



SUSTAINABLE F&B

YOUR GUIDE TO ECO-FRIENDLY MEALS

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What is Sustainable Food & Beverage?



The concept of sustainable food and beverage

encompasses many dimensions, and to explore it, you first need to understand the definition of sustainability itself. According to the United Nations Brundtland Commission, sustainability means “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Sustenance is a core human need. In this guide, discover ways to source and serve food and beverage for meetings in ways that meet that need, but also preserve resources and natural systems for generations to come.

Food impacts the environment through its cultivation, transportation, distribution, consumption and disposal. The choices producers and consumers make throughout this process can have positive or negative effects on ecosystems, greenhouse gas emissions, water quality, waste and more.

The systems that produce and distribute food are complex, and meeting professionals are typically one of the last links in the chain before food reaches end consumers, a.k.a. attendees. The following key areas present meeting professionals and supplier partners the greatest opportunity to influence sustainable choices.

- Designing and sourcing sustainable menus
- Reducing food waste through prevention and landfill diversion



PART 1: Designing and Sourcing Sustainable Menus

A sustainable food and beverage program starts with designing menus. Sustainable menu choice is a multifaceted process with many factors to consider, such as protein sources, ingredient cultivation methods and portion sizes.

Protein Choices: The Benefits of a Plant-Based Approach

Plant-based foods are a booming trend, partially due to the growing awareness around the impact of animal agriculture on the environment. In 2021, the Met Gala menu was 100 percent plant-based for the first time, and fast-food restaurants renowned for beef and chicken products are adopting plant-based menu items.

According to climate solution research organization Project Drawdown, shifting to plant-rich diets is one of the most powerful ways to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. Reduced demand for meat-based protein means less land cleared for agriculture and fewer direct methane emissions from livestock and manure.

You may be ready to adopt a 100 percent plant-based menu for your next meeting — if that's you, go for it! However, if a totally vegan menu isn't a great cultural fit for your group, you can still make a sustainable impact by strategically reducing your menu's proportion of animal-based protein.

Try a single meatless meal in the schedule and gauge how your group responds. Switch out plates that have a large cut of meat as the focal point for dishes that incorporate smaller pieces of meat; for example, lasagna as opposed to a steak, or chicken primavera instead of a chicken breast. You can also substitute higher-emitting animal proteins like beef and lamb with lower-emitting options like poultry, pork or eggs.

When reducing or removing animal-based protein from a menu, it's important to ensure that enough protein and calories remain for the meal to be nutritionally sufficient. One common mistake is to subtract meat to create a vegan plate, rather than substitute meat with a plant-based protein source. Filling (but not overly heavy) meals are vital for all guests to be energized and attentive.

There are dozens of plant-based protein options, creating opportunities for a wide range of textures and flavors in meatless meals. Possibilities range from staples like beans, lentils, peas, nuts and quinoa to soy-based products like tofu and tempeh to wheat-based products like seitan.

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Options for plant-based imitation meats are expanding rapidly, with brands like Beyond Meat, Impossible Foods and others becoming common sights on menus. Brands are also experimenting with combination protein products, such as Tyson's Raised and Rooted, which uses blends of animal and pea protein. But don't rely on imitation meats for every meal, as many plant-based eaters view processed imitation products as indulgent "junk food" for an occasional treat, rather than an everyday staple.

Chefs are no strangers to the plant-based trend. Collaborate with your caterer to conceive creative meatless menu items that will leave your attendees satisfied and energized.

Reasonable Portion Sizes

When designing a sustainable menu, portion sizes are just as important as ingredients. According to food waste nonprofit ReFED, 70 percent of food waste from food service businesses in the U.S. comes from post-consumer plate waste, meaning customers consistently do not consume all the food they are served.

Catering staff are familiar with the sight of large, often expensive cuts of meat discarded after banquets because portions were simply too large for most guests to finish.

Choose portion sizes that your guests will find consumable, rather than using them to make a visual impression. Meat dishes are a great place to start, since they are often portioned in ounces, making it easy to quantify the amount of reduction. With more room on the plate, your caterer will be able to use more artistic plating techniques, which can be just as impressive, with less food waste.

By the time guests make it through hors d'oeuvres, salad and entrée, most are also unlikely to finish a large, rich dessert. Small, one-bite sweets are a great substitute for full-size cake slices or other large desserts.

Choosing wise portion sizes also entails considering the number of overall courses for each meal. Does your audience really need or expect three courses at every meal? Would they be just as satisfied with a lighter lunch or a less formal dinner? A food waste audit can help reveal which courses or dishes your guests are leaving on their plates, giving you guidance on where to adjust.

