

## **Food waste digester Heil of Texas feeds ‘green’ appetites**

**by Mike W. Thomas, Reporter**

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The new Cheesecake Factory at La Cantera is the first restaurant in town to try out a new eco-friendly system that disposes of food waste and has the potential to divert tons of material from going into the landfill.

The restaurant, which opened last month, is the first in town to use the new Eco-Safe Digester, an organic waste decomposition system that takes food waste and converts it into a liquid that be safely emptied into the sewage system. It operates by using microbial agents, or enzymes, which eat away the solid parts of the food and leave a byproduct that is mostly water.

During its first week in operation, the machine digested 3,000 pounds of food waste, according to Fabian Reta, General Manager of The Cheesecake Factory at La Cantera. Reta says it involves a little more work to sort out the food waste from the non-organic trash after bussing tables, but his staff supports it 100 percent. “Our staff is completely behind it,” he says. “They like anything that is green and are very enthusiastic about the new system.”

A business that produces 47 tons of waste a month spends more than \$6,800 each month disposing of it in the conventional way, Guterrez says. In the case of a restaurant, grocery store, school, hospital or any other facility that produces a lot of food waste, the Eco-Safe Digester can divert as much as 30 tons of that waste, saving more than \$2,400 in trash pick up fees each month.

### **Ecological Benefits**

“If they use the machine for one year (at full capacity) it reduces greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to removing 40 cars from the road, or planting 100 trees,” Rodriguez asserts. “And it returns tens of thousands of gallons of water to the ecosystem.”

Guterrez notes that a 2008 study by the United Nations concluded that 30 percent of all food – or \$50 billion worth – is thrown into the garbage each year. And the Environmental Protection Agency has reported that the United States spends an estimated \$1 billion annually on disposing of food waste.

Mike Dugi, manager of Heil of Texas operation in San Antonio, says he hopes to find a large grocery store willing to serve as a demonstration site for the largest Eco-Safe Digester currently on the market. “I think they would benefit from the elimination of a lot of their hauling fees for waste disposal,” Dugi says. “Food waste is very heavy.”

Heil of Texas was founded in 2001 and currently has operations in Houston and Dallas as well as San Antonio. The company opened a local office in 2006 to support the heavy waste-disposal equipment it was selling to the City of San Antonio. In 2008, the company built a 17,000 square-foot facility in Northeast San Antonio at a cost of \$1.3 million, Dugi says. About one-third of the space is for offices and the rest is for servicing equipment and parts. Heil of Texas’ San Antonio office employs 11 people and had between \$10 million and \$11 million in gross revenues last year. Companywide, the business employs about 45 people and had about \$30 million in annual revenues this past year. In addition to the digester,

the company sells a variety of garbage and recycling trucks that load from the front, rear or side; street sweepers; road patchers and baling equipment.

Dugi says there had been a lull in sales the past year, but things have been picking back up recently. "We have pretty much grown every year since we opened, with the exception of last year," he says. "Now we are catching up with the prior year." Dugi says he expects sales of the Eco-Safe Digester to boost the business in the future. "We want to spread the word about this type of machine," he says. "The whole world is going green."



Mike Dugi and George Gutierrez with Heil of Texas in San Antonio are counting on a machine that digests food waste to boost their business in the coming years.