

Creating community: promoting local products, sustainable practices can evoke positive reactions.(Marketing)

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When Ross Burtwell, owner and chef of the Cabernet Grill in Fredericksburg, Texas, decided to go to an all-Texas wine list on Feb. 1, 2008, he was doing so to emphasize local products.

Burtwell said the list, which had been about half Texas wines before the switch, had a very sweet side effect. "That month we saw a 28-percent increase in wine sales that has never let up," he said. "In fact even in the past year, as our food sales have been hit with recessionary decline, our wine sales are up over the previous year."

Burtwell is far from alone. Chains as varied in size and mission as Darden Restaurants Inc., McDonald's, Chipotle and Pizza Fusion have embraced local, green and sustainable practices.

"Sustainability is here to stay. It's not going anywhere," said Michelle Barry, senior vice president of The Hartman Group of Seattle. "We have a collective culture that's in flux, and this is a very grounding, emotional concept."

The trend has taken hold very rapidly, she said, really launching on a large scale in 2007 and growing into a groundswell during the Great Recession.

About four in 10 consumers surveyed late last year for the National Restaurant Association's "2010 Restaurant Industry Forecast" said they were likely to pick a restaurant based on its conservation practices. Meanwhile, about seven in 10 said they were more likely to choose a restaurant if it featured locally produced ingredients.

Restaurants need to embrace at least some aspects of the trend to survive, Barry told the recent Chain Operators Exchange, sponsored by the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association. And they must market that message, even in simple ways, to their customers.

"The time frame for at least addressing it is two to three years," Barry said. "At the end of the day, it's really about responsibility and quality. The brands that don't keep up the pace will keep getting quieter and quieter, and eventually go away."

Consumers are looking for signs from businesses that they care about their community and the environment, she said. Such signs signal "quality" for which consumers have said they will pay a premium. One survey put that premium at 20 percent.

From coast to coast, farm-to-table menus are luring audiences in finer-dining establishments. Todd Duplechan, chef de cuisine at Trio restaurant at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin, Texas, said, "In today's market, you not only have to give guests a sense of place, but they have come to expect you will be sourcing your menu locally."

Chef Jeremy Barlow at Tayst in Nashville, Tenn., even features his local farmers on a chalkboard at the restaurant's entrance.

"A lot of companies are doing a ton of stuff, but they are not getting credit for it," Barry said. "But restaurants have a theater for that."

"It's very much about people, places and processes," she continued. "If you can come up with a story about any one of those things or--better--all three, the story becomes very emotional. Sustainability is about words, romance, icons, symbols and pictures. It's more of a 'show' rather than a 'tell.'"

She said it could be as simple as sprinkling chicken with fresh rosemary.

"You just have to provide cues for your customer," Barry said, adding that well-trained waiters can do much to enhance the restaurant's green image.

Burtwell discovered that when he made the Texas wine decision. "There is no way we could have succeeded with an all-Texas wine list without putting a lot of extra training into our staff," he said. "The fact is: Selling Texas wine is completely different from selling California wine."

The marketing of sustainability has to be genuine, Barry added, citing the efforts of Chipotle in locally sourcing produce, saving energy and emphasizing naturally raised beef and chicken.

Chris Arnold, spokesman for Chipotle, said the fast-casual chain is "just starting to market our sustainability efforts a little bit more."

"The story is best if people arrive at it on their own," Arnold said. "Otherwise, it comes off as preachy, and we don't want to impose our values on the world."

Burtwell said he was motivated less by environmental concerns than those of his patrons.

"I see the faces of my neighbors sitting in my dining room," Burtwell said. "These folks farm the land, raise cattle, make wine and produce jams and jellies that are outstanding. I don't need to source ingredients from France when you can get great products made right down the road."

Consumers help spread the word, too, Barry said.

"Consumers are picking this up, and it's running through blogs and getting Tweeted," she said. "It has a life of its own."

rruggles@nm.com
