

The sustain game

Restaurant gathers some top names to discuss how operators are making progress on ethical sourcing and sustainability

Few would argue that most restaurants need to up their game when it comes to sustainable business practices. Our industry has – for the most part at least – been slow to react and other sectors are leading the way, retail in particular.

With this in mind, *Restaurant* gathered top restaurateurs, chefs and suppliers for an in-depth discussion about sustainable issues in partnership with Nestlé Chef. First up was seafood, arguably one of the biggest, most complicated ethical issues for restaurants at the moment (see “A Fishful of Dollars”, p30). The suppliers were broadly positive about the changes happening within the seafood industry, but several chefs bemoaned the number of organisations dishing out conflicting advice.

Next came the benefits and practical considerations of local sourcing. Local doesn't necessarily mean sustainable and it certainly doesn't mean cheap but, on the whole, the view round the table was that it was expensive, but

worth it in the long-run. Looking to the future, Acorn House general manager Phill Morgan expects sustainability-focused restaurants to be par for the course within the next 10 years, and believes that most restaurants will build sustainability into their business plan. Positive news indeed. Other subjects up for discussion were what the industry can do about irresponsible restaurants, how best to educate diners and why good practice is likely to continue even when times are tough.

Sustainable fishing

Laky Zervudachi: Demand for sustainable fish in the foodservice sector is rising slowly. We find that when there is a scare in the papers or bad press regarding the fishing industry, restaurant operators are more likely to enquire about sustainability. They want to know if they are going to get Greenpeace on their doorstep. There is growing interest, but it is the supermarkets that have led the way in making ethical fish available.

Kit Smith: Aquaculture is the raising of marine creatures in a controlled water environment. Two years ago 43% of global seafood consumption was grown fish. It's probably more like half now. The vast majority of this is fed on wild caught fish, which is a problem. It's inherently destructive; it takes part of a very important food chain out of the oceans. The hunt is on for a sustainable feed.

LZ: People are struggling to understand. They want to know the best way to move forward. There are an awful lot of things to take into account and an

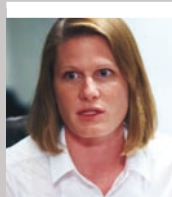
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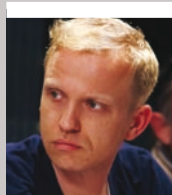
Words
Joe Lutrario
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Rob Lawson



Recycling the issues: the panel deep in discussion

Delegates


Hannah Bass
Operations director,
ETM Group



Julian Heathcote
Account manager,
Sustainable Restaurant
Association



Kit Smith
Seafood
marketer



Hari Nagaraj
Head chef, The
Cinnamon Club



Laky Zervudachi
Sustainability director,
Seafood Holdings



Emma Reynolds
Director,
Tsuru Sushi



Neil Stephens
Managing director,
Nestlé Professional



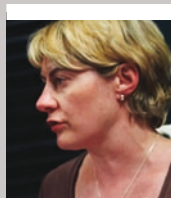
Steve Cole
The Spa Hotel,
Tunbridge Wells,
Kent



Antonio Cardoso
Operations manager,
Ignite Group



Phill Morgan
General manager,
Acorn House



Sam Fulton
Head of public affairs,
Nestlé UK

awful lot of organisations giving information, some of which is conflicting. We have a lot of customers asking us to help them make their menus as sustainable as possible.

KS: Some people are proactive, most are more reactive. Some operators embrace it. People sometimes come at it from a commercial point of view, they want to use it as a point of difference, and I think that's fair enough.

LZ: People don't realise how enormous the fishing industry is. What is causing the big problems are these massive great ships that go out and sweep the seas. They are now having to take on board that this is no longer an acceptable way to do business.

Emma Reynolds: Sustainability has always been high on our agenda. We opened our first site two and a half years ago. We knew fish was a complex area to be moving into; other things are more clear-cut - you know where you are with a free-range chicken. We were encouraged when we realised customers are willing to pay a little more for something that they know is sustainable.

KS: I'm involved with a company in South Wales working to produce sustainable fish from land-sourced protein. There is a lot more education to do, but everyone has enjoyed the samples.

ER: Customers are becoming more ethically minded; someone came in the other day and asked us what specific farm our salmon was from.

Hannah Bass: Tom Martin, co-owner of ETM, goes to the fish market three times a week. So we know where all the fish is from. We'll put it on our specials board and the staff will be briefed.

LZ: I think we've reached a critical stage. I feel we are moving well beyond the danger point - the public is taking it seriously, scientists are taking it seriously and so is the industry. More and more people are trying to do something about it. Times are changing.

KS: A big thing that chefs and the wider public need to get over is frozen fish. Fish frozen properly at sea is, in many ways, better than fresh.

Steve Cole: That's right, it's guaranteed fish. A lot of 'fresh' fish has actually been stored on a boat for several days before it even arrives in the market.

KS: Tusk and ling are ones to watch at the moment, coming from Norway. There are some progressive things going on there.

