

Customers Ask: How Green Is My Dining Service?

Environmentalism, sustainability, local and fresh are now key interests

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Green is the new color in corporate offices and on campuses, and it has nothing to do with lawns. The general acceptance of the global warming phenomenon as a fact and its related issues has created a new interest among diners in not only *what* they're eating, but *where* it came from and *how* it was raised, harvested, distributed and prepared.

"Little by little, active concern about how we treat the world around us has moved from the left of center to the mainstream," notes Robin Lee Allen, executive editor *Nation's Restaurant News*.

Current key concerns in dining service:

- *Fresh*, which many people equate with "healthy." Customers want to know their meals didn't come from a package and like to see food prepared while they watch. (Frozen vegetable sales nationwide dropped 2.7% over the past 12 months, *brandweek.com* reports.)
- *Local*, a corollary of fresh, has two additional virtues: supporting nearby farmers and reducing the "carbon footprint" – the fossil fuels burned transporting foods over long distances.
- *Sustainable* – methods of raising and processing foods, including seafoods, that don't deplete the earth's resources.
- *Fair Trade* is a system to ensure imported coffee, tea, cocoa and other products are raised in a sustainable manner and small farmers receive a fair price for their products.
- *Organic* – the raising of fruits, vegetables and animals naturally, without artificial fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics and the like.
- *Cage-free* – the raising of chickens and their eggs and other animals in spacious environments, not confined to small cages.
- *Vegetarian/vegan* – Interest in avoiding meat in the diet is expressed by a comparatively small, but intense, group of consumers. Vegans also avoid animal products like butter, milk and eggs. Their concerns are ethical as well dietary, so their interest in food is greater than most other people's.
- *Junk food* (bad) – foods, especially snacks and candy, that have no nutritional value and may even have harmful ingredients, like trans-fat.

West to East

As with many trends, these interests have traveled from west to east across the country, and from college campuses to corporate dining and the restaurant industry as a whole. Fair trade, for example, "is spreading eastward from the West Coast, where it has been promoted by well-financed activist campaigns and where progressive politics are more intertwined with the youth culture," says *The New York Times*.

Colleges and the food service companies that serve them were early responders. At Bowdoin College in Brunswick, ME, for example, the dining service department actively supports and buys the products of a student-tended organic garden. Bowdoin also works with the Maine Sustainable Agricultural Society to purchase foods from farms in its region of the state.

'Fresh' Is the Keyword

Food service contractors have begun adopt and tout their fresh, organic and sustainable purchasing and preparation practices. Consider these excerpts from recent proposals to prospective corporate clients:

- “We cook from scratch using fresh, authentic ingredients . . . Our first choice is to purchase seasonal and regional produce within a 150 mile radius . . . prepared and served within 48 hours of harvest.” (*Bon Appetit Management Company*).
- “We produce all meals fresh in the on-site kitchen and [do] not make use of prepared foods . . . We utilize regional produce and vendors to . . . assure the freshest items [and] support local communities” (*Culinart, Inc.*)
- “We require “scratch” food preparation, using the freshest seasonal ingredients . . . derived from natural, hormone-free sources [and] organic products that reflect the sustainable quality of our food. (*Guckenheimer*)
- “Our fresh, retail approach to on-site cooking . . . will maximize customer participation . . . We are able to provide an array of organic, sustainable and locally-grown products. (*Sodexo, Inc.*)

Becoming Green

Bowdoin College’s sustainable policy is a good example of an effective environmentally-friendly program. Excerpts:

- Work with a program that coordinates the sale of food from regional farms.
- In selecting vendors, consider their environmental practices and records.
- Consider environmental factors in purchasing equipment.
- Use biodegradable disposable dishes as available and reusable mugs and lunch bags.
- Use electricity, water, fuel, food products and paper frugally.
- Purchase products with recycled contents and recycle cardboard, metal, plastic and glass containers.

Building Green

Green concerns can be incorporated into new and renovated facilities. Designs can include energy-saving equipment; using natural materials instead of composites and laminates, and providing adequate facilities for recycling waste and, where possible, composting, for example.

Maximizing natural light reduces electrical costs and has increased sales by 40% at some retail outlets, *Owners Perspective* reports.

Clarion can help you plan an eco-friendly dining facility and operating system. Contact Tom Mac Dermott, president, 603/642-8011 • TWM@clariongp.com or Angela Phelan, vice president, 973-544-6223 • ALP@clariongp.com