

Business Travel Managed Travel &
Procurement Solutions

EXECUTIVE

January 2009

Homegrown

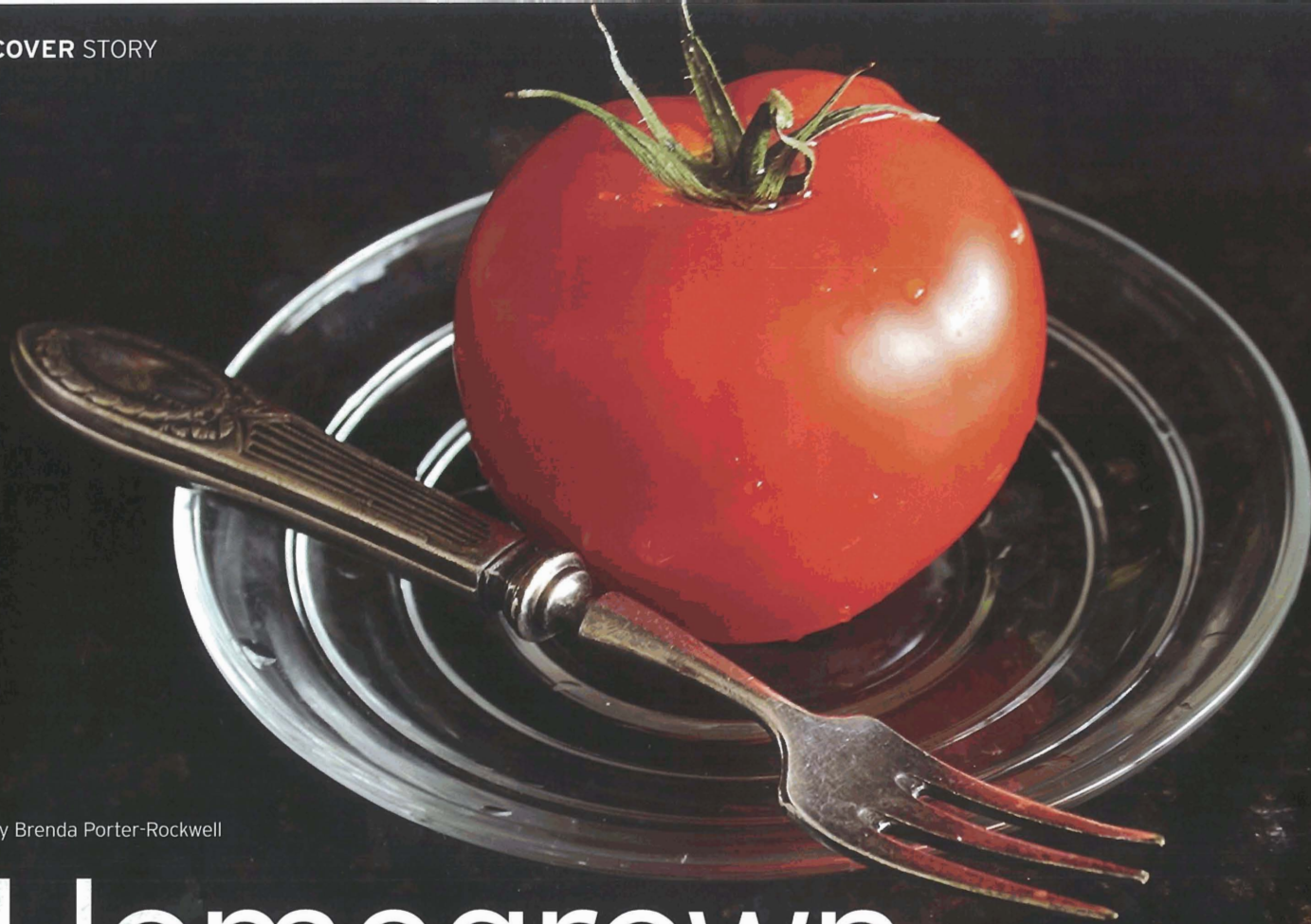
What's the meeting tab
for a sustainable menu?

Under Scrutiny
Oversight on spending of
grant funds is increasing.

Fly-in
What it means at home as
general aviation goes global.

