

Beverage Programs Go Green



JULIANNE WILL

It is Alberto Gonzalez's firm belief that a commitment to the ecological type of green can bring in the financial type of green.

In fact, he's put his money where his mouth is—as have the customers who have flocked to his GustOrganics restaurant in New York City since its opening in early 2008. It's the first certified-organic restaurant in New York state and the first in the country to use 100% USDA-certified-organic ingredients. In November, Gonzalez added a bar, also the first to be USDA-certified organic.



Live It Green's Treetini cocktail (previous page); GustOrganics' Alberto Gonzalez (above left) and restaurant in New York City (above right); wooden recycling bin that the InterContinental Hotel in Chicago is considering (below).

A former business consultant, Gonzalez moved to the United States from Buenos Aires in 2006 with zero restaurant experience. On business trips to New York, he discovered that it was difficult to find high-quality food at a price he could afford. "I realized that New Yorkers in general do not have the pleasure of enjoying organic foods in the city," he recalls. "Also, it was disgusting to me to see the amount of garbage that restaurants generate and the tremendous impact the restaurant industry has on the environment, so I thought, 'This is a good opportunity to thrive by starting up a really responsible business that thinks of the people first, the environment second, and lastly, profits.'"

His commitment is emphatic: all the drinks are free of chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms. In addition, GustOrganics uses no artificial ingredients or enhancers, most of its catering and delivery packaging is biodegradable within 90 days, its power is largely wind-generated, and 70% of its daytime light comes from the sun. Unfortunately, recycling programs and eco-friendly packaging tend to be much more costly than traditional disposal and disposables. "Most of the practices that make sense to people in terms of health and the environment cost much more money," Gonzalez says. "We do not translate our higher costs to our prices, because our vision is to bring organics and sustainability into the mainstream. We are leveraging GustOrganics in some volume of sales that we hope to achieve very soon.

It is very challenging from a financial side, but rewarding for the human side of the equation."

That idealism, says Darren Tristano, executive vice president of the food-industry research-and-consulting firm Technomic, is necessary if restaurateurs hope to make green initiatives work in the current economic climate, when margins are already tight. "They can go green if it saves them green," Tristano says. But Technomic research shows that while consumers now expect and prefer green initiatives, they will not pay more to support them; guests view such efforts as part of a restaurant's cost of doing business.



Photos by Pablo Corradi (top left), Elbert Chu (top right)



GustOrganics bar and bottled water (above); Technomic executive vice president Darren Tristano (below).

Even in today's economy, some operations are being nudged along by the green movement. The InterContinental Hotel in Chicago got a big push at the end of 2007, when a meeting planner from the West Coast issued a three-page list of environmental standards the hotel would have to meet to land that business. "The market, especially in Chicago, is very, very demanding about green initiatives," says Tamas Vago, food and beverage director at the InterContinental. "And of course, California is always one step ahead of things, so it's pretty much coming from there. Lots of meeting planners coming from the West Coast to the Midwest are putting down the rules, requiring us to produce something more green. That was great, because two years ago, if you would have asked me, 'What does green mean for you?' I could not really say."

Green Beverages

The Ecolicious cocktail hour in XYZ Bar at W San Francisco is one example of what green can mean. This program, launched in March 2008, features organic cocktails crafted by mixologist H. Joseph Ehrmann and biodynamic wines and beers selected by wine director Michael Garcia. Executive chef Paul Piscopo created a menu of organic bar bites for the cocktail hour, which now starts at 5:30 p.m. every weekday. Guests are encouraged to bring eco-conscious tips to share with others and to wear sustainable clothing. In April 2008, XYZ Bar began donating a portion of the proceeds generated during the Ecolicious hour to the Save the Bay Foundation.

Customers aren't always aware of the theme when they arrive, but the bar tends to draw a

crowd interested in something different. Says marketing manager Mike Nettles, "Because many of these organic spirits and products are new to the market, I think people are curious to try them out." XYZ Bar had already stocked more than 250 organic and biodynamic wines, and New Belgium Brewing Company's organic Mothership Wit was one of its most popular organic beers. "As more and more organic products became available to make intriguing and eco-friendly cocktails," Nettles explains, "we decided to launch Ecolicious so that we could begin to highlight these things that are unique about our beverage program." The lineup now includes Square One organic vodkas, 4Copas organic tequilas, organic Batiste Rhum Agricole, and Bluecoat organic gin.





BLVD 16 executive chef Simon Dolinky (left) and lounge (right) in Los Angeles; food and beverage director Tamas Vago of the InterContinental Hotel in Chicago (below).

