

Making A Sustainable Change

Learn how one consultancy helps facilities create a lasting sustainable food program using a five-prong approach.

By Allison Rezendes

John Turenne, sr. associate member of FCSI, president, Sustainable Food Systems, has spent the past seven years teaching foodservice facilities how to incorporate sustainable food.

His journey “to make the world a better place through better food” began in 2001 when he was executive chef at Yale University.

While setting up a picnic for a football game one day, he recalls, his boss phoned and asked him to report to the president’s office. There was a parent who wanted to talk.

The parent was Alice Waters, owner of Chez Panisse, a restaurant in Berkley, Calif., that serves organic, locally grown food.

“She is arguably the godmother of the sustainable food movement in the United States,” Turenne says. “And she wanted to meet with me to talk about the food I’m serving her daughter.”

Yale listened to Waters and, led by Turenne, went about implementing a sustainable food program.

Defining Sustainable Food

While working on the project, Turenne developed the following definition for sustainable food:

Producing and consuming food that supports the continuous well-being of our planet and ourselves.

“I came to realize that my decisions about food impacted a whole lot more than just the bottom line,” he says. “It was about common sense rather than dollars and cents. This was the foundation of what changed me—the epiphany.”

There are four pillars that support sustainable food, SFS reports, which are the environment, community, social issues, and our health and well-being.

The environment pillar includes agriculture that eliminates the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and genetically-modified organisms, conserves water and ensures sustained biodiversity. The community pillar includes food bought from local farmers and other area sources to stimulate the



local economy. Meanwhile, the social concern pillar covers the purchase of fairly traded products to help ensure livable wages and quality of life for farmers and other workers. Treatment of animals also falls under this pillar.

As for the health and well-being pillar, Turenne says, sustainable food ultimately supports our overall physical condition.

“Cheap food with additives and preservatives and processed food can have a significant impact on the sustainability of our own bodies,” he says.

Making Changes

Armed with a wealth of new knowledge, Turenne spent several years developing a sustainable food program for Yale. In 2003, two years after meeting Waters, he opened the school’s first dining hall boasting organic, locally grown ingredients.

The menu was a hit. Instead of serving 400 meals three times a day, the hall was serving 600-plus. In fact, because of so much unexpected traffic, the kitchen started to run low on food and so, students were required to show identification at the dining hall’s entrance.

Encouraged by this success, Turenne set out to show other facilities how to bridge the gap between conventional foodservice and sustainable foodservice. He left Yale and, in 2005, founded SFS.

When implementing change at a facility, SFS uses an analogy of a wheel with five spokes. Each spoke must be addressed to guarantee a lasting sustainable food program. The five spokes are food and products, facility, community, communication and fiscal responsibility.

“We have to address all of these spokes to imagine the wheel of sustainable food rolling successfully,” Turenne says. “If we don’t, the program may not sustain itself. It may not be able to roll on.”

Food & Products

Under the food spoke, SFS strives to introduce organic, locally grown foods on the menu. The team also considers social issues surrounding those foods. They research what the farmers stand for in terms of fair treatment of workers and animals.

Next, the team makes menu changes based on what ingredients are in season. “That in itself, in the institutional food world, goes so much against what we had thought and believed for years, including myself,” Turenne says. “I’ve come to realize that we’ve got to get over that.”

He uses asparagus as an example. In conventional foodservice operations, chefs might put asparagus on a menu one week and then not serve it for several more weeks.

“When asparagus is in season, let’s serve the heck out of it,” he says. A kitchen could offer roasted asparagus in pasta one day and the next day dish it up grilled then chilled with balsamic vinaigrette over arugula.

When operators start thinking creatively about the menu and promote the fact that they’re serving fresh, locally grown food, he says, the customers will buy in.

Non-food products are also included under the

food spoke. The team works to outfit the kitchen with cleaning supplies that are more environmentally friendly.

They also study what disposable servingware and packaging is used. Turenne recalls one school that served food on disposable paper plates and had certain products individually packaged. At the end of each lunch period, the school filled seven, 55-gal. garbage bags with trash. The SFS team brought in reusable dishes; the school already had a dishwasher and dishmachine. Next, the school started buying food in bulk instead of single packs. As a result, the institution went down to one bag of trash at the end of each period, leading to reduced waste and cost savings.



