

# SUSTAINABILITY:

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### Introduction to Sustainability and Environmental Issues that Every Culinarian Needs to Know

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#### INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to cook, knowing how to be a professional culinarian, involves far more than how to dice an onion, debone a chicken or fix a sauce if it breaks. In today's world, it is critical for all people in the culinary industry to understand the business, social and environmental world in which they live and work.

The Covid pandemic showed us that it is impossible for owners, chefs and cooks to live separate from the world. The old-style philosophy of walking in the back door before sunrise, putting the world aside while in the kitchen, and then walking back into the world long after dark is not viable. Restaurants and other food service venues that followed that mold were not sustainable during the pandemic. Everyone, from owners to dishwashers, had to adjust—and adjust quickly—to a new way of doing business. If they did not adjust, they were probably wiped out of business or at least sustained economic losses far greater than those who did adapt.

The same is true for environmental and sustainability issues. In a word, the old way of running food services operations is not SUSTAINABLE.

#### WHAT DOES 'TO BE SUSTAINABLE' MEAN?

In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In other words, we must use resources at a slower rate than they can be produced. This applies to natural resources, like water or wild fish, and to manmade resources, such as food products or electricity.

It's not as complicated as it sounds. Suppose your food service business uses 1,200 napkins a week. However, you only order one case of 1,000. Before the end of the week, you will run out. Your use of napkins at 1,200 per week is not sustainable if only 1,000 are delivered each week.

The idea of sustainability in the food service is not new. You are all very acquainted with seafood sustainability. Seafood Watch from The Monterey Bay Aquarium was one of the leaders in pioneering this and started in early 1997, over 25 years ago! Now, restaurant owners, chefs, cooks, politicians, scientists, foodies and customers are championing the ideas of sustainability above and beyond seafood.

## DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

It doesn't matter whether you personally believe that caring for and trying to save the environment is an issue. It doesn't matter if you believe global climate change is caused by human activities or something else. What matters is that all culinary professionals live in the new reality that they must be informed, trained, mentored and practice environmentally and sustainable practices because:

- Profit margins will be affected.
- Your guests are becoming more conscious of these issues.
- Chefs have frequently led the way in social change.
- Government regulations at all levels will be coming on these issues.

Let's take a closer look at each of these four points.

**1. Profit Margins.** It is well known that food service establishments, from fast food to corporate dining to hotel room service to fine dining, run on very thin profit margins. Anything that costs more will decrease that profit margin. Anything wasted will further decrease the profit margin.



About 20 years ago, a movement started in the food service industry. This movement involved a shift in thinking about trash cans. The shift was for chefs and owners to look at trash cans as a cost center. The mindset started to change from just dumping things in the trash without thinking about it to minimizing for cost purposes what went into the garbage. Many operations removed trash cans from kitchen floors and gave everyone small clear containers for their 'garbage' which had to be emptied under the watchful eye of the chef.

It's now time to think about other items as a cost center. For example, how much water is wasted in your kitchen? How often are faucets left running, dishwashers started with less than full racks, items defrosted under blasting water because no one planned and put them in the walk-ins a few days ago?

In much of the country water is in short supply. Conserving water is not only a positive influence on the environment but the cost of wasting goes right to the bottom line. You would never use three onions out of a bag and throw out the rest because you did not need them right away. However, most culinary people will pour water down the drain without a second thought.

The same goes for gas. Heating ovens long before needed, leaving burners on during service instead of turning them off, using high flames when low ones would work just fine has been for years the cooks' way. It was considered 'too difficult' or 'a waste of time' to turn knobs during service. But that costly way of doing business is getting more and more costly for the individual establishment and for the environment. The same goes for other major items like electricity.

Small wasted items wipe out the profits quickly as well. Giving out straws with every glass of water, soft drink, and half of the cocktails whether the customer wants them or not adds up fast. If your business spends a thousand dollars on straws that are never used, not only do those straws go into the environment, but how many more hamburgers, or pizzas or street tacos, or sushi, or pasta, or steaks does your business have to sell to recover that \$1,000 of straws dumped into landfills, lakes, rivers and parks?

**2. Your guests are becoming more aware of climate change and environmental issues.** Put "restaurant customers' environmental impact" into an internet search engine and you will get over 250 million hits. More and more of your customers are paying attention to issues that affect how they, and the business they patronize, affect the environment. It is no secret that more and more people want to know where the product used to make their meal came from. But people are now more and more concerned with the indirect results of business operations. For example, people in heavily polluted areas are realizing that the exhaust from hoods adds more to the neighborhood than the smell of fried chicken, French fries, coffee or cookies. They are realizing that these same hoods are spewing particles into

the air–air pollution–that they must breathe. If you and your business can't stay ahead of the customer's demands on these issues, the business will lose customers and probably fail.

On the flip side, many customers will be more likely to pay more for environmentally friendly processes and procedures. When local, heritage and organic products first started rolling out, the hospitality industry was reluctant to accept that customers would pay a premium for these products. Likewise, the culinary industry was quite wrong in its initial failure to believe that more than a handful of people would care about the sustainability of the seafood they were ordering. By the same logic, many guests will be willing to walk away from food service business that can't show environmental friendliness, and many will be willing to pay a premium at food service businesses that have sustainable and environmentally positive practices.



**3. Chefs have led the way for change, and it is important to keep doing this.** Chefs for many years–but particularly recently–have led movements for social change in the way people eat. Celebratory chefs to local chefs have led the way on nutrition movements, better food in schools, farm to fork, free range chicken and eggs, buying local, utilizing as much as possible of every animal and vegetable, etc. Minimizing the effect the culinary world has had on the environment is purely a continuation of the ways that chefs have led change over the years. It is important to realize that not only can cooks and chefs do this, but they are expected to do it. Chefs have become the new rock stars or celebrities that people look up to and who people expect will change the world.

**4. Government regulations on environmental issues have been coming for quite some time and will be more directed towards the food service industry.** Environmental regulation is not new – the very conservative Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. But it is becoming more a part of the day-to-day and long-term operations of all branches of hospitality. From



where you can allow run-off from the washing of kitchen floor mats to local agencies requiring composting of food, there are more and more regulations coming from city, county, state and the federal government that will impact very directly the places where you work. To avoid costly remodeling, or worse, temporary or permanent shut downs, it is important to understand the basics of the environmental issues the food service industry has on the community, the state, the country and the world so that you can stay ahead of these regulations.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

This article has provided you with some general ideas of why culinary people at all levels have to be concerned with sustainability and environmental issues. The next series of articles will get into more specific issues and answer questions like:

- How can I be a more sustainable person?
- What about pollution?
- What are specific sustainable ways to make my kitchen more money?
- What does carbon footprint have to do with food service?
- What's up with all the talk about monocropping?
- How do I decide: Local vs. organic vs. sustainable vs. carbon footprint vs. cost?
- What's the big deal on composting, recycling and trash?
- What's a kitchen audit?



American Culinary Federation  
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