

Food for Thought

Waste Reduction in the Restaurant Industry

Almost all our activities have environmental costs. It takes energy and resources to produce goods and services, and energy and resources to deal with the ultimate disposal of those goods and their byproducts. Such environmental costs could include noise, air, or water pollution, or a strain on solid waste disposal facilities.

The provincial government is requiring all regional districts to reduce the amount of solid waste requiring disposal. The provincial goals are a 50 per cent per capita reduction by 2000.

Food services operations and businesses are significant contributors to this solid waste stream. However, with some thought and careful planning, they can not only reduce their waste - and save on disposal costs - they can also become more environmentally efficient in other ways, such as energy use.

For example, one Vancouver restaurant achieved a 50 per cent waste reduction in just one year, using some of the tips covered in this guide. Another restaurant found that simply recycling its corrugated cardboard reduced its waste by 50 per cent.

The Greater Vancouver Regional District hopes this guide will be helpful to company managers who want to implement environmentally aware policies and practices. For further information, call the GVRD at (604)437-GVRD.

Menu

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DON'T FORGET TO CONTACT YOUR LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT

In implementing the waste reduction practices contained in this section, please check with your local Environmental Health Department to ensure that the practices do not conflict with local health codes and policies.

It Takes Teamwork

Your most important resource is your employees. Not only will they have many ideas for reducing waste, but without their support it would be difficult to implement any changes successfully.

Let your staff know that waste reduction is important to you, and encourage their suggestions and input. You may even choose to hold an employee contest for the best waste reduction tips!

Be sure to keep staff informed of the changes you implement, and explain why they are important. If you have started a new recycling system, are buying different, reusable products, or have switched to less toxic cleaners, for example, it's vital to train staff in their use.

Make sure that your employees understand what to do - for example, there should be clear signs on the recycling bins. Remember, the Greater Vancouver area is a multi-cultural community, so not all your employees will have the same backgrounds, customs or languages. Meet with your staff to ensure that everyone understands your waste reduction goals and in-house procedures.

Where you can, supply incentives that will keep your staff interested and motivated in helping your business achieve its aims. Part of the money that might be saved by switching to a reusable product, for example, could go to a staff social fund, or employees who spend time helping to plan and implement new programs could be paid overtime hours and/or be recognized with an employee service award.

Purchasing

General Ideas

- One of the most important ways to reduce waste is to reduce excess packaging. Let your supplier know that you are serious about cutting down on unnecessary waste, and ask him or her to keep you informed of new and existing products that meet your requirements but are minimally packaged. The more restaurants that indicate a preference for less wasteful alternatives, the faster manufacturers will respond with better packaging design.
- Ask suppliers to take back and reuse their shipping boxes and pallets.
- Implementing "green" purchasing policies doesn't necessarily mean higher costs. Some environmental choices may be more expensive initially, but will often pay for themselves through reduced disposal costs. As well, some cleaners, drink mixes and other products are more economical when bought in concentrated form or in bulk, instead of ready-to-use and pre-portioned.

Beverages, Sauces, Dressings and Oils

- Serve carbonated beverages from a beverage gun or dispenser rather than from a bottle or can. If you must use bottles or cans, recycle them along with your liquor bottles.
- Buy bar mixes in concentrated form, then reconstitute them and portion them into reusable serving containers.
- Some Canadian wineries offer their cooking wine in refillable barrels. Ask your supplier to investigate this option.
- Buy and use dispenser beverages (i.e. juice, iced tea, hot chocolate) in concentrated or bulk form.
- When possible, use refillable condiment bottles and refill them from condiments purchased in bulk. This can apply to ketchup, coffee cream, sugar and other items.

