

LIFESTYLES ::

Going green

Environmental movement catching on with restaurants, whether it means serving an organic menu, cutting down on electricity consumption or pushing recycling initiatives

<http://www.dailysouthtown.com/lifestyles/402060,271LIF3.article>

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By Robert Loerzel Correspondent

Spurred by environmental concerns and the questionable practices of the corporate food industry, some restaurants are going "green."

That means different things at different businesses. Some are focusing on the use of organic or locally produced food. Others are trying to conserve electricity and water and cutting down on garbage.

Tallgrass, an upscale restaurant located in downtown Lockport since 1981, has switched to an all-organic menu over the past year, said chef Robert Burcenski, who owns the restaurant with maitre d' Thomas Alves.

"We are only dealing with small farms that are humane to the animals," Burcenski said. "There's no antibiotics. The animals that I use are more in tune with what used to go on in our world."

Tallgrass buys its beef from a Kansas farm owned by Chicago television journalist Bill Kurtis. His livestock operation (coincidentally called Tallgrass Beef) raises cattle on an all-grass diet, with no hormones or antibiotics.

"Corn is as unnatural for cattle as fast food is for humans," Kurtis writes on his company's Web site. Cattle fed on grass produce beef with more of the Omega 3 fatty acids that people should have in their diet and less of the unhealthy Omega 6 fatty acids.

To Burcenski, it also tastes better. "It tastes like what I remember beef tasting like when I was a kid," he said.

Tallgrass buys organic eggs and free-range chickens from Amish farms, and most of its fruits and vegetables come from area organic farms. Chef Robert Burcenski grows his own herbs.

The Lockport restaurant is part of a small but growing movement to "go green." That might mean converting food waste to compost or using recycled paper boxes or conserving energy by changing the way dishes are washed.

Last year, the Chicago-based Environmental Law & Policy Center launched a program called Green Restaurants, along with the Web site www.greenrestaurants.org. The goal is to help restaurant owners find ways to be more environmentally responsible.

Howard Learner, the center's executive director, said restaurants can cut down on utility bills, help the environment and improve public relations.

"These are things that customers want to see," he said. "People are looking at businesses and saying, 'What are you doing to make this a better planet?'"

The typical restaurant has a "large environmental footprint," Learner said. Just think of the electricity, water, gas, food, napkins and containers that a restaurant uses, he said. And then think about the waste -- kitchen and table scraps, oils and grease.

Learner's group helps restaurants find more earth-friendly to-go containers and pizza delivery boxes, made from recycled paper. It guides restaurant owners in their use of energy, including dishwashing techniques that don't waste as much water and lights that conserve power.

"I want to see restaurants being part of the solution," Learner said.

Several Chicago restaurants are listed as "green" on its Web site, including Naha, Lula Caf--, Topolobampo, Frontera Grill, Shaw's Crab House, Green Zebra, Saloon Steakhouse, Argo Tea, Hopleaf and Hannah's Bretzel.

Another group helping restaurants follow greener policies is the Resource Center in Chicago, which farms vacant lots in the city.

The nonprofit environmental organization also runs the Perishable Food Recovery Program, collecting food that restaurants and stores no longer want to sell -- surplus stock, damaged produce, maybe something that has just reached its expiration date -- and donating it to homeless shelters and soup kitchens.

The Resource Center also composts food scraps that might normally go into a Dumpster.

"We're taking the scraps from restaurants, composting it, and using the compost to grow produce that we sell back to the restaurants," said Tim Wilson, the center's project manager of city farms. (For details, see www.resourcecenterchicago.org or call 773-821-1351.)

At Tallgrass, Burcenski hopes to take his restaurant's green policies beyond just the food he purchases. He wants to find ways to conserve energy, including the possible use of solar power.

Burcenski said it was Michael Pollan's 2006 book "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals," which details alarming changes in the way Americans produce and consume food, that inspired him to make the changes.

Food is now an industry, mass produced without care to how plants or animals are treated, he said.

"Industrialized foods have created a food chain that replaces nature's way with 'their' way," he said. "By replacing solar energy with fossil fuel, by planting crops in vast monocultures, by raising millions of animals inhumanely in close confinement and by feeding animals food and chemicals they were never intended to eat, the industrialized food chain is putting our health and our natural world at risk."

Burcenski said the prices for his environmentally friendly menu have gone up 20 percent to 30 percent, but he has not passed the cost onto his patrons. Menu prices have remained the same.

"Nobody has to worry about feeling guilt over anything I serve," Burcenski said. "I'm trying to raise consciousness so people are more sensitive about what they put in their bodies."

"It's hard to find a restaurant with the philosophy I'm trying to create. By encouraging this philosophy, I hope to have some small effect on the betterment of both my customers and the world we live in."

Reporter Michelle Mullins contributed to this report.

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