

SUSTAINABILITY CORNER

AUGUST 2023

RECYCLE, PRECYCLE AND REDUCE, REFUSE, REUSE, COMPOST

One of the areas where chefs, cooks, restaurant and hospitality business owners can really have an impact on the environment is in the area of recycling and using products that actually contain recycled materials.

We know what you are thinking: “Recycling? I got this one! I bet I don’t even need to read this article.” We love enthusiasm. However, recycling isn’t as clear cut as it looks at first glance. Here is a fun quiz to find out what you know about recycling, reusing, and composting. Don’t worry, we will go over the answers – many of which will surprise you. (Warning: There might be a real quiz at the end of this article.)

RECYCLING

Question: Recycling is the answer to solving climate change and plastic pollution! True or False?

Answer: False

In the fourth article of this series, we touched on recycling in the context of what’s wrong with plastic bottles. It is now time to take a deeper dive into the issues of recycling.

First, the good news: Recycling is a way to help minimize trash to landfills, minimize impacts on the environment on land, and help minimize further use of precious limited natural resources. Recycling also helps the oceans because anything that is recycled does not end up in creeks, streams, or rivers all of which eventually flow into the ocean, nor will it end up on beaches which, of course, lead to the ocean.

Now, the bad news: Many people for many years have been lulled into a false sense of environmental security by thinking that recycling really works to substantially cut back on the use of natural resources and avoiding pollution. For a number of reasons this is not the case:

1. It takes energy to recycle. We have all seen clothing that tells us how many plastic bottles were used to make it. What is not said is the amount of fossil fuel (coal, natural gas, petroleum) that was used to pick up the used plastic bottles at your restaurant’s back door, drive it to the recycling factory, sort out the recycling, transport it again to the facility where it will be broken down, transported to another factory where will be made into the piece of clothing, and how much is used in that factory to make the clothing.

Similarly, it takes a lot of water to recycle most products. And most of the country undergoes periodic water shortages, so recycling increases that problem.

2. A related issue is that not everything is recyclable. Not all plastics are recyclable. Some are not recyclable at all (like plastic wrap or most clamshell food containers). More are only recycled in certain parts of your state. For example, what is recycled in California is very different in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Bakersfield, and Fresno. Unfortunately, this is true throughout the country. There is no uniform standard from area to area.

In the United States, it appears that:

- ◇ Only 5% percent of all plastic is actually recycled.
- ◇ Only 35% percent of all aluminum is actually recycled.
- ◇ Only 68% percent of all paper and cardboard are actually recycled.

3. Although you and your business are careful to buy and use recyclable products, that does not mean that your guests and customers recycle when they leave your business. There might not be recyclable receptacles where they are going, or they might not even try.

The bottom line is that recycling is better than not recycling, and you should always strive personally and in your business to buy products that have been recycled, buy products that can be recycled (or their wrapping/containers can be recycled) and to make sure that the products go into recycle containers. However, keep in mind that although this is better than not recycling, that recycling does not have a major impact on saving the environment.

PRECYCLE AND REDUCE

Question: Precycling is when you run the dishwasher with no dishes in it to check the temperature and chemical levels. True or False?

Answer: False

Precycling usually means bringing your own bags to the store instead of using the store's plastic/paper bags, buying things that aren't in packages, etc. The idea is to minimize the use of packaging when you are buying things.

However, precycling goes beyond that. It means you don't buy products that you don't really need. If you don't buy them, you don't have to get rid of them. In other words, you are minimizing waste by not buying items in the first place.

In general, the restaurant industry has done this for years. Watching costs carefully includes buying only what is necessary. Watching food costs has been a guiding principle of chefs for a long time. For example, how much product are you wasting

in the kitchen because of sloppy food prep techniques? How much usable product is being wasted?

The front of house could also help the environment and make more money for your business by carefully watching costs. As we discussed in the first article, how

much money is wasted by tossing out straws with drinks when they aren't asked for? Or how much money is spent on plastic bags for to-go orders when the customer doesn't want them?

A general recommendation is to examine everything, including the front and back of house, the bar, the cleaning supplies, and office supplies, etc. Prior to placing an order, consider whether the item is necessary. If it really isn't needed, don't order it. If it is needed, find out if there is a more environmentally friendly substitute.



