but you have all this heavy duty equipment in the kitchen that’s constantly running and needs to be constantly running to prepare and store the food products they have.”

The non-profit third-party verification service offers a standards-based certification for declaring restaurants and food service operations green. Certified restaurants are tracked through invoices to verify claims and make sure any restaurant endorsements are full proof. “We take the certification very seriously,” Fleck said.

Restaurants can become certified through six key environmental categories including water efficiency, waste reduction and recycling, sustainable food, energy, disposables, and chemical and



Bing Smith, general manager of Cisco Burger, located at 620 W. Anaheim St., stands below a skylight, or ceiling windows, which cuts down on energy use by using natural lighting. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

pollution reductions. Sustainable furnishings and building materials is an optional requirement.

The idea behind the certification is to promote sustainable practices within the industry while at the same time provide an informative service for consumers through the GRA's database at [www.greendining.com](http://www.greendining.com). "Any consumer that wants to look for a restaurant that's 100 percent organic, they can come on to our Web site and see a restaurant that received all the point totals for that," she said. "We want to empower the consumer to make good dining choices and make sure they have all of the information at hand."

In general, a restaurant can do many things to become certified or sustainable, and a practice that might be cost prohibitive in one area can often be offset by savings in another, she said. The certification ranges on a sliding scale depending on cost in some instances, such as green building and specific requirements, implementing a recycling plan and eliminating Styrofoam. "It's not necessarily a cookie-cutter mold," Fleck said. "It's very, very flexible because we want to make it sustainable for the business as well. We don't want to do something that's not going to work for them in the long run."

In some states where there's more availability to service sustainable practices, such as in San Francisco or Portland, the savings can often be ten-fold. In Boston, for instance, Fleck said aggressively participating in composting, or using leftover kitchen scraps to make fertilizer for plants, has saved some restaurants there anywhere from \$2,000 to \$4,000 in waste hauling expenses per year. Switching to LED lighting can also result in net savings, such as in one case where a business saved \$25 a

year for each bulb. Depending on how many bulbs are used, the savings can add up, she said.

Cisco Burger, located at 620 W. Anaheim St. in West Long Beach, uses a set of solar panels on the roof that offsets 40 percent of the restaurant's electricity, said General Manager Bing Smith, which can add up for a busy operation. "I wouldn't want to see our bill if we didn't have that," he said.

The restaurant also uses biodegradable take out containers, a Toyota Prius for deliveries, large windows for natural lighting and donates grease for bio-diesel fuel. "We're aware of the movement to do everything green; we see it all over the place," he said. "I'm not sure how many other restaurants are doing it, but we try to do our part as best we can."

### **Waste Diversion**

In Long Beach, while there aren't any large-scale commercial composting services available, more and more recycling options are coming on board. Lisa Harris, recycling specialist for the City of Long Beach's Environmental Services Bureau, said she provides technical assistance to any request to perform what's called a "waste audit," or providing support for setting up a recycling program, composting or finding a waste hauler, whether for a small restaurant, business or a hotel.

Despite the City of Long Beach having no ordinance requiring restaurants or businesses to recycle, Harris said the city maintains a 69 percent waste diversion rate, which is well over the state's mandate of 50 percent. The only recycling mandate currently in Long Beach refers to multi-family residential complexes. However, legislation is being drafted to possibly make commercial recycling a state law, Harris said.

Any business that has city service automatically gets recycling bins and other businesses work with the more than one dozen private waste haulers in the city for recycling, she said. "We do work with our haulers to push them to do recycling with our customers," Harris said. "One of their selling points now is that they will provide recycling for their businesses as well."

The city is also working with Food Finders, a non-profit charity group, to divert un-perished food to families in need. The problem for many restaurants in diverting waste, however, often happens at the source, where separating bottles and cans in-house can be a chore for employees and customers alike.

For many busy operations, recycling can be difficult to perform, which is why some haulers are offering service to separate recyclables as well. Some smart restaurants, on the other hand, look at recycling as a way to make money as opposed to paying for a company to take it away, Harris added.

Paul Buchanan, executive chef and owner of Primal Alchemy Catering in Long Beach, said banquets, meetings and events are the most critical for diverting waste and becoming sustainable since using plastic disposable plates, cups and utensils tend to be harder to divert from trash bins at larger events. The reality is, he said, many people make a small fortune off of recyclables left from restaurants and food servers.

Buchanan, which served roughly 1,000 people during the recent TED festival downtown, said he tries to leave the minimum amount of trash as possible by recycling anything from cardboard boxes to aluminum cans. If he has to use disposable plates, he uses only compostable plates, he said.

"We don't use any plastic and if we get any plastic containers that come from purchasing, then all that gets recycled and put back into City of Long Beach recycling systems," Buchanan said. "We minimize the waste at every step because that's the environmentally friendly way to do it . . . The least amount of time you actually have to empty your trash can the better." ■