PRESORTED
STANDARD MAIL
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT # 73
WEST CALDWELL, NJ





By Brenda Porter-Rockwell

Homegrown

As more meeting planners' RFPs ask hotels what's being done to mitigate their environmental impact, more hotels are highlighting their sustainable, locally-sourced menus. But how deeply is the tactic to cut catering's environmental footprint cutting into meeting budgets?

There are both environmental and profit motives behind the trend toward sustainable menus. Restaurateur and chef Jonathan Rapp credits the revival of his struggling eatery River Tavern (in Chester, CT) to implementing Dinners at the Farm, a summertime series of outdoor dinners staged in the fields of local farms.

Personal, and often corporate, values and preferences are certainly important drivers.

Market researchers tracking the growth of the organic food market, projected to be a \$27 billion industry, say its growth rate is twice that of conventional. What separates organic foods from conventional is the official logo from the US Department of Agriculture, which tells consumers the product has been grown in

accordance with strict guidelines, which forbid the use of pesticides.

Similar to organic foods, the local and sustainable food movement is also gaining prominence in the food service industry as one way to reduce the number of food miles (carbon footprint) attached to a product. The "locally grown" label connects with consumer desires for fresh and safe products that support small, local farmers and help the environment because they're not sourced from so far away. At least one consumer survey has shown that is being locally grown is now more important than being organic (which many local products may not be).

"Sustainable menus have been around for a while although on a much smaller scale. I think that [this] is definite-

ly the way of the future. More and more people are asking for organically grown, local products," says Houssan Erroudani, director of food and beverage at New Brunswick, NJ's newest hotel, The Heldrich.

Another marker of the growth of the eco-friendly food business is the recently established Green Foodservice Alliance, organized to promote the use of local, sustainable and organic foods, as well as the use of kitchen items like energy efficient appliances, in the industry.

There's A Price

While travelers' and meeting attendees' agreeing to turn down the heat in the room and request fresh sheets and towels less often offers no tangible impact on their company's bottom line, a meal tab of strictly organic or local foods will be felt.

The reason? Organic and local foods carry a higher price to source. Because of the strict farming guidelines for organic foods, the end result is smaller yields than conventional, requiring a higher payment to farmers to stay in business and a higher

cost to the end user. Locally grown foods — those sourced as close to home as possible — are also pricier, credited with the extra care and attention a small farmer dedicates to their crops.

Hartman Group (Seattle, WA) researchers surveyed consumers and found that 50 percent defined local as within 100 miles; 37 percent said within the same state, says Hartman's president, Laurie

Everyone is talking about stimulating the economy and generating more consumer interest in spending money ... in the meetings industry, that has to start with big corporations trying sustainable menus and asking for local products.

Demeritt. The survey also showed that 52 percent said it was important for them to buy local goods whenever possible; some 23 percent said the same for organic. Consumers also tend to think of local products — namely fruits and vegetables — as fresher because they're grown "close to home" and generally come from small farmers, Demeritt says.

Nonetheless food and beverage directors heartily advocate for organic and sustainable foods, whether for a party of two or 20. "Although there is a slight difference in price between an organic product and a chemically grown product, this difference is easily offset by the freshness and immediate availability of the product, all the charges that occur when getting a product shipped and all the local economic benefits that the local business gains from buying a local farm product," explains Erroudani.

Just how much of the increased cost gets passed on? It varies. Chef Jody Adams, owner of Rialto at The Charles Hotel (Cambridge, MA), acknowledges the increased cost of sustainable foods, but says "This is a movement we have embraced and decided we will walk with. Food costs in the summer are higher for us than other times of the year. But that's not a cost we pass on to our customers. If we

don't support our local farmers, there won't be any left."

In some cases, as we saw last summer (2008), with the spike in fuel costs and the associated surcharges, the price paid for doing the right thing and doing the same old thing grew closer. "Locally grown products can often be more expensive, as they are a smaller business. Sometimes a product from a larger purveyor can be more cost-effective, but as we saw with the fuel increases this year, it often ended up being as expensive and very close in price," says Miguel David, director of catering at the Montauk Yacht Club Resort & Marina (Long Island, NY).

F&B managers and chefs are sensitive to the current reality and the need to keep food and beverage costs in line. The challenge is trying to find a balance between value and creativity on the menu.

