



# FoodHub in the News

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## **Main Ingredient**

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By Kirk Richardson

### **Being Green Without Going Into the Red**

The world is Chef David Machado's oyster. The owner of Portland's Nel Centro, Lauro Kitchen, and Vindalho restaurants has added his own interpretations to Mediterranean- and Riviera-inspired recipes, earning him a loyal following of foodies willing to cross rivers and mountains for dishes like Spit Roasted Pork Loin with Creamy Polenta and Rhubarb Chutney.

Though Machado's menus are influenced by his visits to exotic far-away regions, he doesn't need to travel to the street markets of Europe to locate the ingredients that fuel his patrons' passion for Ricotta Pansotti with Humble Tomato Sauce. The talented chef has found sustainable food sources in his own backyard, and he is turning green into gold.

Incorporating home grown sustainable products into a menu doesn't necessitate Fort Knox for a bank account, but Machado maintains that it does require smarts. He believes that restaurants' lack of profitability is almost always tied to buying products out of season. "Take a look at asparagus from Chile 30 days after the market in Washington closes for fresh asparagus and see what the price difference is – it's unbelievable," reports Machado. "When I buy asparagus or tomatoes, I wait until the price is right," an opportunity that usually coincides with the bountiful produce harvests in the northwest, he says. "That's when it's at a price that everyone can make money, from the grower to the chef."

There are other reasons Machado prefers to buy close to home. He likes being able to purchase Food Alliance-certified products from Oregon growers, "which means that they've been out to the farm to inspect their practices." That is important to him. "I tend not to buy out of the country for a couple of reasons," he explains. "One is we don't know their pesticide practices. I can never be sure of what they are doing. And I tend not to buy out of the country because of the enormous amount of fuel that it takes to bring it here."

That makes sense considering there are eco-friendlier solutions available in Oregon. "Personally, I would rather see some of the farmers be able to have an outlet through those who are already in the distribution business," says Machado. "The more stable the distribution, the more stable the pricing and the more access I have to information like what is going to be available next week. They're making it much better, much easier for chefs to buy product."

Businessmen like Jim Reynolds, vice president of marketing at Food Services of America (FSA) Portland, relish being that resource for the foodservices industry. FSA Portland, the nation's first Food Alliance-certified distributor, has developed SNOR® (Sustainable, Natural, Organic, Regional) and Hygeia (healthy alternative choices like gluten-free and low sodium foods) product lines. "It's very important to us that we walk the walk, that we don't just hitch onto the latest fad, ride it until it's not a fad anymore and just jump on the next one," he says. "We've really invested in this as a way of life."

Reynolds reveals that FSA plans to round out its family of products later this year with a new line. "The third piece for us is the social consciousness piece and that includes things like cage-free animals and involves things like fair trade issues," he says. "We're taking care of the earth, we're taking care of ourselves, and we're doing the right things."

That includes conserving energy. "The one thing that we bring to the table in a central redistribution point is the optimization of fuel because instead of a hundred little trucks making a hundred little stops a day, you get one big truck picking everything up and one big truck dropping everything off," points out Reynolds. "Honestly, the carbon footprint of that is much smaller from a central distribution point of view than from the small individual distribution point of view."

He adds that the costs associated with sustainable goods could be shrinking as well. "As sustainability and eco-friendly products become more main stream, the prices are reflected as a result," according to Reynolds. "The materials that are used to make non-eco-friendly products, primarily petroleum, are obviously dictated by the price of fuel. Not only are sustainable products becoming more affordable, I think non-sustainable products are becoming more expensive." He adds that freight discounts and volume purchases also help control costs, "and by keeping multiple suppliers in stock, you keep them honed on their pricing and focused on being attractive in price as well as in product."

Reynolds suggests that sustainable, natural, organic, and regional products should provide a profit center for a restaurant rather than be a cost burden. The key is to be able to market it without "greenwashing," he explains: "Sustainability is a word that is thrown around easily and it's hard to dispute. The fact that most anyone can make sustainability claims takes away some of the impact to the folks who are really walking it. The bottom line is you either believe it or you don't believe it."