Grocery, Meat, Dairy and Produce

- All foods in a restaurant must be from approved sources, so ensure that your source of organically grown foods are approved by a health inspection agency.
- Buying organically grown goods helps alleviate problems around pesticide residues, decreasing soil vitality, erosion, and farm worker health concerns. Organically produced meat, eggs, wine, coffee, fruit and vegetables are all available. For more information, contact the B.C. Association for Regenerative Agriculture, listed in the **Resources** section.
- Try to buy shelf-stable foods in bulk, but be aware of the challenges you may encounter along the way: storage problems, overflow on the floor, large or heavy containers that may be difficult for staff to handle, and chemical preservatives that may be undesirable or unnecessary. These problems aren't necessarily insurmountable, but they should be considered.
- Although buying in bulk helps reduce packaging, limited storage space in many restaurants may make this option unrealistic.
- Buy meats in the bulk or uncut form and cut to size whenever the net cost is less than if you were to buy it pre-portioned.
- Only buy meat in bulk if you have the facilities to safely cut it to size and store it.
- Consider buying eggs shelled in bulk if your egg usage for general cooking or baking is three or more cases per week. This will increase your yield (up to 30 per cent of the egg white stays with the shell when raw eggs are shelled manually) and eliminate broken eggs in the cooler, and you won't have shells or boxes to dispose of either.
- Whole shell eggs must be from inspected sources and liquid whole egg must be pasteurized.
- All eggs must be kept under refrigeration.

Paper Supplies

- Purchase paper products made from recycled materials. This could include toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, placemats, bags, menus and more. Try to find products that contain a high percentage of “post-consumer” waste: that means it’s made from paper collected from residential and business recycling programs, not just from trimmings and paper scraps from within the paper mill.
- Use straw-style stir sticks for bar beverages instead of the solid style. They usually cost less per unit and use less plastic. Additionally, use only one straw per drink, if any straw is necessary at all.
- Serve straws from health department-approved dispensers rather than offering them pre-wrapped.
- Use reusable coasters (or nothing at all) instead of paper napkins when serving beverages from the bar.
- Choose reusable coffee filters over paper ones, and unbleached paper coffee filters over bleached ones.

Janitorial and Restaurant Supplies

- Use reusable table linen, china, glass and silverware. Like china, high quality plastic place settings are also reusable, and you’ll lose fewer dishes to breakage. Replace disposable stir sticks with washable spoons for coffee and tea drinkers.
- Disallow smoking or use reusable ashtrays.
- In the washrooms, use cloth roller towelling instead of paper towelling. Similarly, use cloth for kitchen and restaurant cleaning purposes, rather than paper.
- Purchase cleaning supplies in concentrate, rather than ready-to-use form. This reduces packaging waste and saves money.
- Use multi-purpose cleaners that can be used for various surfaces, rather than cleaners that are job-specific. Whenever possible, consider using cleaning agents that are either non-toxic or the least-toxic in nature.
- Use washable and reusable hats for kitchen employees instead of disposable paper ones.
- You will only be able to use re-usable china, glass and silverware if you have the proper dishwashing facilities, usually an approved commercial dishwasher.
- Although some high quality plastic dishes are re-usable, disposable plastic dishes and cutlery (intended for single use) must not be re-used!
- Hot air hand dryers in staff washrooms can also be considered in addition to cloth roller towelling to reduce re-contamination of hands.
- Although multi-purpose cleaners are generally acceptable, tasks that require sanitizing of surfaces or utensils will require the use of approved sanitizers.
- When using cleaners from concentrate ensure that the diluted produce is properly labelled and stored safely away from food and food preparation areas.

Product Handling & Storage

- Check your produce deliveries carefully for rotten or damaged product, and let your supplier know if you are dissatisfied with the quality you are receiving.
- Rotate perishable stocks at every delivery to minimize waste due to spoilage. Date all products when you receive them, and put new products at the back of the shelf so older stock gets used first.
- Clean your coolers and freezers regularly to ensure that food has not fallen behind the shelving and spoiled.
- Arrange your refrigerated and dry storage areas to facilitate easy product access and rotation. This will help minimize waste due to spills, breakage and spoilage.
- Once washed, store raw vegetables and other perishables in reusable airtight containers to prevent unnecessary dehydration and spoilage. Also, store produce (especially leafy vegetables) as far away from the condenser unit as possible to prevent freezing. Never store tomatoes and lettuce in the same container or close to each other. Tomatoes emit a gas that will turn lettuce brown.
- Order quantities carefully, but if you do end up with wilted vegetables (i.e. celery, lettuce, carrots, broccoli, etc.), reconstitute them by trimming off the very bottom part of the stalk and immersing them in warm water (about 37 degrees Celsius) for 15 to 20 minutes.
- Wrap freezer products tightly, date them, and make sure they are used in a timely fashion, to minimize waste due to freezer burn.
- Store and/or handle unwrapped paper supplies (i.e. drink cups, napkins or bags) carefully, to prevent the products from accidentally falling on the floor.
- Freeze and thaw prepared food in portion sizes that are appropriate to your needs for the day. Don't thaw a greater quantity than you'll use!
- Caution must be exercised in the re-use of any leftover cream-based or other potentially hazardous foods.