Ingredient Sourcing Considerations

What makes an ingredient sustainable? Short answer: It's hard to say. In today's complex, globalized food production landscape, it's difficult to make accurate generalizations about any specific food item or agricultural approach.

Fully understanding the complex world of food sourcing is outside the purview of most meeting professionals. Rather, you should become familiar with sustainable food sourcing concepts so you can discuss options with your clients and food service suppliers, while relying on the latter as a provider of deeper sourcing expertise.

Below is an overview of some of the most popular sustainability-related descriptors and labels for food and beverage. Use this primer to familiarize yourself with terms your clients may request or that your organization may wish to pursue based on your values.

1. Local & Seasonal

In recent years, discussion of "food miles" has been a dominant focus of conversation about sustainable food sourcing. The con-



Experiencing the Local Food Community

Meals aren't the only ways for attendees to experience the food landscape of your meeting destination. Agritourism experiences offer an opportunity for participants to get off-site and up-close to the food and culture in your meeting location. Ways to experience the local food community include the following.

- Local farmers' markets
- Farm tours
- Pick-your-own trips to a farm or orchard

Tip: If your attendees can't eat or store the food they pick, work with your caterer to arrange donation to a local nonprofit.

- Seasonal food festivals
- Charter fishing excursions
- Family-oriented farm and food activities (for spouses and families who travel with attendees)

cept is simple and intuitive: Transportation requires significant fuel use; therefore, foods that are shipped long distances must have a bigger negative impact on the environment, especially when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions.

In reality, the equation is more complex. Multiple studies have shown that transportation accounts for a relatively small percentage of the overall carbon footprint of food products—production often proves to be a much more significant factor. Reduced emissions from cutting long-haul transportation can be outweighed by the amount of fertilizer and energy used, for example.

Some regions have favorable climates or improved agricultural development that enable farmers to produce higher yields with fewer resources. For example, growing tomatoes in a greenhouse heated by fossil fuels is likely to have a higher carbon footprint than tomatoes grown in a naturally warmer region, even if those greenhouse tomatoes are consumed locally.

Because growing practices vary from farm to farm, one of the benefits of sourcing food locally is greater visibility into how food is grown. With fewer links in the supply chain, it's easier for chefs to communicate directly with farmers, allowing them to assess quality and learn about the farm's stewardship of the local environment. Local, seasonal ingredients can also travel from field to table more quickly, maintaining flavor and freshness.

In addition to greater transparency, sourcing food from small- and medium-sized farms can positively impact the local economy and community. Small farms are another type of small business your event can support, increasing benefit to the local economy. Selling crops within their home region can also provide cost savings for small farmers, who often operate on thin margins.

Supporting small farms provides environmental benefits for land use as well.

“When people can’t make it farming or have tough times, they sell land, and development pays the most,” says Mike Cullipher, owner and farmer at Cullipher Farm Market in Virginia Beach, Va. “That’s the biggest thing I wish people would consider when they make a purchase and decide who to support. They’re not just buying strawberries; they’re helping the overall environment by keeping those farms as farms.”

Preserving a robust local food system helps communities be resilient in the event of natural disasters or supply chain disruptions, as well.

Serving local foods opens a window for participants into the culture, history and natural environment of the destination they’re visiting. For example, Washington D.C.-based catering company Well Dunn helped a locally focused client create a menu with ingredients sourced only from a handful of counties in the Piedmont region of Virginia. They also create menus that highlight other local regions.

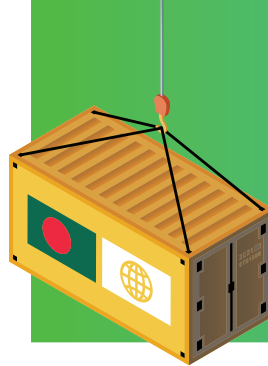
“People are interested in that,” says Madeline Desser, general manager at Well Dunn. “Maybe what you’re serving isn’t something they can get where they’re coming from.” Having authentic cultural experiences through food helps participants feel a deeper connection to the destination, making meetings more memorable.

You’ll ultimately rely on your caterer to advise what local ingredients they will be able to source in sufficient quantities for your group. While food costs vary, you may realize cost savings by sourcing some local ingredients, so it’s worth pricing out options. Meeting professionals may find that a combination of local products and products from further afield is the best solution for a meal’s budget, headcount and vision.

2. Certified Organic

“Certified organic” is a popular label within the sustainable food movement. However, like local sourcing, the environmental benefits of organic farming are not entirely definitive.

To be certified organic, farms must adhere to specific standards in their operations. While there are many different systems of organic certification worldwide, most include the same key elements, such as a prohibiting synthetic fertilizers, chemical pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and



Addressing Social and Environmental Issues with Fair Trade

Some of the world’s most popular food commodities face significant environmental and social challenges in their supply chains, such as child and forced labor, unfair prices paid to farmers and growing practices that harm the environment.

