

Waste Not, Want Not

Restaurants and institutions look for sustainable ways to dispose of food waste.

BY CINDY KIBBE

Food waste is an enormous global issue, contributing significantly to greenhouse gases in landfills. The human toll is even worse—a third of the world's food production is never eaten, costing billions.

In NH, restaurants and others are working to tackle the food waste issue, diverting what was once considered garbage to more beneficial uses. These efforts, however, have as many challenges as benefits.

Out of the Landfill

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states the United States alone generated 36 million tons of food waste in 2011, and 13 percent of the country's greenhouse gases are associated with the life cycle of food. Statistics like these are not lost on NH restaurants and other hospitality businesses. Cindy Hureau, who manages the NH Lodging and Restaurant Association's (NHLRA) Sustainability Program, says food waste management is an important part of the program. "We spend time with restaurant owners to help them be aware of their options," she says. Hureau says some of those options include growing greens and herbs for the restaurant and working with local producers to buy in smaller volumes, in addition to recycling and composting.

Since opening Elm City Brewing Company in Keene in 1995, owner Deb Rivest and her team have formed relationships with area farmers who use the food waste for compost or livestock feed. "Spent grain from brewing also makes an incredible fertilizer. It's full of nutrients," Rivest says. Employees use meat trimmings for pet food and other organic matter for their own gardens. The restaurant also gives its used fryer oil to a local man who uses it as biofuel for his car. "We're always looking for better ways to do things," Rivest says the company instituted these practices out of respect for the environment rather than a financial motivation.

Margarita Grill in Glen and White Gates Farm in Tamworth partner to reduce waste. "They take our used fryer oil and make biodiesel from it and use it to power the farm's tractors," says owner Corrine Rober. "We then use a lot of their produce in our restaurant." The Southwest-inspired grill also donates food preparation scraps and the uneaten tortilla chips to a turkey farm and a local vineyard.

Jay McSharry, owner of several Seacoast restaurants including Jumpin' Jay's Fish Café and Dos Amigos Burritos, practices a "near-zero-waste" policy in his establishments. McSharry has Mr. Fox Composting of Dover collect his food waste for composting and SmartFuel America in Seabrook recycle his fryer oil. Dos Amigos donates its food waste to a local pig farmer. "It's just good practice," says McSharry. "You turn the lights off when you leave a room; you recycle waste."

The Common Man family of restaurants, with 18 locations throughout NH, has long been known for its sustainability and philanthropy. "We do divert our food waste through composting, giving to pig farms and donating to soup kitchens," says Owner Alex Ray.



Students in UNH's food waste management program add food to the compost pile.

Kitchen staff use vegetable trimmings to make soup stock, and used vegetable oil is sold to biofuel refiners and recycled by Common Man itself for biofuel, though not for financial savings.

There is one class of food waste that rarely avoids diversion and that is prepared food. Donating to a food bank prepared food that was not served and that is not packaged might seem like an obvious solution to both food waste and human hunger, but the rules surrounding such donations are murky. "There aren't rules one way or the other," says John Seiferth, NH's supervisor of field food inspectors. Consequently, restaurants and other food preparation businesses either toss this food into the compost bucket or the trash can. "It comes down to who wants to take the responsibility if someone gets sick."

Beyond Restaurants

Other businesses are also managing their food waste. Hanaford Supermarkets shaved off \$1 million from its waste bill and diverted more than 70 percent of its total waste from landfills since 2012 through its "Moving to Zero Waste" program, says Kasey Harris and George Parmenter, who heads up the chain's sustain-

ability program. “Packaged food that is no longer sellable but edible is donated to our food bank partners like New Hampshire Food Bank,” Parmenter says. Items that can’t be given to food banks are donated to farms for compost or animal feed. Some 22 of NH’s 34 Hannaford stores have compost programs.

Trish Taylor, executive chef at the Grappone Conference Center in Concord, says the facility “worked closely with DES [NH Department of Environmental Services] and the NHLRA Sustainability Program to identify a farm to take our food waste.” Although the partnership is only a year old, Taylor says the facility reduced its trash bin from eight cubic yards to six cubic yards.