XYZ Bar has always recycled bottles, and it also composts corks and returns boxes to shippers for reuse. Asking guests to use the same beverage glasses throughout the evening helps the environment as well, but seems better suited to wine and beer than to cocktails. "Because many of the martinis we make have fresh-fruit purées in them," says Nettles, "the glasses tend to get a bit cloudy; however, we will certainly reuse the glass if the guest would like us to."

The cocktail hour "has been enthusiastically received by our patrons," he adds, and continues to grow via word of mouth from like-minded customers. "Because many of these products are more expensive than their non-organic counterparts, it is definitely more expensive to offer them," Nettles notes. "However, we continue to believe that making these changes will benefit us in the long run in a variety of ways."

BLVD 16 is another green sprout on the West Coast. The restaurant and bar, which opened in the Hotel Palomar in Los Angeles in May 2008, recycles all its cardboard and bottle caps and its glass, aluminum, and plastic bottles. Its takeout packaging and cocktail napkins are made from unbleached or recycled materials, and old menus are reused as server notepads. Basil, mint, thyme, rosemary, chives, and micro-greens for the kitchen and bar are grown hydroponically in an organic rooftop garden, which saves money on purchasing, shipping, and storage; in fact, BLVD 16 is expanding the garden to include lettuce, carrots, strawberries, and chili peppers.

The restaurant has also implemented an in-house bottling system for still and sparkling water, which it sells for \$5 a bottle. "The Natura water system is an easy and efficient way to eliminate the waste caused by beverage containers," says executive chef Simon Dolinky. "We are very passionate about reducing our ecological impact at BLVD 16, and it is a great way to minimize our carbon footprint. I won't serve a product that might fit our eco standards but isn't of high quality, and the Natura water tastes great. Using biodynamic, sustainably grown, and organic wines and spirits allows the beverage program to match our philosophies on food, and there are more and more great wines being produced with this commitment behind them."



Photo courtesy of BLVD 16 at the Hotel Palomar Los Angeles-Westwood (top left); photo by David Phelps (top right)

GREEN BEVERAGE PROGRAMS



BLVD 16's organic rooftop herb garden (above); Three Thieves co-founder Charles Bieler (below).

Vago is considering a similar system at the InterContinental, where he often uses water dispensers in conference rooms rather than putting out bottled water—again, at the request of meeting planners. “As a businessperson,” he says, “you need to really evaluate if you eliminate bottled water, what should you charge for the green water? Costwise, of course, it’s much cheaper. Instead of buying the bottled water, you’re buying the big 5-gallon container. But as a business decision, we need to price it. The profit will be higher, but as a hotel, you cannot really lose revenues. If I replace all of my Evian with bottled dispensers—a couple of dollars less a person—it’s a huge effect on my operation.”

Vago walks the same tightrope when thinking about a water-filtration-and-carbonation system for the hotel’s bar and restaurant. “It would be very difficult to upsell water because everybody knows in Chicago that the water quality is very good,” he says. “But maybe you can build it into your food pricing. If you put an extra dollar on it, at the end of the day, it will actually be bringing you more money because not everybody buys your bottled water.”

The InterContinental has found at least one cost-effective green beverage by joining forces with Live It Green, an Illinois-based sustainability company. Participating bars and restaurants contribute a portion of the sales of martinis made with VeeV Açai spirit to Live It Green, which plants a tree for each of these “Treetinis” in parts of the world needing reforestation. The program has spread to 30 bars in six cities since it began in April 2007, and Live It Green has now planted more than 5,000 trees, according to founder Roddy Richards. The martini recipes can vary from bar to bar and can change seasonally to use local and organic ingredients as much as possible.

Many bars are also switching to green spirits, such as Square One, an 80-proof vodka made from 100%-certified-organic American rye. The company’s eco-consciousness extends to its bottle, which is produced with tree-free face labels and soy inks and designed to be reused as a vase or a container for olive oil or spirit infusions. Another popular 80-proof spirit, Rain Vodka,



Photo by John Popplewell (bottom)



GustOrganics' Strawberry Caipiroska (top), Banano (middle), and Suavecito (above) cocktails.

Julianne Will passed the introductory level of the Court of Master Sommeliers last summer. She left a career in marketing and publishing this spring to pursue freelance writing full time, covering food, wine, fitness, travel, and other subjects. She has also authored or co-authored four best-selling Catholic children's books. She lives in Chicago and can be reached through her website, www.juliannewill.com.