Fair trade (or fairtrade) certification programs aim to address these problems by building long-term relationships with producers, ensuring fair prices and setting environmental and human-rights standards. There are multiple similar fair-trade labels, such as Fair Trade Certified, Fairtrade International, Fair for Life and others. The Rainforest Alliance certification program also addresses a combination of environmental, social and economic issues.

Requesting fair trade ingredients from your caterer is a low-hanging opportunity to improve the sustainability and social impact of your menus. Focus on fair trade for the following commodities, which face particularly pressing issues in their supply chains.

- Coffee
- Tea
- Cocoa / chocolate
- Bananas
- Sugar

requiring certain activities that improve soil fertility.

Numerous studies have shown organic farming practices as having mixed positive and negative environmental consequences. On the one hand, the soil on organic farms tends to be healthier and require less water, and organic practices can also preserve more biodiversity on the farm landscape. Workers on organic farms may also avoid some negative health outcomes associated with occupational exposure to synthetic pesticides.

On the other hand, organic farms tend to produce lower yields per unit of land compared to conventional farms, meaning more land is required to produce the same amount of food. The climate benefit of organic farming is also inconclusive; while organic practices can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the reductions may not be significant when looking at the carbon footprint per unit of food, because of the lower yields.

It’s also important to recognize that many smaller producers choose not to pursue organic certification due to the costs and rigorous record-keeping associated with the process, but many still follow practices consistent with the organic approach. Farms of any size may implement some organic practices without pursuing full certification.

3. Regenerative & Conservation Agriculture

Regenerative and conservation agriculture are two similar systems of farming that emphasize ecosystem restoration and soil health. In contrast to organic farming, regenerative and conservation agriculture are not formal systems of standards, but rather approaches that include a suite of soil-building techniques including the following.

- No-till or low-till practices to reduce soil disturbance
- Planting cover crops
- Rotating diverse crops
- Rotating crops with livestock grazing

Some of these practices are present in organic farming, but they are used by many farms without organic certification as well. Successful implementation can result in reduced soil erosion, water pollution and pesticide use, while also supporting biodiversity and increasing the soil's potential for sequestering carbon. Research has shown mixed effects of conservation agriculture techniques on crop yields, with some farms experiencing increases and others decreases.

4. Biodiversity

As stewards of large amounts of land, it's important for farmers to support and protect biodiversity in the local ecosystem.

"A big part of biodiversity is maintaining pollinator health," says Dr. Aurora Dawn Benton, owner of positive impact consultancy Astrapto. Pollinator populations are declining worldwide due to numerous factors including habitat loss, disease, pesticide exposure and climate change. "Pollinators are dependent on a rich diversity of plants. Biodiversity is the antithesis of chemicals and the herbicides, pesticides and monoculture" that have come to dominate the large-scale farming landscape, Benton says.

Certain cover crops, which themselves help foster long-term soil health, can also support pollinators.

"As we finish up sweet corn, we'll plant sunflowers as a cover crop to help with pollination and our bees," says Cullipher of Cullipher Farm Market. "There's not a whole lot of pollen available when you get into September and October, so it gives [the bees] an ample supply going into the winter."

5. Sustainable Seafood

What makes certain seafoods sustainable? Sustainable seafood is grown and harvested in ways that do not harm the ecosystem or other wildlife. Seafood is either wild-caught or farmed, and each approach has different sustainability considerations.

Wild-caught sustainable seafood comes from well-managed



The Impact of Offshore Wind Turbines on Sustainable Ocean Seafood

Wind farms are well-known as a source of renewable power, but their potential for sustainability goes beyond the production of electricity.

Twenty-seven miles off the coast of Virginia Beach, a 188-turbine wind farm is under construction, only the second of its kind in the United States. Once complete in 2026, the project will produce enough electricity to power as many as 660,000 homes, avoiding the same amount of greenhouse gas emissions as could be removed by 80 million trees. But the project's benefits will extend into the ocean ecosystem as well.

In coastal aquaculture, "a lot of the fish we're interested in are associated with structure," says Dr. Michael Schwarz, director of the Virginia Seafood Agriculture Research & Extension Center at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). "When we put in structures like wind turbines, we'll very quickly see different species begin to colonize the area and create habitat, almost like a marine preserve."

Like coral reefs, wind turbines provide the basis for new habitats in what was otherwise a flat area. Fish like black sea bass and Atlantic spadefish are expected in the area, along with crabs, mussels and other organisms up and down the food chain.

Exclusion zones around the wind farm will not only protect the energy infrastructure from commercial ship traffic, but also provide protection for the new habitats and create opportunities for symbiotic aquaculture and enhanced fisheries. "It's a really exciting opportunity to look at what else we can do with offshore wind farms, and what the environmental benefits can be," Dr. Schwarz says.

