

# The final straw

*Restaurants look to reduce plastic waste and “green” up with more Earth-friendly practices*

**BY ELIZABETH BUELOW**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The environmental impact of the restaurant industry is massive. The Green Restaurant Association estimates that, on average, each American restaurant produces 50 tons of garbage each year, uses 300,000 gallons of water, and consumes more electricity than any other type of retail business.

In the Portland-metro area, which according to City Observatory has more restaurants per capita than all but two other U.S. metropolitan areas, that’s a considerable environmental impact.

Some local restaurant owners are trying to change that by partnering with the Green Restaurant Association, or GRA, to find ways to make their operations more sustainable.

Food waste is a main culprit in the amount of waste restaurants send to the landfill. Americans waste 40 percent of their food supply, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, and restaurant diners are no exception. Additionally, cardboard boxes, beer bottles and other recyclables end up in the garbage when employees aren’t diligent about recycling.

According to the association, close to 95 percent of restaurant waste could be recycled or composted.

“We are, quite simply, not using our resources in an intelligent way,” said Michael Oshman, founder and CEO of GRA “Let’s look at the issue of garbage. As a species, we spend huge amounts of money and water and trees and oil to make things and then throw them into a big pit (a landfill) that’s going to sit there for decades, centuries, millennia.”

Oshman founded the GRA, an international nonprofit, in 1990 and has gone on to pioneer the “green restaurant” movement, calling itself “the leading voice within the industry, encouraging restaurants to green their operations using transparent, science-based certification standard.”

Oshman’s organization has developed a certification program that is now widely circulated, including within large companies such as Microsoft, which implemented the GRA’s standards into its Redmond campus’s corporate dining program, feeding more than 50,000 employees.

Oshman’s strategy is to look at industry trailblazers – such as Microsoft – in order to establish environmental leadership and hope others will follow suit. Oshman estimates that more than 800 restaurants in the United

States and Canada are green-certified, and if you add manufacturing and distributing – the other two pillars of the GRA – his network extends to more than 40,000 establishments.

The GRA’s system is based on “green points,” a collection of standards that reflect 25 years of research on the impacts the restaurant industry has on the environment. Restaurants can achieve star levels by improving their sustainability in seven categories, from things like water efficiency and waste reduction and recycling. Once a restaurant signs up, the GRA provides a professional consultant who offers expertise with regard to obtaining green points. Oftentimes, the GRA can point them to products and services that are already in their distribution network: for example, napkins that are made from recycled materials.

“We often discover many restaurants have 20 steps they’re already doing. They already have 52 green points, and then we go on to help them with their distributors because we know the products,” said Oshman.

Though there is a small fee involved in the certification process, often around \$50 per month, Oshman said that restaurants end up saving much more in the long run because going green is not only good for the environment, it’s good for a restaurant’s bottom line.

“The argument for sustainability is so clear. You may spend a little more on a more efficient dishwasher, and care less about the environment, but your business will spend less money over a long period of time by encouraging efficiency. Business and sustainability are one and the same. This is why you have major corporations powering their operations using solar. Society has shifted,” he said.

By making small, “green” changes, businesses can save. For example, switching out incandescent light bulbs for LED lights presents effective cost saving. While LED bulbs are more expensive up front, they typically use about 25 percent to 80 percent less energy and last 3 to 25 times longer, according to energy.gov. Restaurants can also save money by composting their leftovers and unused food instead of throwing them in the trash. Additionally, using hand dryers in bathrooms contributes zero waste and utilizes minimal electricity – all of which contributes to cost savings for restaurants. “I’m not a tree hugger,” Oshman said. “I’m a business

person.”

Widmer Brewery is one of five green-certified restaurants in Portland, along with four Bamboo Sushi establishments, all of which have 3-star ratings. (GRA rates restaurants up to five stars, with the fifth star designation titled Sustainabuild.) They all amassed green points for things like serving vegetarian and vegan dishes, using energy-efficient appliances including LED lamps and recycling food waste.

On a tour of Widmer’s North Russell Street location, the brewery’s sustainability manager, Julia Person, pointed out numerous examples of their eco-friendliness, from a newly-installed herb garden to a poster of their “Sustainability Story” and a comprehensive recycling guide. Out of their five dumpsters, only one is for garbage; the other four are for compost and recycling. In their employee area, a sign touts their reusable takeout container program for on-campus meals, an effort to reduce the 3,000 annual to-go containers that formerly went to landfills. They also have a bucket where employees can drop off their recycled batteries. All this earned them a 3-star rating with the GRA.

Widmer Brewing has been green-certified

Learn more about the Green Restaurant Association’s standards, best practices and certification process at [dinegreen.com](http://dinegreen.com).