

# 1 million plastic straws: Grain aims to reduce use to help environment

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Few people give it a second thought, but plastic straws are omnipresent in modern life. Order a soda at a restaurant, and the waitress is sure to drop a straw on your table. Bartenders are quick to reach for a straw when serving a cocktail. Swing through a fast-food drive-thru or grab your daily iced coffee at Starbucks, and you're sure to get a straw.

Straws are tiny, but millions of them add up and fill landfills and cause pollution in the ocean. As a result, several organizations are trying to reduce the use of straws by educating people about the environmental impact of straws.

In Newark, one local restaurant recently made straws optional in an attempt to reduce their use. Since July, customers at Grain Craft Bar + Kitchen only receive a straw with their beverage if they specifically request one.

"It's definitely a habit change, but it's been well received," co-owner Lee Mikles said. "When you're home, you never use a straw. Why is this any different?"

Mikles determined that between his Newark restaurant and two others he recently opened in Bear and Kennett Square, Pa., he was on pace to use an estimated 1 million straws over the course of a year.

Multiply that by millions of restaurants around the country, and Americans go through 180 billion straws each year, or 500 million every day, according to the Surfrider Association, an organization that works to improve the health of the world's oceans. Plastic straws are often ranked among the most common items found on the beach during cleanups and easily travel to the ocean, harming organisms, wildlife, and the general biodiversity of the oceans, according to the organization.

Mikles began researching the Surfrider Association's "Plastic Straws Suck" campaign at the suggestion of the Rev. Cynthia Robinson, from New Ark United Church of Christ. With her church just a block away from the restaurant, Robinson is a frequent customer at Grain and holds weekly "office hours" there every Wednesday afternoon as a way to give people a different, casual setting to talk to her about religion.

Robinson said she was spurred to action after learning about the effect of plastic on sea creatures who often ingest it thinking it's food. "It's not a crusade, but I just thought, here's a small thing that could happen," she said. "People pooh-poo small steps, but taking 1 million straws out of the dump is a big thing."

Mikles looked into the anti-straws campaign and surveyed his staff on the idea. "Everyone was behind it," he recalled, adding that he's received few complaints, if any, from customers.

Grain still stocks straws, but they are only served with kids' beverages, frozen drinks and by request. Small signs on the tables let customers know why straws are no longer served automatically. So far, Mikles has seen a 90 percent decrease in the number of straws served. "Maybe it will inspire others," he said.



At the suggestion of the Rev. Cynthia Robinson (right), from New Ark United Church of Christ, Grain Craft Bar + Kitchen co-owner Lee Mikles (left) decided to serve straws by request only. He expects the move to keep hundreds of thousands of plastic straws out of landfills and oceans.

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