Between habitat growth and aquaculture development, projects like Virginia's offshore wind farm have the potential to increase seafood production, making fresh, local seafood more available for residents and visitors alike.

populations that are not over-fished and is harvested via methods that minimize the impact of fishing gear on the ecosystem and other species. Farmed sustainable seafood limits pollution and disease, habitat damage, the escape of fish and the use of wild fish as feed.

Seafood Watch, a resource maintained by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, is a leading source of expertise for both consumers and businesses. The program maintains a system of rigorous, scientifically based environmental standards for aquaculture and fisheries. They publish regularly updated seafood recommendations organized into three categories: Best Choice, Good Alternative and Avoid.

While Seafood Watch takes a comprehensive view of the global seafood industry, sustainability can vary by region and species. Local experts, such as an aquarium or marine science institute, can provide insight on sustainable seafood options available in your meeting destination.

In addition to providing information about specific seafood species, regionally focused programs can help you identify restaurants and caterers that are committed to offering sustainable seafood.

For example, the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center created its own Sensible Seafood Program to highlight sustainably caught local seafood and educate restaurants about sustainable sourcing. The program also highlights local species evaluated by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch rating system.

"When we launched our program in October 2008, summer flounder was on the red list," says Karen Burns, manager of the Sensible Seafood Program. "We crafted a letter with supporting documents and evidence from experts in our region that showed that summer flounder in this region is, in fact, sustainable." The following year, Seafood Watch moved this species of flounder from the red "Avoid" category to the yellow "Good Alternative" category.

In addition to providing information about specific seafood species, regionally focused programs can help you identify restaurants and caterers that are committed to offering sustainable seafood.

Ask caterers if they source seafood in accordance with recommendations from Seafood Watch or a locally managed responsible seafood guide. If they do not, share those resources with them.

The companies that supply seafood to restaurants and caterers often have lists with highlighted sustainable seafood choices, according to Burns. These lists are available upon request.

If you want to adhere to Seafood Watch's Best Choice list or other sustainable criteria, communicate that to your caterer early in the menu selection process.

Beyond environmental concerns, human rights issues such as forced labor and worker abuse are prevalent in the seafood industry. While there is no easy-to-use rating system or directory to find seafood free of human rights issues, some fair-trade certification programs do include seafood. Ask your caterer what fair trade certified or other ethical options may be available.

Influencing Sustainable Food Sourcing

While meeting professionals ultimately rely on their food and beverage suppliers to execute final sourcing decisions, planners can exert significant influence on the process.

When possible, partner with a caterer who is committed to sustainable food sourcing. The Green Restaurant Association certifies restaurants and caterers on sustainable criteria using a 4-star system. Use their online directory to find certified restaurants and caterers in your destination. Also look for caterers who emphasize a commitment to sustainability in their marketing materials.

Ask specific questions about food sourcing in your RFPs to food and beverage suppliers. If a supplier is unable to provide substantive answers to your questions, they may not have the knowledge required to meet your expectations.

Many caterers welcome these questions and want meeting professionals to utilize their expertise as resources on local and sustainable food options.

"We encourage meeting professionals to share their values and expectations regarding environmental sustainability for their events, which in turn allows us the opportunity to showcase our expertise in the local and regional food scene," says Beth Williamson, district manager for Sodexo Live! at the Virginia Beach Convention Center. "We find significant value in focusing on sustainable food and beverage practices at every level of our operation."

Early Communication & Flexibility

Among the competing concerns of budget, attendee preference and sustainability, caterers often rely on their clients to lead the conversation about what factors are most important to them.

"During the proposal writing process, it's vital to get all that

information ahead of time,” says Desser at catering company Well Dunn. “It’s a lot harder, the further along you get into the process, if we’re trying to make big changes.”

The sooner caterers know your preferences, the more information they can share. For example, if you tell your caterer you want to emphasize local foods, they can create a proposal citing where ingredients come from and what farms they’re working with, says Steve Dunn, founder of Well Dunn.

Meeting professionals should also be prepared to collaborate with caterers on custom menus.

“We look forward to working directly with our clients to provide more inclusive menus that focus on local, seasonal, healthy and sustainable options versus the traditional cookie-cutter menus of the past,” states Williamson of Sodexo Live!

To meet each group’s unique requirements, Williamson’s team collects important information from clients including group history, dietary preferences and accommodations, budget and sustainability goals. This information allows the sales team to collaborate with the chef to customize and propose several menu options.

Ultimately, the goal of menu design is to feed guests, so sometimes you need to meet attendees where they are. It’s okay to rely on certain dishes your guests have reliably consumed in the past, because food that gets eaten doesn’t end up as waste. But leave space for exploration.