To help keep the costs of sustainable menus from skyrocketing, while at the same time making strides toward greater sustainability, Allana Smith, director of back-of-the-house operations at Restaurant Avondale in the Westin Riverfront Resort & Spa (Avon, CO), says the resort has invested in a number of eco-friendly upgrades in the kitchen.

For example, when it comes to water, the hotel has invested in an additional filtration system and a separate carbonation system. The facility uses one-liter glass bottles featuring the hotel logo. The bottles are filled in-house with chilled, ambient or carbonated water. This alleviates the need to purchase expensive bottled water from outside vendors and reduces the amount of bottles to be recycled.

"It takes something from the group's point of view to perceive this as a value and not a downgrade," says Smith. For pre-boxed business lunches, the resort will serve the food in a non-bleached apple bag. "It doesn't look as fancy, but it's functional and sustainable. This is also a cost saver, which could justify the higher cost of the food," explains Smith.

Price & Patriotism

Even with the best interests in mind, today's tough economy could likely necessitate a closer review of the cost of offering sustainable menus. From a corporations' view these menus will noticeably add a premium to any meal tab. While market researchers have not been able to identify an average flat fee for a "green" menu over the cost of a conventional

Define Seasonal

Hotels are now looking to local farm partners to supply seasonal

produce available specifically to that region at that time of the year. In Cambridge, MA, says chef Jody Adams, owner of Rialto at The Charles Hotel, one Maine farmer drives three hours to sell his produce to Rialto and a local oyster farmer delivers oysters during the summer. But she will forgo strawberries and asparagus in winter, since those items don't grow during the cold New England winters.

Also during the colder months, both Rialto and Henrietta's Table rely a lot on root vegetables and look to local greenhouses for items like heirloom tomatoes. "We try to use the most seasonal fruits and vegetables possible. We do a lot with root vegetables (carrots, rutabagas, parsnips, celery root, beets, turnips, potatoes) roasted or in gratins. For fruit, it's mostly apples, pears and cranberries either slow roasted, fresh or in sauces and chutneys. We also try to use apple cider, hard cider and apple wines for sauces and reductions," says Peter Davis, The Charles Hotel's executive chef and head chef at Henrietta's Table.

When it comes to sustainable food choices for dinner, Allana Smith says the Westin Riverfront Resort & Spa in Avon, CO, resort is careful to source only non-endangered species of fish.

For Miguel David, director of catering at the Montauk Yacht Club Resort & Marina, spring could bring fresh fluke (a type of white fish) while summer could yield striped bass, lobster, oysters, Brussels sprouts and corn. He also sources local duck from the surrounding Long Island area.

Even for all of the good intentions to save the local farmer, reduce the number of food-miles a product travels from field to fork, the market for sustainable foods is robust, but not evolved to the point where all goods can be sourced from nearby farmers.

Houssan Erroudani notes that The Heldrich still relies on a local distributor for all of its produce. "Some of the products come from California, Florida and other warm states. We still use local micro-greens and mixed herbs because they are grown indoors."

Adds Smith: "More and more food and beverage departments want to promote their sustainability efforts. However, the public is getting smarter, so we have to be smarter too. We have to educate the public about our recycling efforts and our composting efforts, and more."



Miguel David



Houssan Erroudani

menu, companies are still struggling with trying to be good stewards of the earth while maintaining a positive cash flow.

Still, food managers are not dissuaded. “In today’s economy it is more important than ever to invest in the local economy so that local farmers can stay in business,” says Erroudani.

Other than considering price when planning a sustainable menu, meeting planners should be flexible in their food choices, and sometimes in the portion size, experts advise. “Sustainability should be maintained by all businesses; if not, you’re perceived as if you don’t care about the environment. Also, it takes training about your products with your staff. It appears that consumers are willing to pay for artisan cuisines even if it means smaller portions. The value is in the quality, not the

quantity. And a group planner needs to be aware of this,” says Smith.

“What we like to suggest to a client in need of a totally sustainable menu is that not only are they getting the freshest ingredients available to this area, they are also helping the local economy,” says Montauk’s executive chef, Jared Potter, adding that this creates a partnership with the local community.