Many customers are believers. "The restaurateurs have to be responsive to their customer-bases, and I think that is what is driving the conversation," believes Reynolds. "It's a steady growth and an adaptation. I think it's becoming more and more a part of the way to do business rather than a way to do business."

Alex Amarotico, who owns and operates Standing Stone Brewing Company in Ashland, provides compelling proof that the sustainable model can be wildly successful. His business has grown every year since 2002, climbing right through the recession and peaking with 15 percent growth in 2010. "While the economy was starting to go down, our sales started to go up as a result of our making a big deal out of our actions," he says.

Amarotico reports that tapping into local sustainable ingredients has actually helped cut his food costs. "We've kept all of our food costs down using more expensive items just because

we do all of our own prep in house," he explains. "We have more people in the kitchen to make all of these products," a strategy he admits adds to his labor costs, but releases freshness into Standing Stones' dishes in the process.

Many of its ingredients come from growers in the fertile radius that surrounds the restaurant. "If they go to the farmer's market and sell only half of their produce, and they're not going to make it for another day, they can swing by and we might take it off their hands," he shares. "People think that these fresh local products have to cost a lot of money because they see the price at the farmer's market. If they know we're here, when they have an excess of something, we have that relationship already going with them. We definitely get to take advantage of lots of extra things that, if we were just shopping at the grocery store, we might not think is ever possible."

The resourceful entrepreneur plans to take buying local to a new level by producing local. The restaurant is raising its own chickens on leased local land. "We'll process them in-house from farm-to-table," says Amarotico. In the meantime, "All of our eggs are coming from our own chickens that we manage and feed all of our own byproducts," he says. "All of our kitchen scraps go to the chickens."

Standing Stone Brewing Company isn't the only Oregon outfit finding clever ways to reuse byproducts. Portland-based Asean Corporation is turning sugar cane fiber into compostable containers. "When they crush the sugar cane, they're only after the juice," explains Buzz Chandler, President. He says that the leftover fiber used to accumulate outside sugar mills kind of like sawdust piled up outside of Oregon's timber mills years ago.

These days the cane fiber is breaking down with a purpose as the key component in Asean's StalkMarket® product line. "Officially, in a commercial composter, it decomposes in 30-45 days, but in our certification tests, it went in less than 30 days," reports Chandler.

Asean also makes a Planet +® line, which includes cups and bowls for everything from soup to nuts. "They have a film lining that is a bio-resin made from sugar," he explains. "That is the film lining instead of polyethylene. It's an organic material instead of classically inorganic material like petroleum-based."

The company's biodegradable products (including its biopolymer-base Jaya® line of clear containers, cups and cutlery) have been well received everywhere from The Rose Garden to mom and pop diners. "Everybody we deal with who has decided to become more sustainable, through energy use, water use, or by switching to compostable, never go back to their old ways," says Chandler. "They realize that sustainability is not just for environmental reasons, they also start to see bottom-line results too."

Chandler says that biodegradable containers are a reasonable investment when you take all related expenses into account. "Nothing can beat the price of Styrofoam® – it's just the nature of the beast," he says, but adds that the cost and impact of disposal needs to be factored into the equation.

Jason French, chef/owner at Ned Ludd, an American Craft Kitchen in Portland, didn't set out to make his Portland-based restaurant into a model of environmental responsibility, but it would be difficult to find a better example. "Our sustainability is kind of ridiculous just

because I don't have a gas line in the restaurant," says French. "We have a two-burner hot plate, a steam table, a wood-fired oven and a hot box. We're sort of living this romantic notion of a sustainable restaurant, but it is more of a byproduct. It's not something I thought I would be doing, but it was also very much a part of my ethos."

The transplant from Boulder, Colorado is also a realist. He tries to buy food locally when it's available, but the global and regional food markets are part of his three-tier system. He mentions "the spices, coffee, and chocolate that we all love from the Equatorial Region" and European-sourced capers as prime examples of foods he purchases from the global marketplace. "To say that you're 100% local seems a little bit silly," says French.