Food Preparation & Storage

- Adjust inventory levels on perishables to minimize waste due to spoilage. If you are constantly throwing out a particular item that has spoiled, you are probably stocking too much of it.
- Develop hourly or daily production charts to minimize over-prepping and unnecessary waste.
- Whenever possible, prepare foods as needed in order to minimize waste due to over-preparation.
- When prepping food, only trim off what is not needed. Over-trimming typically occurs in the preparation of bulk meats and whole vegetables. Check the garbage

for signs of over-trimming, and, if required, retrain your prep staff or change the products' specifications or size.

- Use vegetable and meat trimmings for soup stock, or see below in “Soup’s On” for alternate uses.
- Pre-cool steam table hot foods in an ice bath before placing them in the cooler. Similarly, always place hot foods into clean, shallow containers before storing in the cooler. This helps prevent premature spoilage and keeps your cooler from working overtime.
- Reuse leftover cream-based sauces and soups (that have been held and stored at proper temperature) within two days of when they were originally prepared to prevent waste due to spoilage. This case also applies to leftover poultry and fish-based menu items.
- Store leftover hot foods from different stations in separate containers, rather than consolidating them, to minimize the chance of spoilage.

Behind the Scenes

Equipment

- Develop and implement a monthly cleaning and maintenance program for all your equipment. If your refrigerator, freezer, or air conditioners are being serviced, ensure that the CFCs are being treated in accordance with new provincial regulations that require recovery of ozone-depleting substances. Remember to check the air intakes on your appliances, too, where dust can cover openings. Regular maintenance of your refrigerators and freezers extends the life of the compressors, reduces energy costs and avoids food spoilages caused by breakdowns.
- Keep oven equipment calibrated to prevent over-baked products.
- Clean your fryers and filter the oil daily. This extends the life of both the fryer and the oil. Built-up carbon deposits on the bottom of the fryer act as an insulator that forces the fryer to heat longer, thus causing the oil to break down sooner.
- Use a test kit supplied by your grocery distributor in order to determine when to change your fryer oil. This is more accurate than judging by the appearance of the oil.
- For energy saving tips on griddle, oven, broiler, range and steamer operation and maintenance refer to **The Green Partnership Guide** (cited in the **References**).

Production Areas

- Create staff incentives to reduce breakage or loss of china, glass and silver supplies. Employees with a “clean record” for the month could be given cash

bonuses, gift certificates, a night off, or a company t-shirt, depending on your budget.

- Check for accidentally discarded china or cutlery before throwing out dining room trash.
- Place rubber mats around bus and dishwashing stations to reduce glass and china breakage - as well as injury resulting from slips.
- Have employees use non-disposable cups for their own drinks.
- Decrease your use of plastic garbage can liners by manually compacting the trash in the cans and emptying them only when they are full.
- Ensure that cracked or chipped dishware is discarded as it cannot be properly cleaned and sanitized.

Out Front

Soup's On!

It's a shame to throw out food that has been carefully prepared by your kitchen staff. It represents invested dollars and staff time, and a wasted resource. Avoid throwing out unused food by considering the following:

- Evaluate and adjust the size of your meal portions if they are consistently being returned unfinished.
- Offer half-portions to your guests, and a children's menu for younger diners.
- Donate any extra food to a community meal service. FoodRunners will pick up your unserved portions of food and deliver them to a community kitchen or emergency shelter. For information, call (604) 876-3601.
- If you can't feed people, see if you can help animals. If your restaurant is located in a rural area, there may be a nearby working or hobby farm that would be happy to use some of your leftovers, or your kitchen prep scraps. Ask your customers, or put a note on your cash register.
- If you have space, install a rodent-resistant compost bin in your back lot and compost your uncooked fruit and vegetable scraps. For advice, call the Compost Hotline at (604) 736-2250.