When focusing on local foods, planners should be prepared to be flexible on substitutions. “Events can get planned a year out, so we don’t know sometimes what the product is going to look like,” Desser says. “Maybe you won’t be able to guarantee that every single thing is going to be exactly the same as it was a year ago, but it’s going to be delicious product no matter what.”

Finally, if you want to source from smaller, local, diverse suppliers to meet your sustainability goals, be prepared to encounter some obstacles. “You have to be willing to break through some walls, because the walls are there,” says Dr. Benton of consultancy Astrapto. Corporate procurement systems may



Applying Sustainable Sourcing Concepts to Beverages

The same sustainable considerations used to source food can also be applied to beverages. Most beverages consist of one or more agricultural ingredients, whether it be fruit for juices, hops for beer or sugar for soda. Depending on the focus of your sustainability goals, work with your caterer to source locally grown or made beverages, or drinks with organic, regeneratively grown or fair-trade certified ingredients. Many of these options may come from smaller beverage producers, presenting an opportunity to add diversity to your supplier list.

include minimum order quantities, turnaround times or financial requirements that exclude smaller suppliers, so you may need to request exceptions in order to use desired vendors.

To make your case, Dr. Benton advises creating a “compelling punch”—data that shows attendees and clients are interested in these things, and/or the experience and storytelling that come with using these suppliers.” In the face of barriers, Benton suggests thinking quality over quantity. “Every little bit that you commit to doing, you’re going to have a really cool story to tell.”

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“It’s about the planner expanding their menu mindset,” Dr. Benton says. Some meeting professionals may copy-and-paste their menus for multiple events, she adds. “It’s about going outside that mentality and asking chefs to bring some of their ideas in order to broaden and create a more interesting menu.”



PART 2: Reducing Food Waste Through Prevention and Landfill Diversion

Every year, an estimated one-third of global food production goes to waste, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization. Food waste is a major social problem because world hunger and malnutrition continue to be widespread, with 2.37 billion people either without food or unable to eat a healthy diet on a regular basis, per UN statistics.

Environmentally, food waste is also a major global problem due to the amounts of land and resources used to produce wasted food, not to mention the greenhouse gases emitted at every stage along the way.

Project Drawdown identifies reducing food waste as one of its top climate solutions. According to Drawdown, food waste sources vary by a country's income. In low-income countries, food waste often occurs as unintentional spoilage in early stages of production and distribution. In higher-income countries, food waste at the retail and consumer levels is more common. Twenty-eight percent of U.S. food waste is estimated to come from consumer-facing businesses, which include hospitality and food service, according to ReFED.

As part of Sustainable Development Goal No. 12, the United Nations has set a target to cut retail and consumer food waste in half by 2030 while also reducing food losses along production and supply chains.

Preventing Food Waste

Techniques to prevent food waste can occur both front- and back-of-house. While many back-of-house methods, like proper labeling and storage, fall within the purview of the caterer rather than the meeting owner, you can assess a caterer's commitment to reducing food waste by asking for information about food waste management in RFPs.

The most important role meeting professionals can play in reducing food waste is providing accurate headcounts. "We rely heavily on the client to know their show and attendee history, in-

cluding how many people typically attend each meal function as it relates to the original guarantee provided," says Williamson of Sodexo Live! "The no-show rate is valuable information to any caterer from a logistical planning, purchasing and preparation perspective."

Collecting accurate headcounts starts with registration. Rather than determining one overall headcount for the entire event, include a question in your registration form that asks guests to check off which specific meal functions they plan to attend. Guests often know if they are arriving late, leaving early or scheduling personal meetings over mealtimes. Having meal-specific registration provides a way for them to communicate those plans and gives you a headcount for each individual function.

Refer to data from past events to further increase headcount accuracy. In addition to overall attendance (how many people didn't show up to the event at all), collect attendance and consumption data for each meal. Ask your caterer for a post-event report of how many plates or pans of food were prepared but not consumed for each meal. This data will reveal how your no-show rate and food waste vary by meal. For example, your guests may optimistically register for the 8 a.m. breakfast, but your post-event report will show you what percentage of guests actually made it there. These reports can also be helpful for your caterers to identify when they may have overproduced certain dishes.

Attendance and consumption behavior will likely vary by audience, so this data is most useful for repeat events with similar groups. Also keep in mind that different caterers may prepare different amounts of food for the same headcount, so use caution when applying data to different situations. Over time, you may identify trends that are consistent among multiple groups or caterers you work with. Continue to request consumption reports for each meal function and event you plan to build a knowledge base and refine your headcount estimation skills.