LZ: The best source book available at the moment is the *Good Catch Manual*. Good Catch is a joint venture of four organisations and provides a step-by-step guide for chefs and owners who want to make sure the fish they're serving is sustainable.

Julian Heathcote: They also have an audit that helps you identify species of fish with the Marine Stewardship Council's ratings. So you can identify what you need to eliminate over time. But I would say that a restaurant can't suddenly get rid of everything, it needs to be a gradual process or it could disrupt business.

LZ: It's a process that needs little steps, otherwise people just get scared off. The MSC has made people think that if they want to get involved they have to change everything. That's a shame because it's not all or nothing. It's all about education.

Neil Stephens: Just to pick up on the word 'education', we need to be targeting chefs at the very beginning of their careers and making them



"Finding out about fish sustainability is a bit of a mess at the moment"

Antonio Cardoso

understand that this sort of thing is important. We don't want people to have bad habits.

HB: It's about respect for and understanding of the produce. We take our chefs to the market to buy produce and the MSC comes in regularly to give talks to our staff. You're relying on chefs who may have had no education on sustainability issues.

NS: As an industry, we should look at what the current curricula are doing to teach people these things.

HB: This industry is practical and immediate. And it needs to be within our sites that we give people this information - we can't necessarily rely on the colleges. Staff handbooks, sourcing policies - we should lead by example.

Sourcing locally

Antonio Cardoso: At Bumpkin, everything is from Great Britain - even the olive oil. It's very tricky, but it is our passion. We deal with lots of small suppliers, which is difficult and a lot of work for our chefs.

Hari Nagaraj: Local sourcing is important at the Cinnamon Club. We used to change our menus every day, but we thought that was a waste of paper. We now change the menu every two weeks to reflect availability and the seasons. Since we joined the Sustainable Restaurant Association we make a real effort to get in MSC-certified fish from local suppliers.

AC: We have an ethical approach to fish at Cocoon, our upmarket sushi venue. We don't use any of the endangered species, but we don't shout about it.

HB: Sustainability is a big deal for us, our brand is built on being British and seasonal. We've built up a relationship with suppliers for 10 years now, and we're trying to put money back into the industry in a responsible way.

AC: We're proactive about sourcing sustainably, we don't just wait for a big noise in the papers.

HB: I think the days are gone when the customer

wants to read where every single ingredient on the menu has come from. We're trying to take a step back from that. But the information is available if the customer wants it.

Animal welfare

Phil Morgan: Animal welfare is key at Acorn House. We work with suppliers big and small, and we choose the ones that can give us clear answers about where their food comes from. You need to be able to trust your supplier.

SC: Supporting local farmers is important. We have a pig producer that - through our custom - has been able to grow significantly. And that drives down the price for us a little.

PM: It's not about naming one supplier, it's about attention to sourcing running through your whole business. It's almost less transparent to name the provenance of certain ingredients in certain dishes; it makes me wonder where the rest is from. We don't name suppliers on the menu at Acorn House.

JH: The more people that go in for local sourcing the cheaper it will become for everybody. At the most basic level, we'd push our members to go for Freedom Food.

PM: We're a training restaurant as well. As part of the placement, our trainees go out to farms to learn about fishing, shooting and butchery. They need to find out where things come from.

Costing it all out

HN: Ethical sourcing is expensive. But a business is not only about making money, you have social responsibilities as well.

AC: I guess it depends which market your

restaurant is aimed at. It's harder for the mid-market as competing on price is more important. It's a fine balance getting the best possible produce and making the numbers add up.

KS: As an observer, locally grown, animal welfare, Fairtrade - all these mean more expensive. It's a misconception that produce sourced locally will be cheaper. And something sourced locally isn't necessarily sustainable.

SC: In my experience, local sourcing is far more expensive. But you're buying quality.

JH: Buying partnerships with other restaurants are a good way to reduce costs, but you can also offset the higher food costs associated with ethical food by cutting other costs, such as energy and water bills.

Sam Fulton: If Nestlé doesn't invest large amounts of money in things such as cocoa and coffee, there actually won't be any.

NS: You must invest in the quality where it matters, but also be relentless in taking out costs that don't add anything to the product or help sustainability. We will try to challenge ourselves to not pass the cost on to the consumer.

Energy efficiency

JH: Restaurants are, as a whole, not doing enough to cut energy usage and costs. The whole industry is time-poor. The first thing to do is to look at usage. But there are simple measures that don't cost anything, such as hippo devices in the toilet that limit water usage, closing fridge doors, not leaving taps running and tons more. These are massive contributors to water consumption. It's a question of having the policies and training in place.

HB: Our challenge is taking historic buildings and

bringing them up to date. Costs come into it too and that's a major motivating factor for businesses. We're always looking at energy efficiency and trying to improve it across the group, but sometimes it is difficult to make the time. Well-maintained equipment is important too.

PM: Reduce, reuse, recycle. It sounds almost silly to say it, but this is the key to running a restaurant sustainably. Recycling is the last resort... Kitchens will inevitably produce food waste. We have a machine that makes food waste into an inert substance while massively reducing the volume. We have it picked up every few weeks, which saves us a huge amount. Most restaurants have to get waste picked up every two days.