The University of NH instituted a food waste management program in 1999. “We compost everything that’s organic,” says Rick MacDonald, director of business affairs. Staff collects and transports the waste and composts the food waste at its farm laboratory in Madbury. The compost is used in its agriculture programs and for the grounds. “We divert, on average, about 12,600 pounds a week,” says MacDonald. The university’s two food pulpers each cost \$50,000, according to MacDonald.

“If you’re looking at diverting food waste as a way to reduce costs, you’ll be disappointed,” he adds.

Colby-Sawyer College in New London recently partnered with Sodexo for its Feed the Freezer program. In the first two months of the program in January and February, it divided its leftover dining hall food into more than 270 individual frozen meals and delivered them to three local food pantries.

The NH Food Bank also works to minimize its own waste. “We try for zero-waste,” says Bruce Wilson, director of operations. “It’s humans first, then animals, then the dumpster.”

Not Your Typical Garbage Men

Rian Bedard, owner of Mr. Fox Composting, says his compost collection process works like routine garbage collection, but instead of bringing organic waste to a landfill, he hauls it to the company’s composting yard in Eliot, Maine. “Everything from meat scraps and bones to dairy to veggies can be composted,” says Bedard.

Starting with just four clients, Bedard now has more than 100 commercial clients, such as Jumpin’ Jay’s Fish Café, and “hundreds” of residential clients within a 30-mile radius of Portsmouth. Mr. Fox’s five employees haul some 40 tons of organic waste each week, diverting hundreds of thousands of pounds from the landfill since opening in 2009.

Bedard says the cost for commercial services was “less per ton than a waste company.” Mr. Fox’s residential composting service costs \$24 per month for weekly pick-up and \$12 per month for bi-weekly pick up, according to its website.

Hank Letarte of Tamworth owns Organic Matters, one of NH’s few permitted—albeit small—food waste composting sites. He also owns White Gates Farm, a certified organic farm, that grows produce and sustainable pork and beef using the compost he makes from food waste. Letarte says he only has a handful of restaurant clients that



Mr. Fox’s composting yard in Elliot, Maine.

send food waste for composting but would like to work with more. “I can’t pick it up; there’s only so much I can do,” he says.

Because his farm is organic, there are constraints on what he can compost. “You have to be aware of certain herbicides, for example, that go on the grass that horses eat but pass through to the manure,”

he says. Letarte also collects used vegetable oil from nearby restaurants and recycles it at his refinery, Our Town Biodiesel.

Here, too, Letarte would like to expand, but issues from refinery insurance costs to competition hamper his efforts. Several companies across NH—including SmartFuel America in Seabrook, Amenco of Pittsfield, and Simply Green Bio-

fuel of North Hampton (now a division of Lamprey Energy)—also collect used vegetable oil and refine it into biofuel. “It’s just too expensive,” he says.

Lack of infrastructure

The biggest challenge to managing food waste is NH’s lack of a composting infrastructure, according to restaurateurs. One of the reasons UNH’s food management program is so successful is that it has its own staff, facilities and funding supporting the entire process.

Mike Guilfooy, administrator of NH’s Solid Waste Management Bureau, says there are no large commercial food waste facilities in the Granite State, only a handful of smaller operations. “They would have to seek a solid waste permit to operate, but no one has come forward to do that,” Guilfooy says.

Starting a large-scale food waste composting facility is similar to opening any solid waste facility, says Guilfooy, requiring permitting and public hearings. Bedard says testing is also required to detect any pathogens leaking into the watershed. “The infrastructure for commercial composting, honestly, is just not there in New Hampshire and Maine.”

Even the pig farms that receive food waste are not stable solutions. “It is erratic,” says Ray. “They go in and out of business.” It can also be a challenge to train employees to consistently separate food waste, he says. Despite these challenges, restaurant owners say any effort is worth it. “Don’t think that one small thing isn’t worth the effort. It will blossom into bigger things,” says Rober of Margarita Grill. ■



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**- Rian Bedard
Owner, Mr. Fox Composting**