Interview: Stu Orefice, Director of Dining Services

Sustainable Eating at Princeton: Dining Services Makes the Grade

By Carol H. Peters

Is it possible to sustainably feed thousands of people, round-the-clock, seven days a week, in central New Jersey? Just ask Stu Orefice, Director of Princeton University’s Dining Services. Stu and his staff have made it their mission to create sustainable menus for the University’s residential halls, and retail and catering services, in the largest and most successful dining transformation ever undertaken at this University.

Even for the well-versed, well-meaning “foodie,” it is extremely difficult to prioritize food choices, as balancing the options entails considering many issues and values. Dining Services strives to satisfy people whose food choices represent a plethora of purposes: eating to improve their health, to protect animals, to reduce their carbon footprint and impact on global warming, to protect the health of the oceans, to reduce energy consumption, and/or to support local growers or organic farmers. In addition, there is the paramount issue of taste. Everyone wants to eat great-tasting food.

Feeding this kind of diverse, demanding audience means facing complex and often conflicting issues, but Stu has found manageable ways to do this. PEI News interviewed Stu to discover how he and his incredibly accomplished staff at Dining Services have succeeded in making this transformation.

When purchasing food on behalf of the University, how do you prioritize the issues surrounding sustainable eating? We don’t attempt to make these decisions alone. We ask the advice of students and they decide how we should prioritize. For this purpose, we meet with the student group Greening Princeton once a month or every two weeks (at the beginning of the process we met weekly). The meetings usually consist of three or four students, and representatives from Dining Services, including Sarah Salati Bavuso (Special Events Manager), Dave Goetz (Business Office Manager), Linda Recine (Purchasing Manager), and me.

How has forging an alliance with Greening Princeton helped Dining Services to become more sustainable? When we began to work with Greening Princeton students we learned so much. One thing that stays in my mind is when Katy Andersen ’08, said to me, “We are analysts, not activists.” When we first began to meet last year, the students gave us a list of items they insisted upon having, such as organic milk that came in bulk dispensers to reduce waste, fair-trade bananas, and grass-fed beef. The advice from students led to many changes. Now we serve only grass-fed ground beef campus-wide for food such as chilis and meat sauces. The only chicken we purchase is

BY THE NUMBERS

8,600
Pounds of grass-fed beef Dining Services purchases in an average year. (This is used for making foods such as chili and meat sauce.)

13,000
Pounds of pre-made hamburger patties Dining Services purchases that are made from grass-fed beef.
from Bell and Evans, which humanely produces chicken and is located in Pennsylvania (www.bellandevans.com). The students have also requested organic bread, and 100% compostable cups. Later, we asked them to choose between cage-free eggs and United Egg Producer eggs (these are commodity eggs). They chose cage-free eggs.

We learned about the Seafood Watch Program from Greening Princeton students. This completely changed our seafood-buying practices. (A program of the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Seafood Watch raises consumer awareness about the importance of buying seafood from sustainable sources.) We became the first University to become a Seafood Watch Partner with the Monterey Bay Aquarium. This shows our level of commitment to these meetings with our students. We went through our list of seafood and the students told us what seafood was sustainable and what wasn’t. As a result, we removed Atlantic salmon from all of our menus, and we bought sustainable shrimp. We received a great deal of press from this effort, which resulted in a dozen other universities following our lead and becoming Seafood Watch Partners.

**How have you overcome the specific challenges you have faced while working to make sustainable food purchases? When making decisions, how do you balance cost, transportation, delivery, sourcing, and other issues?**

The biggest challenge we face is finding the products we want. The market still needs to catch up to these new demands. Many of the products we seek are either not being made, are too expensive, or are produced too far from New Jersey to responsibly import. For example, we are trying to locate organic deli meats for the new Café Viv in Frist. Our challenge is to make this station entirely sustainable, so in addition to looking for sustainable deli meats we’re spending a lot of time looking for locally produced deli cheeses to slice. We found some varieties from New York, which is not as close as we’d like, but at least they are from the East Coast, which is better than Wisconsin. We are looking for products that are local, humane, and organic, but buying local products is our priority because we are trying to reduce the University’s carbon footprint. Unfortunately, most of our meat still comes from the Midwest. Our only other option at this point is to buy it and roast it ourselves, and we might do that at a later date. The deli station at Café Viv is called “Subconscious.” We are displaying lots of information at the deli, explaining which products are local, or organic. It is similar to Subway as we make every sandwich to order in front of the customer.

**You were very involved in PEI’s 2006 conference “Food, Ethics and the Environment.” Dining Services created and implemented the eco (and very delicious) lunch served to attendees, and you personally participated in the final panel called “Eating More Ethically at Princeton University.” Did this experience make a lasting impact on how you have shaped the University’s eating?**

Absolutely. The conference had an enormous impact on our team. Several managers were able to attend the conference, and we soaked up the information like a large sponge. We all came back with ideas that

“We are looking for products that are local, humane, and organic, but buying local products is our priority because we are trying to reduce the University’s carbon footprint.”

—Stu Orefice

42.8%

Of the foods Dining Services purchases are local (produced within a 200 mile radius of the University). This number includes produce, baked goods, cheese, milk, beef, pork, poultry and eggs.
really shaped where we are today. What we learned at the conference inspired us to buy grass-fed ground beef, Bell and Evans chicken, and cage-free eggs. Today, ninety percent of our pre-formed hamburgers are made with grass-fed beef. Of this, all of our residential dining halls and catering operations serve grass-fed beef hamburgers, but Frist offers both conventional and grass-fed beef burgers in the Food Gallery. We also made the change to purchasing cage-free eggs across campus. We use them for hard-boiled eggs at the salad bars. We’d like to use cage-free for all our liquid eggs, but this product is very expensive. However, we do buy cage-free liquid eggs to make omelets at Sunday brunches at the residential dining halls.