Tips for Buffets & Stations

Request specific service methods that have been shown to reduce food waste, including the following strategies to reduce

post-consumer plate waste from buffets and stations.

- Provide smaller plates for guests and use smaller scoops and spoons for serving. Guests tend to fill the space available on their plates, so reducing the amount of plate space and the default serving size prevents guests' eyes from being bigger than their stomachs.
- Serve high-value foods like meat as individually plated, appropriately sized servings, rather than in a pan for guests to portion themselves.
- Display signage about your event's commitment to reducing food waste near the buffet to keep responsible consumption top-of-mind.

Food that has been out on the event floor typically does not meet health regulations for donating or serving to another group (though regulations may vary by location). Therefore, it's important to keep as much food as possible safely back-of-house under appropriate temperature control until it is truly needed. Bringing out food on an as-needed basis allows more food to be viable for a caterer to reuse internally (such as incorporating leftover veggies into tomorrow's soup) or donate to a hunger-relief organization.

Request the following service methods to reduce food waste from the end of a buffet.

- Allow pans and trays of food to fully diminish before refreshing. Use creative décor, dishware and arrangements to make the buffet look attractive even when food has diminished.
- Serve smaller quantities of each food at once and refresh only as needed.
- Shift some menu items to a cook-to-order format to prevent overproduction, particularly near the end of buffet time.

Tips for Plated Meals

While plated meals often generate less food waste than buffets, they can still be a significant source. One of the biggest drivers of food waste for plated meals is pre-setting. In event food waste audits, pre-set items such as salads and desserts are often the most common items that are thrown away untouched.

Pre-setting food at every seat guarantees a certain amount of food waste for every no-show and buffer seat because prepared food that has been sitting on the table without temperature control is typically not suitable to recover. If you must pre-set, consider pre-setting at only 80 percent of the available seats to encourage density and reduce wasted food, with servers bringing out items for the latest-arriving guests as needed.

Pre-setting also incorrectly assumes that every guest can eat

every dish, with no consideration of dietary restrictions. Salads and desserts often contain dairy, nuts, gluten and other common allergens or animal products. To avoid potential health hazards and ensure the majority of guests can consume them, design any pre-set items to align with all reported dietary restrictions in your group, or use assigned seating to ensure each seat is pre-set with the appropriate items.

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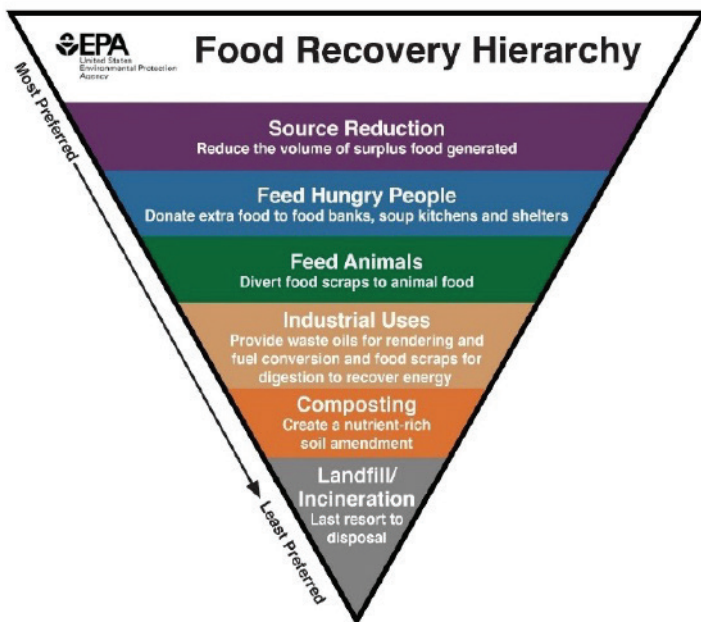
Another way to reduce food waste from plated meals is to ensure guests with dietary restrictions receive clear instructions for how to obtain the appropriate food. The meeting industry has become much better about collecting dietary needs up-front during registration. However, execution onsite is less consistent, often with no clear signage or instructions. If guests are confused and unable to obtain the food they requested, it results in both food waste and an unhappy, hungry guest. Reiterate the process for claiming special meals both in your "know before you go" communications and at onsite registration and ensure banquet staff are adequately trained.

Service Ware

Finally, meeting professionals can reduce additional waste that comes from food service by choosing reusable dishware, glassware and utensils. Reusable items have a lower environmental impact than their disposable counterparts if they are used more than a handful of times and washed efficiently. Dishware used by venues, caterers and event rental suppliers is often used dozens of times a year for many years and washed in efficient commercial dishwashers.

Reusable dishware is safe to use even amid the pandemic. The Sustainable Event Alliance released a guidebook to help event professionals confidently and safely implement reusables both in regular circumstances and in situations of heightened health concern.