Square One Organic Vodka (left); eco-friendly Sombra Mezcal (right).



made from organically grown white corn, was one of the first organic vodkas on the market.

Green Producers

With increasing numbers of producers turning out top-quality organic and biodynamic wines, environmentally conscious winemakers are beginning to turn their attention to packaging. Charles Bieler sells his Three Thieves Bandit Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot in 1-liter Tetra Paks made from more than 70% renewable resources; they're lightweight and, thus, require less energy to move the same volume of wine compared to glass bottles. Tetra Pak containers reduce the packaging waste associated with bottled wine by 90%. The wood material used in the packages is certified-sustainable-harvest, and the plant that makes and prints the carton material is carbon-neutral. Although Tetra Pak wines are probably not going to catch on in fine-dining programs, Bieler notes that they are useful in restaurants that serve by the carafe or at poolside. And they're handy in the kitchen, where glass is a greater liability.

Bieler has also partnered with sommelier-winemaker Richard Betts, MS, on an eco-friendly Mezcal project. The glass bottles for their new Sombra are made on the north side of Oaxaca, the Mezcal is bottled on the south side of the

city, and the boxes and packaging are produced in Mexico from recycled materials. All the facilities are close by where the agave is harvested and distilled in the Sierra Mountains. "It is really special to be able to do it all in one spot," says Betts. "It is neither fast nor cheap, but has been fine thus far. It feels good to be doing it locally."

Green Trends

Industry reports support both producers' and beverage directors' efforts to go green. In its analysis of "What's Hot in 2009: Trends for Hotels & Restaurants," food-industry consulting agency Andrew Freeman and Co. states that green is no longer a trend, but a norm. The Grocery Manufacturers Association also predicts, in its year-end report for GMA SmartBrief, that sustainability will become an industry standard in 2009.

In December 2008, the National Restaurant Association listed organic wine among the top 20 culinary trends of 2009, based on a survey of more than 1,600 American Culinary Federation members. Organic cocktails were also high on the list of trends. In May 2008, the NRA launched a comprehensive website called Conserve, full of tips, stats, facts, how-tos, and links for green initiatives in water use, construction, energy efficiency, and recycling.

The Green Restaurant Association has been

Photos by Pablo Corradi (left); photo courtesy of Sombra LLC (right)

GREEN BEVERAGE PROGRAMS

GREEN SPIRITS KEY PRODUCERS

Batiste Rhum Agricole

www.batisterum.com
St. Barts Spirit Company
San Quentin, Calif.

Bluecoat Gin

www.bluecoatgin.com
COLORADO, SOUTH CAROLINA
Southern Wine & Spirits
www.southernwine.com

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Chesapeake Beverage Group
www.nksdistributors.com
WASHINGTON, D.C.
Capitol Beverage Group
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Southern Wine & Spirits
www.southernwine.com

*For a complete list of distributors, click on the link in the online version of this article at www.sommelierjournal.com.

GUSTORGANICS RECIPES

Livianito

½ cup ice
1 cup organic watermelon
1 ounce TRU Organic Vodka
1 tablespoon organic agave nectar

Splash of fresh-squeezed organic orange juice

Serve in a martini glass, and garnish with sliced organic strawberry on the side of the glass.

Pepino

½ cup ice
⅓-½ organic cucumber (about 3 inches)
4-6 organic spearmint leaves

1 ounce Square One Organic Cucumber Vodka

1 tablespoon organic agave nectar
Splash of fresh-squeezed organic orange juice

Serve in a martini glass, and garnish with a slice of organic cucumber.



GustOrganics' Rojito and Dulce de Leche (top left and right), Basil Daiquiri and Fresquito (middle left and right), and Margarita and Pepino (above left and right) cocktails.

advancing the cause since 1990—well before it was a trend—by providing research, environmental consulting, education, public relations and marketing, and community organization for consumer activism. Restaurants seeking certification must conform to a list of standards, which become more stringent for those seeking to maintain their certification. The association helps restaurants find the resources to go green; it also lists green restaurants for consumers who wish to lend their support.

Customer response to GustOrganics' green cocktails, such as the Livianito and Pepino (see box) has been so overwhelming that Gonzalez is planning to open a second location on the Upper West Side this year. But Gonzalez is only leading where many will eventually follow—particularly as the kids who grew up recycling juice boxes and soda cans grow up to drink adult beverages. “We’re looking at a generation that’s coming up behind us that is pushing this,” says Tristano. Green is definitely hot. 🍷