Ignoring local bounty would be equally ludicrous. In fact, he points out, "There is a farm right behind the restaurant." His customers like knowing that the salad, radishes, herbs, and tomatoes on their plates were picked that day from a garden just out the back door. "Just having local wines, beer makers, and cheese makers also helps the mentality of what we do," adds French. "Oregon feels very much like Europe, just in that there are so many small producers and committed craftspeople within the region. We use those as much as possible because we believe in their commitment and want to support them. They are committed to me, and I'm committed to them."

Deborah Kane, Vice President of Food & Farms at Portland's Ecotrust, manages foodhub.org, which helps connect foodservices businesses and local growers at its online marketplace. "FoodHub is free for buyers and a great way to streamline the search and discovery process when looking for new supply-chain relationships," she says. "Establishing a relationship with local, green producers benefits both parties."

FoodHub, which now boasts more than 2000 members, makes finding sustainable goods more affordable. "Going into the 'red' can be a function of the time spent sourcing green products in addition to the cost of green products," claims Kane. "FoodHub's features are designed to help restaurants quickly and easily find the right fit for their businesses. Perhaps a restaurant wants to get started by featuring one or two local, green farmers. They can use FoodHub to source a list of certified organic farmers within 100 miles of their restaurant. Or perhaps they've got a particular product in mind; they could just as easily go straight to a list of all the farmers who sell raspberries. Detailed profiles for each farmer provide information about products, distribution methods, insurance, certifications, and all the specifics a restaurant would need to determine whether the farmer might be a good fit. Further, FoodHub's ratings system provides peer reviews on things like professionalism, value, and overall product quality so that restaurants can quickly ascertain who the quality producers are."

When it comes to finding bargains, timing is everything. "Savvy restaurateurs will often lock in pre-season prices and negotiate forward contracts with growers," says Kane. "As it relates to cost savings, the supply and demand tricks that apply in the conventional produce world are equally relevant in the organic, green world. Shoulder season items are always going to be more expensive; you'll pay more for first of the season organic tomatoes than you will for mid season tomatoes. Time your use of green items to coincide with their best price or that cost competitive moment when supply outstrips demand. Also, think about local, green items in the off season. Adding color to a plate with local, organic kale in the

winter can be equally, if not more, cost competitive than out-of-season, non-local spinach, for example."

Creative chefs like David Touvell of CHOW make the most of available ingredients, like the local favorite micro greens that he uses to liven up his Poke Salad. Sustainability is ingrained in Touvell, who started working in an organic bakery when he was nine years old. "It was how I was trained," he recalls. "It is how my mother raised me. It educates everyone. I see no other way."

In fact, Bend-based CHOW has a zero waste policy, according to Touvell. "We make our own compost," he says. "We even have our oil made into biodiesel. We are very conservative with everything and indulgent with our cuisine."

Farm-to-table practices are nothing new, reports Touvell, but the environmentally sensitive chef is pleased to see more exposure to growing and sustainability methods through common practices and attitudes. Local food sources and a loyal customer base have helped him successfully apply the model at CHOW. "I am proud to be a part of a community that supports our ideals and goals," he says.

Touvell, whose restaurant supports more than 25 local businesses, plans to incorporate more foods from the surrounding agricultural community soon. "I would like to buy from more local farmers," he states. "My goal is to increase my local product buying by 25 percent this year."

That is the kind of sustainable support that Nel Centro's Machado thinks is needed from the industry. "I've always had this great fear that local agriculture goes away and it's diminished," he worries. "If you let your agricultural land slip to housing and commercial development, once it's gone it's gone. So my opinion is that the restaurants need to pledge their support to the local small farmer. Pay a little more in order to preserve that way of life because if that way of life goes away, all you have is a tractor trailer pulling out of California's Imperial Valley all the way up to Oregon. Whatever is on that trailer is what you can buy, and I personally wouldn't want to live in that world."

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