If reusable dishware is not available, compostable food service supplies are preferable to landfill-bound disposables if an appropriate collection and disposal program for compost is in place.



Diverting Surplus Food and Food Scraps to Sustainable Uses

Even with prevention strategies in place, events are likely to generate some food waste. However, it doesn't have to be destined for landfill. There are multiple alternative outlets for surplus food and food scraps. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has organized these outlets into the Food Recovery Hierarchy, ranking uses for surplus food from most preferred to least preferred.

At the top is source reduction, meaning it's best to prevent surplus food generation in the first place. The second-most preferred solution is to feed hungry people by donating surplus food.

Donation

Many caterers already have donation relationships with local food pantries, shelters or other hunger relief organizations. In your RFPs and initial conversations, express your desire to donate surplus food and ask if the caterer already has existing donation contacts.

If your caterer doesn't already have a food donation program, ask them to start one and provide resources to help. In the U.S., the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act protects donors from liability when donating food to nonprofit organizations for ultimate distribution to individuals in need. Additional information about food donation laws, tax incentives and potential barriers in 14 countries can be found online in the Global Food Donation Policy Atlas. Share a copy of relevant legislation

with your caterer to help them navigate any liability concerns.

Different organizations have different capacities for the types and amounts of foods they accept. For example, food pantries that distribute grocery items may only be able to accept packaged foods. Organizations that serve hot meals may be more prepared to accept surplus prepared food. Recipients may also be limited by their storage capacity.

Pre-planning food donation is vital, especially when working with a new recipient organization. Prior to the event, even if potential donation quantities are unknown, talk to your donation partner about logistics, including the following.

- What types of food can they accept or not accept?
- Do food donations need to be packaged or labeled a certain way?
- When and how will pick-up or drop-off occur? (Depending on when the handoff occurs, food may need to go into cold storage, so your caterer may need to plan to have fridge or freezer space available.)
- Which party will measure and report the amount of food donated?

These conversations will likely happen directly between the caterer and the donation partner. However, if you're helping a caterer adopt a new program, follow up to ensure the details have been handled and initiate conversations, if needed. If logistics aren't discussed until the last minute, the donation partner may not have the capacity to receive your surplus food.

Animal Feed

Feeding animals is the most preferred use of certain types of food scraps that are not suitable for human consumption. Regulations for feeding food scraps to animals vary by country and region/state/province, and some scraps are not suitable for use as animal feed. Contact an expert at the local solid waste agency, agricultural extension office or public health agency to learn about options.

Industrial Use/Anaerobic Digestion

The next notch down on the Food Recovery Hierarchy is industrial use, including rendering, conversion to biodiesel and anaerobic digestion. Anaerobic digestion is a method of breaking down organic waste in sealed tanks, resulting in two useful end products—biogas for energy and solid digestate used as fertilizer.

Anaerobic digesters can be found at cattle or dairy farms, some wastewater treatment plants or standalone facilities. Some

venues, such as McCormick Place in Chicago, have installed a Grind2Energy system that grinds food waste into a slurry for easy transport to an anaerobic digester. Ask your venue or caterer if they have access to an anaerobic digester as an outlet for food scraps.

Compost

More and more event professionals are becoming familiar with composting to put food scraps to sustainable use. Composting is the process of collecting different types of organic waste in the correct ratios and allowing the mix to break down over time in piles, rows or vessels. This process releases a lower amount of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, than is released when organic waste breaks down in landfills. The finished product, compost, is used to enhance soil quality. Ask your venue or caterer if they have a composting program or access to a local composting facility.

A comprehensive food waste program may incorporate more than one of these diversion streams. For example, the Virginia Beach Convention Center combines source reduction, donation and composting in its waste diversion program.

“Our approach is to be as accurate as possible when planning, purchasing and preparing for the number of guaranteed guests to help reduce waste on the front end,” Williamson says. “We utilize the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore, a member of the Feeding America network, as our main donation partner. When we anticipate having excess food from events, we contact them immediately so they can plan to pick-up the donations as soon as possible.”

“When circumstances arise that prevent us from being able to donate, we compost the food waste along with all production and trim waste during the food preparation process,” Williamson adds. The Center’s robust waste diversion program contributes to its LEED Gold certification for Operations and Maintenance, which it has held since 2010.

Food waste diversion presents a great opportunity for meeting professionals to measure their impact and tell the stories of their events’ support for environment and local community. Venues and caterers can provide measurement data, but it’s important to convey that request early so suppliers can implement processes to separate and measure the waste from specific events.

Food waste diversion presents a great opportunity for meeting professionals to measure their impact and tell the stories of their events’ support for environment and local community.

