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## MEET ELSIE GREENER

There's a newcomer in the Salvage area: a hip and polished female with square shoulders and a low carbon footprint. She eats heartily and has the digestive capacity of a small tank. Correction: make that a large tank.

Elsie Greener is gleaming stainless steel: about 6' wide, 4' deep and 4 1/2' high. Her welcoming mouth - - think of it as the door to her digestive tract - - is on the slanted top surface. Known in the trade as a "digester," Elsie is made in Korea for a US company called BioHitech America.



Elsie, the first of her breed at the FoodBank and probably not the last, receives visitors in her permanent location about 50' from the kitchen door which opens into the warehouse. "She's up and running," Executive Chef Paul Kapner tells cooking school students and staff. Get to know her, he says. She's changing the way we do business in the kitchen. How so? Elsie's appetite is for food waste only. On a white chalk board, next to the door to the cafeteria, the chef has listed "Digester Rules." The "no's include paper, wood, glass, hot liquid, fryer oil, plastic gloves, and bleach.

Elsie's best friend and principal operator is David Bailey, who has been working in Salvage for the past four years. With his thin handsome face framed in dreads and a radiant smile, David is poster material for the FoodBank's green future. Given the opportunity to name the machine, he fixed on "Elsie." Everyone knows Elsie, David said by way of explanation. She's friendly and likeable. Of course, the famous Elsie gives milk. This techie, save-the-planet Elsie turns waste food into a miso soup-like liquid which is re-cycled in water treatment plants along with the FoodBank's sink water and toilet water.

How about a last name, I asked David when the machine first arrived. How about Greener? It will be helpful, I suggested, in explaining Elsie's function to kids and other volunteers. If you say "Greener," they'll think re-cycling; they'll get it. David agreed. I told David that I'd like to acknowledge her mixed heritage and Asian technological savvy with a middle initial - - Elsie K. (for Korea) Greener. That's too

much to explain, David said.

David, who is 30, has a feel for cows and the rhythms of nature. Raised on a family farm in Jamaica, he helped care for chickens, pigs, goats and sheep. And yes, he occasionally milked cows. He remembers, as a kid, getting up at 4:30 am to feed the animals. He remembers walking five miles to the store to buy feed and five miles back. He remembers the mess, the barnyard odors, and the back-breaking labor. Caring for Elsie, by comparison, is simple, David says. She does almost all the work herself.

Like an active teen-ager, Elsie needs constant feeding: ideally, 200 pounds of waste every four hours and up to 1200 pounds per day - - or less than half of the FoodBank's daily total. This intake yields 100 pounds of liquid (waste water), which runs directly into the warehouse's sewer. In addition, Elsie requires a balanced diet: a mixture of vegetables, protein and carbohydrates -- and nothing (like corn cobs or T-bones from steak) that a healthy human system would reject. I'll modify that: Elsie's okay with chicken bones and fish entrails, even uncooked rice and pasta. She tolerates some fats and liquids, too. But heavy doses of cooking oil will clog her system.

To introduce FoodBank workers to Elsie, Frank Celli, the CEO of BioHitech America, spent several days during September 2009 at the warehouse. A compact and energetic man in his 40's, Frank worked in "waste" for 20 years before getting into green technology. At 11 am on a sunny September morning, he met with a dozen FoodBank staff members, many in dark green tee shirts that say "staff." A couple of chefs in white jackets joined the group as Frank described the science and environmental benefits of the machine.

How does a digester digest? How does Elsie do her job? He explained that several strands of bacteria are introduced into her "body" which provides a perfect environment for the process: it keeps the bacteria warm, wet and oxygenated, he said, and thus able to break food down into liquid.

Frank opened the metal door on Elsie's topside and reached in. He grabbed a handful of what looked like beef chili mixed with zucchini and pepper chunks. It's not going make my hand diseased, he said. When I thrust my own right hand in, I was surprised to find the mixture on the dry side and not at all smelly. What's more, it didn't cling to the skin. I accepted a paper towel from Frank and returned to my note taking.

The digester, as the CEO in jeans explained, will save the FoodBank thousands of dollars every year in waste disposal. It will reduce the organization's carbon footprint by keeping (fuel inefficient) garbage trucks off the road and lessening the burden on the nation's overloaded landfill. (These days New Jersey's waste is transported to Pennsylvania for disposal.) Once you know the routine, Frank assured his audience, this machine will make your jobs easier. With less waste standing around, waiting to be carted away, the digester will also keep the FoodBank cleaner - - and less attractive to rodents.

Elsie, we learned, is surprisingly low maintenance. Micro-organisms are added every three months; and the system needs a cleaning only twice a year. Unlike milk-producing creatures, Elsie has few moving parts. She takes care of herself - - provided she's fed correctly and constantly. That's David's job. He's going to be busy. He may even need an assistant for some weekends and nights - - to get maximum value from Elsie. I'll work as much as they need me, he said. But even if Elsie never takes a break, he continued, the FoodBank's waste is too much for her. We need a herd if we really gonna be green.

Doris Friedensohn  
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