



Chef Rick Bayless, who calls himself a child of the '60s, has kept his commitment to the environment and knows it can be cost effective.

RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES

KEEPING IT GREEN

RESTAURANTS | Being friend to the environment is good business, too

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When Earth Day began in 1970, many skeptics thought it was just another activity of the hippie generation.

As Earth Day 2007 approaches on Sunday, the catchphrases "global warming" and "being green" no longer elicit giggles or visions of Kermit the Frog.

Quick-service restaurant owners are clearly concerned. A 2005 survey by the National Restaurant Association found that about 90 percent of QSR owners said high energy costs had an adverse effect on their businesses.

Several prominent local restaurateurs are leading efforts to conserve energy and reduce wasteful operations.

Chef Rick Bayless, who owns Frontera Grill, Topolobampo and Frontera Fresco, has operated with conservation as a centerpiece of his business for 20 years.

"I'm a child of the '60s. It makes sense to me; it's a good thing to do to make sure not to overuse resources," Bayless said in a telephone interview. "We've felt we were contributing positively to the community from an environmental standpoint."

Bayless, whose quick-serve Frontera Fresco is expanding to the Macy's Oak Brook store and the Macy's store in San Francisco, suggests QSR operators consider steps such as using biodegradable servicewear when possible.

He also recommends:

- ◆ Buy fresh produce from small, local farms when possible.
- ◆ Use a waste-disposal vendor that is committed to recycling. Bayless' restaurants have created

the largest composting endeavor in Chicago, sending a combined 2 tons of food waste each week to Resource Center, the heralded not-for-profit environmental organization headed by Ken Dunn that emphasizes recycling, composting and educational programs, and runs a farm in a gentrifying inner-city neighborhood.

Bayless knows from experience that restaurant workers can be motivated to take recycling seriously if they realize they are helping the community and the environment.

Being green doesn't have to be expensive, either, he said. It's a matter of setting priorities.

"We run costs in line with everyone else," Bayless said. "We take things one step at a time. We feel we make headway every single year.

"If 25 percent of the world's resources are used by the United States, maybe that's not a sustainable thing," he said.

Bayless led a workshop in December 2005 called "Green Restaurants Initiative" sponsored by the Chicago-based Environmental Law and Policy Center. The ELPC recently launched a Web site at www.GreenRestaurants.org and published a guide to help restaurant owners save money while benefiting the environment.

"A number of restaurant operators want to tout the steps they take to be energy efficient and environmentally friendly because it's a plus in satisfying customers," said Howard Learner, executive director of the ELPC. "People like to see that restaurants are part of a solution."

The ELPC first contacted the Illinois Restaurant Association

two years ago about a conservation initiative and has slowly expanded its reach. The ELPC has worked with celebrity chef Gale Gand to tout green-to-go containers and with Rich Melman's Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises restaurant chain to promote environmentally friendly policies.

Steve LaHaie, a vice president and green advocate at LEYE and longtime manager at Shaw's Crab House in Chicago, is working with the ELPC to find energy-efficient light bulbs that enable the restaurant to keep the sophisticated ambiance its clientele expects and to use low-flow spray arms in dish-

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washing operations to save water.

LaHaie believes that baby boomers and a diverse group of other customers support restaurants that do business with local farmers, serve organic food and care about healthy alternatives.

LaHaie worked with Jon Rowley, a nationally recognized expert on seafood and produce, to improve Shaw's sourcing of food from local farmers and advocates of a cleaner Great Lakes. Shaw's buys berries, asparagus, corn and other produce from Tom's Strawberry Farm in nearby Huntley, and it gets berries, apples and vegetables from farmer Mick Klug in St. Joseph, Mich.

LaHaie advises other restaurant operators to look for small ways to compost, recycle and save electricity. For example, Shaw's Crab House is studying the idea of recycling fryer oil to re-heat water and is considering buying an EcoLogic line of ecologically safe cleaning supplies from Ecolab, a Minnesota-based supplier.

Argo Tea, a Chicago-based chain of seven tea shops, is a private company owned by native Europeans who grew up in countries where energy conservation was part of everyday life.

"It's about commitment to be a sustainable and environmentally conscious business," said Arsen Avakian, CEO and founder. "The commitment translates into everything you do — your suppliers, operations, the store design and the types of products you use."

Argo Tea builds its stores with the goal of using recyclable material, water-efficient landscaping and efficient mechanical and electrical systems.

The tea shops sell all-natural products made by local artisans; offers a recycling trash bin next to the regular trash slot, and promotes employees from within.

The chain gets creative with projects such as tea seminars, held in conjunction with Northwestern and the University of Chicago hospitals, to build awareness of cancer research and women's health, and by starting Argo CreativiTEA, which released a CD-ROM showcasing local musicians, including some of its employees.

"While we live in a capitalist society, we live on planet Earth," Avakian said. "We should remember basic human principles and value them."