The use of back lot compost bins for restaurants in the urban parts of the GVRD is discouraged due to the large volumes and proximity of neighbours. The use of a service picking up scraps for processing at a centralized facility is encouraged. Approval from the local health departments must be obtained prior to installing back lot compost bins. For the latest information, call the GVRD at (604) 437-GVRD.

Dishes and Packaging

- Distribute any disposable cutlery, condiments or other accessories from behind the counter instead of offering them self-serve. Train your counter staff to dispense a predetermined quantity of these products for any meal or when requested by guests.
- Establish and advertise a policy that encourages customers to help you cut down on waste - for example, offer a 10 cent discount to people who bring their own coffee mug. As well, you can offer a 20-cup coffee card for regular customers and reward them with a reusable mug with your logo on it when the card is filled. This will encourage customer loyalty while promoting waste reduction.
- If your establishment is located in an office building or mall, consider allowing people who eat at their offices to take out their food in reusable containers. You can charge a deposit for the cutlery and china, or put a collection bin on each floor of the office building and send staff to pick up the used dishes.
- Use serving containers in sizes that meet the packaging needs of your menu items without having excess material.
- Minimize the use of unnecessary extra packaging, such as double wrapping or bagging, for dine-in or take-out foods. Establish packaging standards for every menu item and ask staff to follow them.

Recycling Activities

- Set up a rendering service for your waste grease, fat or used cooking oil.
- Set up a cardboard and/or glass recycling program with a local recycler.
- Make sure staff are flattening tin and aluminium cans before putting them in the recycling bin. By reducing the volume of recyclables, you will save money by decreasing the frequency of pick-ups by your recycling contractor.
- Donate empty plastic pails or buckets to schools, nurseries or churches, or offer them to your customers. If you consistently produce large volumes of these or other reusable items, call the B.C. Waste Exchange at (604) 732-9253 for information on being listed on their database.
- Donate old uniforms to theatre companies and thrift shops.

Give Yourself Credit!

Your environmental efforts are not only likely to attract customers, they will encourage other restaurants to follow your example. Publicize your efforts in some of the following ways:

- Keep a tally of your waste reduction progress and post a chart so customers can see how well you're doing.
- List your environmental efforts on your menu, and if your menu is printed on recycled paper, be sure it says so.
- Encourage customer awareness by offering a donation to an environment group when people purchase the special of the day or bring their own reusable mug. You might also act as a distribution point for free environmental brochures or publications.
- Once your program is successfully underway, contact your local media. Reporters are often interested in environmental initiatives happening in their community.

Resources

The British Columbia Industrial Waste Exchange puts potential users of a wide variety of waste materials in contact with waste producers. If you have something you think someone else could use, call (604) 732-9253.

The B.C. Recycling Hotline (604-732-9253, or 1-800-667-4321 outside the Lower Mainland) can also offer ideas on recycling items locally, such as broken appliances or old uniforms.

FoodRunners is a program operated by the Vancouver Food Bank. It picks up unused meals from restaurants, caterers and institutions and delivers them to emergency shelters and community kitchens in the Lower Mainland. Call (604) 876-3601 for information.

If you plan to install your own compost bin, you'll want to make sure it is rodent-resistant and used correctly by your kitchen staff. For information, call the Compost Hotline at (604) 736-2250.

The B.C. Association of Regenerative Agriculture certifies local organic farms and can provide information on organic agriculture. Call (604) 322-1215.

Written information on waste reduction is also available through the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, 316 Bloor St. W., Toronto, Ont. M5S 1W3, tel: (416) 923-8416. A working group within the CRFA called the Quick Service Restaurant Council has also been working toward waste reduction in the quick service sector.

Another useful booklet is *The Green Partnership Guide* (1992, Produced by Canadian Pacific Hotels and Resorts). For information call The Director of Communications and Environmental Affairs, 416-376-7101.

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