“Almost everything is tracked on a building scale as a whole, so it’s difficult to be able to say ‘this amount of material was recycled from this one event,’ unless arrangements are made ahead of time,” says Kimberlee Dobbins, sustainability coordinator at the Virginia Beach Convention Center.

As food waste becomes a greater concern to more meeting professionals, a growing number of suppliers focused on food waste are emerging in the space. If your venue or caterer doesn’t have an in-house process for diverting food waste, a third-party event waste diversion supplier can help design and execute a short-term food recovery program for your meeting.

Looking Ahead

Sharing food and drink is a staple of human gatherings. As society grapples with the climate crisis and other environmental challenges, sustainable food and beverage service will be vital for the meeting industry to remain relevant and aligned with the values of stakeholders and attendees.

“I see this as the only way forward in the industry,” says Desser at catering company Well Dunn. “Sustainability has to improve for the industry to move along with the way the rest of the world is moving. This is a worldwide issue, so to put your head in the sand and ignore it is short-sighted.”

From supporting local businesses to preserving a destination’s ecosystem, making sustainable food and beverage choices can help your event leave a positive legacy. Dobbins emphasizes that tourists and locals alike enjoy Virginia Beach’s natural beauty and wildlife, “and it comes naturally to want to preserve that. We’ve strived to educate others on how you can still have meetings and events, but in a way that preserves resources and protects the environment that we all so much enjoy.”

Resources

Project Drawdown

www.drawdown.org

- Climate-solution research organization that ranks and explains dozens of ways to combat climate change

Protein Scorecard (World Resources Institute)

www.wri.org/data/protein-scorecard

- Compares plant- and animal-based foods on greenhouse gas emissions per gram of protein

Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch

www.seafoodwatch.org

- Rating system based on rigorous, scientific standards for environmentally sound practices for aquaculture and fisheries
- Eco-certification labels approved by Seafood Watch as equivalent to its Best Choice or Good Alternative ratings
www.seafoodwatch.org/recommendations/eco-certified-seafood

FishChoice

fishchoice.com

- U.S.-based nonprofit offering a sustainable seafood sourcing directory, tracking and reporting tools and information about fisheries working to improve social responsibility

Sustainable Event Alliance

- Global Best Practice Guidelines: 'Reusables' Hygiene at Events thrive.sustainable-event-alliance.org/global-reusables-at-events-hygiene-standard
- Research and best practices for safely and hygienically implementing reusable dishware and glassware for events

EPA Food Recovery Challenge Results & Award Winners

epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/food-recovery-challenge-results-and-award-winners

- Case studies of various U.S. companies, institutions and organizations that have successfully reduced food waste

Green Restaurant Association

www.dinegreen.com/results

- Directory of restaurants and caterers that are certified by the Green Restaurant Association

Global Food Donation Policy Atlas

atlas.foodbanking.org/country-research.html

- Food donation laws and tax incentives for 14 countries

Julia Spangler Owner, Ecosystem Events



Julia Spangler helps organizations and event professionals reduce the environmental impact of their events in order to preserve our planet and deliver powerful sustainability results. As the owner of Ecosystem Events, Julia specializes in reducing & diverting waste at meetings and events. Julia's experience ranges from conventions and banquets to festivals and concerts. She has led waste diversion programs at events with up to 24,000 attendees, and her programs have resulted in waste diversion rates as high as 93%. Julia is a proud member of MPI and was the recipient of MPI's RISE Award for Young Professional Achievement in 2019. She is based in Indianapolis, Indiana.



About Meeting Professionals International

When we meet face-to-face, it empowers us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder. That's why MPI strives to lead the world in education, networking and innovative solutions that advance not only the meeting and event industry, but the careers of the professionals in it.

Through MPI's global network of local chapters, we activate, educate, support and connect the connectors—people who are passionate about bringing people together. MPI serves the entirety of the meeting and event industry, regardless of need, audience or specialization. MPI delivers leadership and education that are not only credible—they're actionable. We empower our community to visualize and execute one-of-a-kind experiences that inspire people to evolve their outlooks, reexamine their preconceptions and take positive action.

Because when we meet, we think in ways previously unthought. Because when we meet, we break through barriers that kept us apart. When we **meet**, we change the world.*

For more information, visit MPI.org.



About Virginia Beach CVB

Virginia Beach may be all about soft sands and ocean waves, but planning your meeting here puts you right on solid ground. You'll enjoy not only the full support of our team of meeting professionals—devoted to the details that make your event a success – but an entire network of hotels, restaurants, venues, attractions and services ready to pitch in. From big events at the LEED® Gold Certified Virginia Beach Convention Center to roundtable sessions with an ocean view, your style of meeting is at the top of our agenda. Bring your meeting to life in Virginia Beach.

vbmeetings.com.