

WORKING TOWARDS A GREENER RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

With the increasing need for businesses to operate in an environmentally conscious way, the restaurant industry is being put under the sustainability spotlight. Fortunately, this could be good news for restaurateurs, as well as the environment.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

According to research carried out by the charity WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme), more than 1.3 billion meals are wasted annually in the UK's hospitality and food service sector, costing restaurants and diners an estimated £3 billion a year. Speaking about the need for the industry to reduce this figure, Resources Minister Rory Stewart has said, 'This is not only crucial for our natural environment, but our economy too – no food should go to waste.'

And waste management is just one part of a complex picture. As well as other environmental considerations, such as recycling and energy efficiency, in order to operate sustainably, restaurants must also think about their supply chain, how they source their ingredients and the wider impact they have on society.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

For Asian restaurateurs, there can be some unique challenges, including the tendency to use a lot of imported ingredients and speciality foods. However, Mark Linehan, Managing Director of the not-for-profit Sustainable Restaurant Association, which was set up to help simplify sustainability within the industry, says, 'While there can be challenges sourcing some authentic ingredients from within the UK (although an increasing number of those herbs, spices and vegetables are now being grown here), there's no reason why Asian restaurants can't match the environmental and societal aspirations and achievements of other cuisine types.'

Take Bristol's award-winning Thali Café, for example. The owners point out that in rural India people use seasonal, local food out of necessity and recycle as much as possible because they can't afford to waste anything. They explain, 'Right from the beginning we decided to follow this model to set up a business that can thrive without harming the environment.'

BENEFITS OF A MORE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Besides the clear environmental and societal benefits, adopting a sustainability strategy makes good business sense, as many practices can save money as well as waste. And, in future, sustainability may be an increasingly important factor influencing where diners choose to eat.

'Many of the issues on which we assess and advise restaurants, including food waste and energy efficiency, offer the opportunity for businesses to make significant savings,' says Linehan.

MAKING YOUR RESTAURANT MORE SUSTAINABLE

Becoming more sustainable is an ongoing evolutionary process, but there are some key factors that you should consider when starting out:

- **FOOD:** Source seasonal, locally produced ingredients where possible, choosing those that are organic and/or fair trade.
- **WASTE:** Think about how you can reduce food waste, for example, by always offering diners the option to take leftovers home with them or better planning menus to reduce surplus.
- **ENERGY AND WATER:** Choose a sustainable energy supplier, check the energy-efficiency of your appliances, and be conscious of how much energy and water you use.
- **CLEANING SUPPLIES:** Switch to non-toxic cleaning products.
- **RECYCLING:** As well as recycling in the kitchen, aim to use only recycled and biodegradable packaging, napkins and toilet paper.

Crucially, it's important to remember that there is help available to restaurateurs who are interested in making their businesses more sustainable. 'Running a restaurant sustainably can, without the right support, appear to be a daunting task,' says Linehan. 'But the SRA's Food Made Good Programme breaks it up into 14 key areas across the three main pillars: Sourcing, Environment and Society. Our advice is always to take it one step at a time.'

CASE STUDY: SUSTAINABLE SUSHI

Feng Sushi is a London-based delivery chain with nine branches across the capital. The owners believe that 'environmental responsibility is an important aspect of running a successful long-term business and that meeting the needs of our current generation should not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. In line with this ethos, Feng Sushi operates according to a comprehensive environmental policy. This includes some obvious measures, such as sustainably sourcing MSC-certified fish, and others that are more innovative,.