

SUSTAINABILITY



SARA BABCOCK

Some chefs want the freshest, prettiest vegetables from the farmers market, while others hunt for the scraps.

Hacking Sustainability is No Sweat

FROM PRODUCE-TRACKING APPS TO SCRAPS THAT FEED PIGS, SAVING THE EARTH AND YOUR BOTTOM LINE HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER.

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Sustainability is no longer considered a buzzword of the moment; it's an ecological and financial necessity. Trimming waste, sourcing carefully, and making the most use of each ingredient are principles everyone should live by, but essential within the restaurant industry where more than 11.4 million tons of food waste are generated annually, according to ReFED, a collaborative nonprofit committed to reducing food waste in the United States.

Keeping costs in check has always provided an incentive to reduce waste. In fact, 47 percent of operators track food waste, and over 60 percent engage in recycling practices, according to a 2018 State of Restaurant Sustainability report from the National Restaurant Association. But creative operators are taking things a step further to reduce their restaurant's environmental footprint. Here's how.

Wanted Waste

Chefs are often the first to be found at the local farmers market, picking through the freshest produce to put onto the plate. But chef-owner Jehangir Mehta is happy to wait for the day's leftovers.

"Going at 10 a.m., you might get a fresher oregano, but I don't need this really fresh oregano if I'm going to make a puree. So it's OK if I go later and get it at a better price because the farmer can't do anything with it," Mehta says.

Ugly fruits and less-than-perfect herbs from the farmers market are just one way he sources ingredients for his New York restaurant, Graffiti. Becoming a zero-waste operation has been a critical mission since its inception, pushing Mehta to think differently about the opportunities for discarded ingredients. For the past year, he has partnered with area restaurants like Dirt Candy and Birch Coffee to pick up their scraps and breathe new life into his own menu. Scrap meat and broken fish that might be thrown to the wayside, for example, could easily make 12 to 15 salads or be used to flavor stock.

"You are looking at a huge number [of savings] when you utilize something every day someone is throwing away. [Dirt Candy] is one of the restaurants that make vegetables look really pretty. So if they take a portobello where it's round but they want to make squares, they'll have leftovers. If we take that, they are being sustainable by not throwing it out, and it's sustainable for us," he says.

For items that can't be scavenged, Mehta keeps an eye on his inventory and food costs through a partnership with mobile ordering platform BlueCart. The platform's concise tracking allows him to see more clearly when a product is under- or overused in order to make smarter purchasing decisions.

"It would be very helpful for restaurants with a large inventory to see where things are going off," he says. "When we see we are clearly only selling 40 dishes, then we realize, 'Why are we watching so much of this product?' or if you are wasting 25 individual bottles of olive oil versus getting one large tin. So even that has its own reduction in terms of cost as well as wastage. Almost every company is having that problem, but are you talking with them about what they're doing with their waste. It's sometimes just looking in places you haven't looked before."

Bin It to Win It

In an effort to reduce waste management costs and have a more positive impact on the environment, many restaurants have looked to composting. Unfortunately, regulations on the practice are a mixed bag depending on city and state. Operators in California have found an easier time with state-regulated composting programs, whereas those in New York say it's an uphill battle in terms of cost, management and effectiveness.

"Some restaurants have good success with tracking food waste and donating and sending to recycling; others have challenges because the infrastructure isn't there in the whole U.S.," says Laura Abshire, director of sustainability policy and government affairs for the National Restaurant Association. "I think one thing with food waste that's interesting is that it does have an employee engagement factor to it, and there's been some data to show that when employees are doing something in the back of the house around sustainability, employee engagement and retention tends to be higher. They feel like they're helping their communities, creates purpose and engagement."

Still, there are a few hacks operators can use internal waste management to cut down on how much is going out.

Chef-owner Gavin Kaysen started his own "pig bucket" program when he opened Spoon and Stable in Minneapolis in 2014. Using four to five bright green or blue bins, staff separate scraps of meat, seafood, or boiled-down vegetables from stock. The bins are donated to local pig farmers to use as feed, which ultimately sustain the animals that come back to the restaurant.

"It adds a lot of value to cooks' and service individuals' ecosystems, how they think about where the food goes before and after. And the biggest part is the money. I can't put an exact number on it, but I'd say we save well over \$75,000 on our annual garbage bill," Kaysen says. "Garbage is charged to you per weight. So, if you're making heavy, wet stock and put it into a trash container, you're effectively throwing away added weight of water."

The system isn't perfect, Kaysen admits. Human error means things will sometimes go into the trash instead of the pig bucket, but ultimately there's a lot less waste than there would be.

Farm animals aren't the only ones who can feed off food scraps. Composting scraps can do what nature intended for a restaurant garden, cutting down on the need to buy produce while reducing the amount that's tossed in a landfill. After adding a 900-square-foot greenhouse to his restaurant 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Kentucky, nearly two years ago, chef-owner Edward Lee says the staff has made of a conscious effort to use every part of every vegetable. Separate bins are rotated through a composting facility every couple of weeks, cutting his dumpster pickup to once a week instead of four times.

"Once you grow something, it becomes much more precious to you where you realize it's not just the fruit or pretty parts. It changes the ways our chefs look at foods and waste and how we do things," he says. "On the produce side, we did great at reducing waste. For us it wasn't really much, our standards are much higher than the state regulations are anyway so it was never really an issue for us."

Pushing Out Plastic

As Styrofoam bans continue to sweep the nation, the next battle ramping up is the one against plastic. Straws are among the biggest preventable culprits, with Americans using an estimated 500 million straws per day, according to the National Park Service. Eliminating the use of straws has evolved into a widespread viral campaign, known online as the #SkipTheStraw movement developed by the Ocean Conservancy. Many restaurants have joined the cause, from independents to Bon Appétit Management Company, a subsidiary of multinational foodservice company Compass Group. Bon Appétit pledged in May to ban plastic straws and stirrers at its 1,000 cafes and restaurants nationwide by September 2019.

And it goes beyond straws. Along with switching to paper straws, bar director Nicky Beyries of Foreign Cinema in San Francisco says the restaurant doesn't have a single plastic bag in its building. "All of our bins, we don't use liners, plastic to-go bags, very little plastic usage at all," she says. Beyries managed to cut out the usage of cocktail napkins, as well, opting for reusable ceramic coasters instead.

In Minneapolis, Kaysen made an investment in 500 metal straws eight months ago to replace plastic ones at Spoon and Stable, and hasn't had to reup. At 610 Magnolia, Lee completely rid the restaurant of all plastics. The cocktail program was altered to pre-shaken and mixed drinks that don't require straws, and customers are advised to use their own cutlery when ordering take out.

"When we tell people we're doing it because of the environment, we've only had one complaint. It's not something that we're trying to force or convince customers to get on board; they already are," Lee says.

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