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It Takes More Than Veggies to Make a Kitchen Green

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Author(s): Kim Severson

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Keeping a restaurant kitchen green is a new focus at both high-end restaurants like Savoy and less expensive chains. Not only is there a search for safer cleaners, but also for new ways to compost kitchen waste and save electricity. Even takeout containers can be friendlier to the environment when they are made from corn or pulverized sugar-cane fibers instead of petrochemical foam.

The products must work. Early forays into disposable spoons made from corn-based plastics melted in hot soup. Some biodegradable cleaning products have also been disappointing, although there are more cleaners that use plant-based ingredients like soy and citrus oils, and other products that use enzymes or hydrogen peroxide to perform the demanding tasks in professional kitchens.

Finding the proper cleaning materials was one of the hardest challenges for the chain Le Pain Quotidien in its effort to be certified green. Yolaida Gonzalez uses them in one restaurant in New York City. (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times); SUPPLIES -- Lawrence Axil Comras, president of greenhome.com, which researches and sells ecoproducts, shows some cleaners to Anna Grace of Cafe Gratitude in San Francisco. (Photo by Fred Mertz for The New York Times); (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times)

Full Text (1289 words)

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PETER HOFFMAN runs Savoy, a restaurant in Manhattan that specializes in seasonal food from local farms. But for as much attention as he pays to organic food and the politics of sustainable agriculture, another aspect of environmentalism eludes him. He has not found a way to keep the kitchen both clean and green.

Not that he hasn't tried. Once a week, he donates the used oil from his deep fryer to Michael Yessi of Flying Pigs Farms. Mr. Yessi, in turn, uses it to run the diesel engine on the 16-foot box truck he drives to and from his farm in upstate New York.

But like many other restaurant owners on a quest to find ways to handle the garbage and mess of a professional kitchen while reducing the effects on the environment, Mr. Hoffman is still searching. He has tried numerous nontoxic and biodegradable cleaning products, but, he said, "It's an ongoing headache."

"Some of them are good and can do it, and some of it can't really cut it for the level we need to be working at," he said.

Keeping a restaurant kitchen green is a new focus at both high-end restaurants like Savoy and less expensive chains. Not only is

there a search for safer cleaners, but also for new ways to compost kitchen waste and save electricity. Even takeout containers can be friendlier to the environment when they are made from corn or pulverized sugar-cane fibers instead of petrochemical foam.

"People are finally ready," said Michael Oshman, who founded the nonprofit Green Restaurant Association in 1990.

The association, based in Sharon, Mass., helps restaurants figure out how to be more environmentally responsible and ultimately secure its certification. Among the steps it encourages: using energy-saving light bulbs, water- and energy-conservation programs, and napkins made from unbleached paper. It insists that its certified restaurants do not use polystyrene foam products.

By this spring, his group will have certified almost 300 restaurants as meeting its standards of energy conservation and environmental stewardship. "A lot of restaurant owners are seeing that this is good, cost-effective business, but also that there is now a strong consumer base that values this," Mr. Oshman said.

In San Francisco, greenhome.com researches and sells products -- from pest-control aids to baby clothes -- that are easy on nature. "For seven years I have been banging my head, and all of a sudden everyone is doing it," said Lawrence Axil Comras, greenhome's president. "Now they get it."

Both the Green Restaurant Association and greenhome.com try to allay concerns about cost by showing how extra spending in one area can be offset by savings in others. Installing additional insulation on a water heater or buying compact fluorescent light bulbs can save a third in energy costs after the initial investment is paid off, which can come as soon as a couple of months. Those savings can help with the added costs of buying more food locally and using takeout containers that are not made from plastic.

"At the end of the day, they need to have it justified financially," Mr. Oshman said.

And the products must work. Early forays into disposable spoons made from corn-based plastics melted in hot soup. Some biodegradable cleaning products have also been disappointing, although there are more cleaners that use plant-based ingredients like soy and citrus oils, and other products that use enzymes or hydrogen peroxide to perform the demanding tasks in professional kitchens.

Many are safe to use on surfaces that food comes in contact with. Although not all restaurant cleaning chemicals are necessarily bad for the environment, less caustic products can be better for employees, especially those who are sensitive to chemicals.

But switching to those cleaners presents headaches that changing light bulbs or setting up a composting bin does not. Some companies are locked into long-term contracts for cleaning supplies and can't change. For others, there is a psychological barrier.

"We have a restaurant owner right now that doesn't like the way a product looks," Mr. Oshman said. "The pricing was great, but the restaurant industry is so socialized to using the blue chemical for this or the pink chemical for that. There's an education piece to do on the cleaning chemicals, definitely."

Michael Eisenberg is a senior vice president of Guardian Service Industries, a \$100 million company that began cleaning windows in 1914 and now cleans 50 buildings in the Northeast, among them the Chrysler Building and several corporate cafeterias. He recently went to all-green cleaning products, but he said finding the right ones took time.

"We've tried tons of products," he said. "I've got closets filled with them." He favors something called H2Orange2 from Envirox, which can be diluted to levels appropriate for different jobs. It contains a biodegradable surfactant, orange oil and hydrogen peroxide. Mr. Eisenberg says he likes how it cleans, but not everyone on his crew does.

"All my cleaners all want to use Windex," he said. "They think because they can't smell it, it can't be working. But green doesn't smell."

Finding the right cleaner is one of the last steps in Le Pain Quotidien's quest to go green. The company, which has 60 restaurants worldwide, including 12 in New York City and 8 in Los Angeles, was recently certified green by the Green Restaurant Association.

"It seemed sort of ironic to have hand soaps that have foaming agents when we are using reclaimed wood and have linseed oil on the chairs and tables," said Patrick Jenkins, vice president for operations.

For hand soap in the bathroom, the company has tested Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, a favorite from the late 1960s that is made from olive oil but tends to clump in the dispensers. The company has also tried some Aveda products. And it is in the testing phase with enzyme- and oxygen-based cleaners for other parts of the restaurants.

Whatever cleaner it ends up with will be nontoxic, phosphate-free, petroleum-free, 100 percent biodegradable and free of volatile

organic compounds, Mr. Jenkins said.

"In some ways there's no looking back once you start looking at everything through that green filter," he said. "All costs aren't economic. There are costs that are social and more ecological."

At the Cliff House, a historic building overlooking the Pacific Ocean in San Francisco, creating a greener kitchen was a goal of a two-year, \$19 million remodeling project, said Ralph Burgin, vice president for operations.

The city picks up both recycling and composting, and a biofuel company picks up the frying oil -- up to two 55-gallon drums a week. In the kitchen, the staff uses products from Clean Source and EcoLab. And the restaurant stopped using plastic liners in the bathroom wastebaskets.

The restaurant's conversion started after Mr. Burgin's wife, Vickie, became interested in organic food. Soon, his household was green as could be.

"At this point in time, even my pets are having organic food," he said.

It didn't take much for him to convince his fellow staff members that the restaurants could change, too.

"I became convinced that what was happening in my own private household would makes good business sense," he said. "But it goes beyond that. It also makes us feel good."

[Photograph]

GLEAM -- Finding the proper cleaning materials was one of the hardest challenges for the chain Le Pain Quotidien in its effort to be certified green. Yolaida Gonzalez uses them in one restaurant in New York City. (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times); SUPPLIES -- Lawrence Axil Comras, president of greenhome.com, which researches and sells ecoproducts, shows some cleaners to Anna Grace of Cafe Gratitude in San Francisco. (Photo by Fred Mertz for The New York Times); (Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times)

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