NS: Nestlé is working to offer products utilising lightweight glass, and packaging is being drastically reduced across the whole company. Our technologies are developing all the time to hit one of the three Rs. By 2015 we hope to be sending no waste at all to landfill.

ER: There's a big takeaway side to our business. At the beginning, as a small independent, we found ethical packaging to be difficult to source. We tried to find corn starch alternatives - but now we've found it easier and more sustainable to use paper-based sushi trays. And we encourage people eating in to use plates so we can wash and reuse.

The SRA

JH: The Sustainable Restaurant Association sits across three main strands: environment, sourcing and society. We're a broad church and we're open to all corners of the industry. All members will start off by making a pledge to do three things to make themselves more sustainable. That's the minimum. We've done research and 70% of diners would rather eat in a restaurant that takes sustainability seriously. Most restaurants aren't ticking that box, and we'd like to help. We're there to support people. Everyone is at a different stage. So the benefits can be quite different. It's something that consumers are demanding more and more. We're an active organisation, we don't just give you a badge.

Sustainability in a recession

JH: A couple of years ago, sales of organics went through the floor as a recession hit. But I think society has now reached the point where enough people value sustainability, we don't and won't see much retrenchment. Ethical spending has risen by 82% since 2002, according to one report.

SC: A big problem at the moment is that some of the larger hotel chains are de-skilling chefs by using centralised production and sous vide. Some of the big companies are the ones that need to address the problems.

AC: Government and councils don't do enough for sustainability - they are often the worst offenders in terms of waste and policies. We struggle with recycling through the council.

KS: We're moving forward simply because the major multiples in the retail sector have made some very serious changes to the way they do business. The responsibility card is being played here, but regulation is always an option.

SF: Local authorities are lacking joined-up policies. People need help to be environmentally friendly. A



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Kit Smith



good example is that each local authority has a different recycling policy, which means some waste is going to landfill unnecessarily in some places.

PM: Some companies are producing biodegradable packaging which is needlessly going to the wrong place.

Irresponsible restaurants

LZ: I don't see why there shouldn't be some really stringent regulations put in place to stop certain UK restaurants selling bluefin tuna.

KS: I think naming and shaming is better.

AC: They should be penalised.

ER: Some celebrities did a petition and it got a lot of press. I don't know if it had any effect though.

HB: I can't believe it didn't.

AC: Some sushi restaurants will serve bluefin, but they won't advertise it. But if a customer asks, they'll get it. They're subtle because they don't want the bad press.

ER: It's an aspirational thing.

KS: Could you criminalise it?

LZ: I don't see why not - they've done that with caviar.

KS: Unfortunately the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) did not come down in favour of most of the world in taking any action against it. If one company criminalises it, it's not going to make much of a difference, unfortunately. It's very, very difficult to regulate the seas.

SC: At the end of the day they can't even regulate the French shipping cheese into the UK with no

date code on it.

KS: And the Spanish fishing off Hastings beach.

JH: It needs to be unified, but that's tough.

KS: Some countries just don't seem to care though, and that's the biggest problem.

AC: Some things are seen as traditional in countries such as Japan, and it's very hard to get people to stop doing things. It's like the row here with the hunting.

Consumer education

KS: Not enough is being done to educate the consumer about fish. Restaurateurs don't know what farmed salmon are being fed and they're supposed to be at the leading edge of their profession, so the consumer has no chance of knowing. There needs to be a lot more education.

JH: Most consumers would assume all fish was wild. There's a lot of work to do to inform people and give them the information they need to be making the right choices. But I think the industry is heading in the right direction.

SC: I think quite a lot of the public know about the issues. The plight of the bluefin, for example, is well-known. But what about the other species?

KS: The main players in the white fish market - Birds Eye and Findus - don't want cod any more, and Alaskan pollack is now more expensive, because that's where the big buyers have gone.

JH: One of our customers had to keep cod on the menu because customers wouldn't eat pollack.

KS: It's a muddle out there, because most people still think they shouldn't be eating cod.

Looking forward

PM: If you're opening a restaurant you'll build it into your business - it's easier at the beginning. As time goes on, what we do at Acorn House won't be something you shout about, it will be something you just do. The future is green for the restaurant trade but not green in a big shouty way. It's what the majority of customers want now.

HB: If you get your first site right environmentally and grow from there, the principle will grow with the company. It's harder for companies such as ETM that didn't start out with these policies in place, although we did pay attention to ethical sourcing. The government needs to encourage sustainability by rewarding good behaviour.

NS: I see very significant change over the next 10 years. The issues are better understood and there is more transparency. Information about good practice spreads more quickly. Retailers have moved very quickly in a short space of time and I think as it comes into this industry it will move slowly and then quickly.

HB: We need more providers of cost-effective environmental solutions and the SRA is doing a lot to drive and support that.

JH: When sustainability is a continuous journey that requires constant attention, you have to constantly review it. We hope that our organisation will become more of a regular agenda item for everybody. ■

Special thanks to Martin Williams and rest of the team at Gaucho O2 for hosting the event