For their part, many restaurants, like Henrietta’s Table inside The Charles Hotel, and hotels like The Heldrich are offering multi-tiered pricing.

At The Heldrich, “Our menu prices are currently tailored to offer value toward any group and budget. We are priced in tiers to offer more to our guests. Custom tailored menus are also available to meet budgets,” explain David & Potter.

“Everybody has a budget and we try to work within that budget,” says The Charles Hotel’s executive chef, Peter Davis, who is also head chef at Henrietta’s Table.

But a commitment to sustainable menus should come from corporate, says The Heldrich’s Erroudani. “In today’s

These menus come at a premium ... companies struggling with being good stewards of the earth while maintaining a positive cash flow should be flexible in their food choices, and sometimes in the portion size.

news, everyone is talking about stimulating the economy and generating more consumer interest in spending money; however [in the meetings industry] that has to start with big corporations affording their meeting planners the opportunity and the budgets to try sustainable menus and ask for local products.”

Health Considerations

With the e.coli scare and most recently the backlash against tomatoes, meeting planners may start to question if the freshness and the quality of locally grown and organic menus are worth the price, if the risk of food-borne illness is so high.

Ensuring the safety of the food you source means always knowing where your foods are coming from, says Adams. “We know who’s coming to our back door — it’s a question of trust. The issue of contamination is not with the small farmers. Go and visit the farmer — it becomes more of a relationship with the farmer-partner.”

The government’s role in assuring a safe food supply is even more important today, maintains Erroudani. “I actually think that by involving the government in the process we gain a [watchful] eye and a regulator for all the products that come out of those local farms. The risks will always be there, but the benefits are greater. I am a huge fan of sustainable menus and will always work toward growing the local economy, while serving healthier, fresher products.” **BTE**

Fashion In Foods

“Fresh and locally produced ingredients, intense rich flavors, and, thankfully, the demise of supersizing is where America’s chefs are trending this year,” said Robert Zappatelli, vice president of food and beverage at Benchmark Hospitality, as he introduced his company’s five top dining trends for 2009.

Benchmark operates restaurants, personal luxury hotels, resorts, conference centers and condominium resorts throughout the United States, in Japan and Latin America. Its trends report is based on observations made at those properties.

Trend number one is organically grown produce pulled fresh from the earth that morning, farm-fresh eggs collected before breakfast, and locally produced, hormone-free meats, says the company.

Trend number two is “sliders – the 21st century comfort food.” Although often based on memories of White Castle, the Benchmark culinary team observes that they now come in many guises: a mini tuna burger, Kobe beef burger and lamb masala, presented on breads from brioche to semolina or the great breads of Cuba.

Trend number three is offal. While many may find this – pardon the pun – hard to swallow, Zappatelli sees it as another comfort food “making a huge comeback after being out of favor for way too long.” He extols new recipes: old classics like calves liver and onions get a touch of marsala and pancetta; veal sweetbreads presented with fresh tomato, thyme and porcini mushrooms; tender tripe with baby white potatoes and chippolini onions.

Still, he admits, this isn’t for everyone and says he expects to see it more as the personal choice of individual business travelers rather than on meeting planners’ menus. As for religious restrictions: “The strict rule of Judaism ... holds the most restrictions of religions. These are regulated by the degree they practice, of course we know there are others that will have no pork product and cows equate to sacred.” It takes sensitivity on the part of the catering manager, he says, and on the part of the meeting planner as well.” Then he lists the basic rules of Judaism:

- No pork or shellfish.
- Fish is acceptable as long as it has fins and scales.
- All animals with split hooves and which chew the cud (including sheep and cows).
- Refrain from eating meat and dairy products at the same meal.
- No wine, unless it’s kosher wine.
- All meat has to be prepared by a qualified kosher butcher.

Trend number four, he continues, are portions “that are by no means nouvelle cuisine, yet are no longer supersized ... hearts and arteries across the country will give thanks.”

Trend number 5 is “the other side of the farm-to-table movement.” Food grown and consumed locally doesn’t require massive fleets of refrigerated trucks for transport, doesn’t need to sit in large temperature-controlled warehouses, doesn’t require shots of coloring to make it look fresher.

“Somewhere,” Zappatelli says, “Mother Earth is smiling.”