

Headline: Restaurants must help conserve Mother Nature

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Last Oct. 4, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, YouTube Originals premiered the documentary “The Letter: A Message for Our Earth,” which includes a plea from Pope Francis for everyone to take action against climate change.

Experts estimate that by 2050, some 1.2 billion people will be displaced globally due to climate change. According to the United Nations Climate Programme, we are in a “code red for humanity.” Global average temperatures are on the rise and predicted to exceed 3 degrees Celsius this century. This means catastrophic consequences, which we have already started to experience in different parts of the world.

We have all felt this impact in terms of the greater damage from natural disasters and greater effect on food production.

Winemakers alone have been terribly hit. In 2021, French winemakers produced a third less wine after the grape harvest plunged 29 percent due to extreme weather, frost and disease during the spring and summer. Many of France’s most important wine regions such as Bordeaux, Champagne and Languedoc-Roussillon were adversely affected by off-season spring frost. It was so bad that the country’s minister for agriculture, Julien Denormandie, described the grape and fruit crop devastation as “probably the greatest agricultural catastrophe of the beginning of the 21st century.”

The numbers presented are that world greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions must be cut by 30 gigatons annually by 2030 to limit temperature rise to 1.5 C, which is needed to halt the worst impact.

Every effort counts, especially from the restaurant industry. Food production and service industries are responsible for up to 30 percent of the world’s GHG emissions. More specifically, the food system contributes 19-29 percent of total emissions. The energy that goes into the production, harvesting, transporting and packaging of that wasted food generates more than 3.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO2). Hence, large-scale industrial change can have an effective impact to counter climate change.

Here are some actions that restaurants can take:

Stand up for sustainability. Studies have observed that even for restaurants, when the brand stands up for something like sustainability, this can boost brand presence and be good for business.

Impose climate change surcharge. In California, to combat the restaurant industry’s carbon footprint, some restaurateurs have initiated a surcharge to raise funds to stabilize renewable farming practices in the state. For example, Mission Chinese Food restaurant in San Francisco already charges its customers a 3-percent “CO2 offset” fee on a purely optional basis (but nobody opts out!). If 1 percent of restaurants in California could implement the 1-percent surcharge, the fund would raise \$10 million for renewable farming practices. If all of the restaurants in California could implement it, the budget would be closer to \$1 billion.

Support climavorism. A climavore is someone who eats eco-friendly food and makes daily food choice a call to action. This is actually an effort of consumers, not just restaurateurs. But restaurants can also adapt to the shift in behavior by serving food sourced from farms that are mindful of sustainable practices.

Go plant-based. Studies have shown a strong correlation between climate change and the production of animal-based foods. Over half of the emissions of the restaurant industry come from raising and processing livestock. Beef has now become the biggest agricultural threat to our environment because its production creates almost four times more GHG emissions than that of pork. In fact, beef production requires 20 times more land and releases 20 times more GHG than plant-based protein. Not-so-fun fact: global beef production releases as much GHG into our atmosphere as the entire country of India. Hence, the UN Environment Programme's International Panel for Sustainable Resource Management has stated that a global shift toward vegan diet is vital to protecting the world from the worst impact of climate change.

Consider carbon farming. This is a farming method that allows carbon to be absorbed by the soil. According to a soil scientist at Ohio State University, a mere 2-percent increase in the carbon content of the planet's soils could offset 100 percent of all GHG going into the atmosphere.

Eliminate or at least reduce food waste. Food consumption accounts for anywhere between 15-50 percent of GHG. Even if 30-40 percent of food produced around the world is not consumed or simply spoils after harvest or during transportation, emissions associated with food waste could soar from 0.5 gigatons of CO₂ equivalent per year to between 1.9-2.5 gigatons annually by midcentury.

Eliminate or at least reduce plastic waste. This is the simplest and most actionable step a restaurant can take to shrink its carbon footprint and stop unnecessary waste from ending up in landfills or the ocean. Banning single-use plastic may not be possible—but reducing plastic waste can be achieved easily. Some steps that may be taken: replace plastic cutlery and packaging with biodegradable alternatives; add small signs at self-serve stations to ask customers to take only what they need; and only give out cutlery and straws when asked.

For online orders, add a checkbox to request cutlery, if needed.

Buy local. By supporting local farms and vendors, restaurants can reduce carbon footprint by reducing reliance on long-distance delivery. Traveling results in the constant release of GHG, but the problem can be solved simply by finding local suppliers.

Use energy-efficient appliances. In the United States, lighting alone accounts for 6 percent of CO₂ emissions, and a global switch to LED lighting could offset 1.4 billion tons of CO₂. Hence, simpler and more cost-effective alternatives can have an incremental difference to both energy bills and carbon footprint, such as installing automated lighting and using energy-efficient LED bulbs.

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These proposals may take a bit of an effort to initiate but once they are set to practice, people easily adjust. Mother Nature is too sick now to ignore. Let's all collaborate to combat climate change!