Each spoke on the wheel represents a critical component of a sustainable food program.

Facility

As part of the facility spoke, SFS considers what equipment the foodservice staff will need to prepare the new menu.

“We can’t be changing the food unless we have the right equipment to handle it,” Turenne says.

For example, the team might recommend countertop food processors to speed up chopping of fruits and vegetables. Tilting skillets are also popular because of their versatility. They can be used to brown meat or to prepare soups or stir-frys.

Turenne adds that when a facility uses food from local farmers, the food typically doesn’t arrive in such a raw state that a customized receiving area (to break down, wash and store produce from the field, for example) has to be established. In the past, though, SFS has converted freezers to refrigerators to handle fresh food versus frozen food.

Also related to the kitchen, the team researches how energy efficiently the facility runs. On-demand ventilation systems, water-saving dishmachines and pulpers are all options to consider.

Waste management also falls into the facility category. The team tries to build relationships between operators and local farmers so that not only does food come in, but compost goes out. The team makes sure the kitchen produces the right amount of food so that less gets thrown away, as well.



Turenne works with schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, corporate clients and national organizations to promote sustainable foodservice.

Community

When it comes to implementing a sustainable food program, community involvement plays a key role.

At a school, for example, the community would include the foodservice staff, students, parents, teachers and other faculty. Administration and those ultimately responsible for the school also are involved. In addition, area farmers and chefs from local restaurants may take part.

“If we want to start changing the food program, every one of these stakeholder groups has to be involved,”

Turenne says.

At the beginning of a project, SFS will sit down with the facility’s staff and explain what the team hopes to change and why they want to change it. Then they listen to their feedback.

“These guys are the ones that live in these kitchens and in these communities,” he says. “They know some things that I would never know. So, that buy-in is critical.”

Communication

Communication with customers and staff fulfills another spoke on the wheel. To involve customers, SFS encourages operators to promote the sustainable food program through marketing and merchandising. For example, operators may note on the menu that a certain food comes from a nearby farm. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, the communication spoke includes SFS training staff how to handle the new ingredients.

“If you have the most delicious Swiss chard grown organically from a farm around the corner and give it to somebody that doesn’t know how to cook it correctly,” he says, “the customer’s going to wonder, what’s the big deal? This is awful.”

The team also educates the staff about the im-

portance of sustainable food. Once they work with the new menu, staff morale often gets a boost.

“I’ve seen the staff become so much more motivated,” he says. “They’re employing a skill that they had either forgotten or hadn’t used in a long time. They feel like chefs again.”

Fiscal Responsibility

A five-spoke wheel with only four spokes won’t roll forever. Fiscal responsibility works as the fifth spoke to support a sustainable food program.

“We have to be sure with everything we do that we’re responsible for our fiscal budget,” Turenne says. “I have yet to come across a client that says it’s OK to increase the operating budget.”

Often, saving money in one area allows for more spending in another, he says. For example, scaling back the menu can help cut costs.

“We have to offer less quantity, more quality,” Turenne says. “Therefore, we don’t have to increase the amount of staff or labor.”

Operators can also save money by serving ingredients in peak season, investing in energy-efficient equipment, and better managing waste.

Buying in bulk also helps. Turenne once worked with a hospital that made coffee from ground beans packaged in 5 oz. foil packets. After some research, he found a local coffee supplier that was well known in the community for selling fair trade, organic coffee. Turenne and the hospital manager sat down with the coffee supplier and offered to buy the coffee 5 lbs. at a time. They would also market the product in the serving area. The deal ended up costing the hospital .55 cents less a pound for coffee.

One More Thing

When working on projects, SFS uses an assessment process to determine on what level operators incorporate sustainable food. There are four levels of achievement, ranging from operators who make easy changes to those who are global leaders for the sustainable food movement. For more information, including a self-assessment form, operators can visit the SFS website at sustainablefoodsystems.com.

On any level, Turenne asks operators to do one more thing. “It’s about progressively improving. We all can do something better,” he says. “Nothing’s impossible.”