REFUSE

Question: When ordering products from your suppliers you can make more money by:

- A. Buying something just because it gets good reviews online, is mentioned in social media, or is featured on Instagram or TikTok.
- B. Asking suppliers if there are products available which are more environmentally friendly, green, or sustainable and then market that you are using these types of products.
- C. Buying the cheapest products, even if they are inferior and environmentally detrimental. That is the best way to make money.
- D. Don't change anything. It's too late to change what's happening in the environment.

Answer: B

One way to start changing things in the world is to refuse to use products that are not recyclable, come in recyclable containers, etc. Discuss this with your suppliers. Tell each of them that you want to minimize the number of products you obtain whose packaging, or the products themselves, don't contain actual high amounts of recyclable material. Also tell your suppliers that you must be able to recycle the products when you are done with them. (Instead of 'garbage in, garbage out' you should start thinking 'recycled products in, recyclable products out'.) This is one way you can start changing those low percentages mentioned above.

Please note that you should be willing to discuss these issues freely and openly with your suppliers. Most restaurant suppliers are very knowledgeable about these issues. However, if your company or salesperson isn't, then find another one. Working with you on increasing your profitability and sustainability issues is part of the ser-

vices they provide. If you are not happy with them on these issues, find a salesperson or supplier with whom you are.

Remember, this isn't just about food, paper products, etc. For example, tell your suppliers of cleaning products that you want lower polluting or more green cleaning products. Buy refilled toner cartridges for your printer.

These things will help your bottom line in two ways. First, many of the products mentioned above are often less expensive – like the refilled toner cartridges. Second, you can market to your customers and potential customers what you are doing in your business to be more environmentally friendly, not just in the kitchen, but in every part of your operation.

REUSE

Question: If something can be reused in your establishment, it should always be reused. True or False?

Answer: False

For example, latex gloves would hold up to being used, taken off, put back on, worn by different people, etc. However, no one would suggest they should be used this way. Just because something can be reused doesn't mean it should be.



That being said, you should reuse products as much as possible but make sure doing so is within the limits and requirements of food safety, employee safety, the health department, etc.

If products are in single use containers, don't reuse the containers. However, when you have containers, storage boxes, etc. that can be used again and again, then reuse them.

Likewise, if you have products that can be reused or recycled if you return them, then return them promptly. For example, milk crates. They are reusable when you have your supplier take the empty ones back. Nothing you didn't know. But how many are in your facility that you use for storage, or for propping up containers so they aren't on the floor, or that just sit outside the backdoor? How many are sitting around collecting dust? Or, worst of all, are used for step ladders?

Note, follow labels on chemical containers regarding reuse. If the label says do not reuse, then do not reuse them. The same applies for instructions on Material Safety Data Sheets -- follow their instructions on reuse and recycling.

COMPOST

Question: Coffee grounds are NOT compostable. True or False?

Answer: False.

Coffee grounds make great compost. As briefly mentioned in previous articles, composting is a great way to have a positive effect on your local environment by minimizing what you are putting into the local landfills by helping create natural material for conditioning and treating the soil without chemicals.

For most food service locations, composting in-house is not viable because of time and space. However, check with your main supplier to see if they have some machines that might work for your situation, or for recommendations on local services that provide composting services.

You should also check with your waste disposal company and/or your local landfill district to see if they have a composting program. If they do, check on what is compostable. Some allow only food scraps, others allow things like milk cartons and pizza boxes, etc.

Please note that one of the authors of this article was the first to try composting in their county at their restaurant approximately 20 years ago. The program was so successful environmentally that it was then mandated across the county. But what is key to note was that it reduced the price of garbage pick-up by about 25%. The waste disposal company sold the compost which offset the cost of picking up the food scraps and processing them. The author learned that composting not only helped the local environment but decreased operating costs as well. Saving the environment and making more money. That's a win-win.

CONCLUSION

So, how did you do on our little quiz? We hope you learned some new things that you can apply and share TODAY. Remember, no one is expecting you to be 'perfect environmentalists,' but if everyone did the best they could, the world would be a better place. Remember what you read in the last article, chefs and cooks are leaders in changing the world, it all starts with you!