Has your budget needed to increase to meet your changing goals, and has the University responded favorably to this need? The University has been very supportive of our mission. Our main requests have been permission to purchase Bell and Evans chicken exclusively, as this product is more expensive. We have not yet asked for everything we’d like (such as serving all cuts of grass-fed beef on campus) because of distribution concerns. We need to wait for the industry to catch up. However, we do know we are having some small influence on the market by ordering all grass-fed ground beef for making chili, meat sauce, etc. Right now a lot of our suppliers offer “natural” meat, but “natural” can have many different meanings in this case. We met with Hormel recently, and told them they have to begin to offer products that are either local, or organic, or humanely treated, and they really took us seriously.

In addition, at the annual conference for the National Association of College and University Food Services, I was on a panel sponsored by Food Management Magazine. As part of the panel I advised manufacturers about the kinds of products we want at Princeton University. I essentially told them, pick one category (local, organic, or humane) and do it well.

Dining Services and some departments across the University (such as PEI and others) are now purchasing corn-based products such as cups and cutlery for their events. Of course these products are compostable, not recyclable. Does the University have any plans to begin its own composting to ensure these products really do break down? We give all of our food waste to a local pig farmer from South Jersey. He picks up the waste himself. When we began working with him in 1996, we gave him 572 tons of waste. Then we added Whitman, and this year we started giving him 744 tons of waste. We also are looking into alternative

**Café Viv 2.0**

By Christopher Lillja, Facilities Communications Manager

Café Viv, which was closed for renovations, re-emerged in September rebuilt on a more sustainable model. The Dining Services staff made every effort to use recycled materials in the remodeling and to provide organic, sustainable, or local foodstuffs in the menu.

The new Café “Viv” sports millwork and shelving produced from a particle board made from sunflower seed shells. The quartz countertops require no chemical sealers or cleaners, which in turn contributes to better indoor air quality. The glass tile surrounding the oven contains a high percentage of recycled glass and the lighting fixtures over the serving areas are made from 100% recycled aluminum. Many of the other fixtures in the cafe use LED lighting technology, an energy efficient choice which contains no mercury. Even the choice of...
uses for our food waste, and it is in the works. We are about a year away from it now. For it to work here, we will need to purchase custom-built, certified collection barrels that can be sealed and hold 200 gallons. To use these barrels, we will need to retro-fit our loading docks to accommodate them. Once we begin, our food waste will be taken to a local plant for biodiesel production.

**What are some of your goals for making Dining Services greener over the next 2 to 5 years?**

Expanding the offering of sustainable protein sources is currently one of our greatest challenges. We would like to offer more grass-fed beef. Produce will always be a challenge because of New Jersey’s climate. Right now our hope is to go tray-less (eliminate the trays for carrying food) two to five years out. To reduce energy consumption, some Universities and companies are already going tray-less. Studies have shown that without trays students will take 20–30 percent less food, plus not washing the trays saves energy. However, the conveyor belts the University has only take trays (not plates alone), so we will need to retrofit our belts so they can carry plates. We may start this as a pilot at Forbes. We are also working with Shana Weber, Manager of the Office of Sustainability, to make events greener at Princeton. Currently our default plate is made of 100% renewable resources, and we charge departments more if they request black plastic plates.

**What are some of the greatest rewards you’ve experienced during this very challenging process?** “The College Sustainability Report Card” ([http://www.greenreportcard.org/report-card-2009/schools/princeton-university](http://www.greenreportcard.org/report-card-2009/schools/princeton-university)) has given Dining Services an “A” grade (in the “Food and Recycling” category) for two years in a row. (Princeton University overall received a “B” grade). The authors of the report wrote, about “Food and Recycling” at Princeton: “Dining Services partners with 20 local farms, provides many organic options and fair trade coffee, and recently switched to corn-based biodegradable cups. A comprehensive recycling program has set a goal to recycle 50 percent of waste materials by 2012. Leaves and tree trimmings are composted and food waste is sent to a pig farmer.”

The first year we received an “A,” we celebrated and thanked the students who helped us by running a full-page ad in the *Daily Princetonian*. The ad consisted of a giant letter “A” with copy that read, “Thank you for helping us make the grade.”

For more information, please go to Dining Service’s website: [http://www.princeton.edu/facilities/dining_services/contact_us](http://www.princeton.edu/facilities/dining_services/contact_us).

**The College Sustainability Report Card** was not overlooked; a low “VOC” (or volatile organic compounds) was specified.

The menu also received, and continues to receive, its share of attention; considerable effort goes into making the choices both delicious and more sustainable. Patrons who return to the Café will find organic or local (or both) deli meats and cheeses. Bread is baked on premises and the pizza is made in a hearth oven. Real “Jersey” produce and organic sandwich spreads are featured, and of course, vegetarian and vegan options are offered. There may even be treats from the Forbes College organic garden. The grain bar will feature macro-vegetarian salads, the coffee is “equal exchange,” and a host of organic yogurt and other drinks are available to go.

So, if you find yourself in need of some refreshment, or just a great place to relax, come to Café Vivian for some delicious food in an environmentally conscious venue.