



● H. Joseph Ehrmann at Elixir in San Francisco is leading the charge for eco-friendly bar management. His specialty is organic cocktails, including Pretty Pepper (top left) and the Ruby Chai Appletini (bottom left).

The Environmentalist *at the Bar*

As green goes mainstream, eco-savvy drink programs present challenges and opportunities for restaurant and bar owners.

By James Scarpa

The green movement is getting too big to ignore. Just walk the well-stocked organic aisles at many supermarkets, swing open the door of a hotel mini-bar and find a chilled natural soda or organic iced tea or dial up organic pizza, natural sodas and juices for home delivery. Green products are everywhere.

Ecologically-conscious shopping and consumption used to be elite behavior, but today the trend cuts across all income brackets. More people are appreciating the benefits of organic products—to their bodies, their ethics and their environment—and are willing to pay higher prices for them. Cars are green, clothes are green, entire corporations are going green. The movement also is evident on some restaurant menus, where natural and organic ingredients abound. “Green” even pervades the wine, beer and cocktail lists of a few forward-looking restaurant beverage programs, where specialties made with local, seasonal or organic spirits and mixers are highlighted.

What’s impressive is the speed at which attitudes are changing and green is going mainstream. A recent study by the London-based research firm Mintel found that more than a third of adults claim to be regular buyers of green products, up from 12 percent just 16 months earlier. Americans now spend roughly \$16.7 billion on organic food and beverage annually, according to the Organic Trade Association, an increase of more than 120 percent in the past five years.

“We’re seeing the green movement rapidly transition from niche to mainstream,” says Mintel senior analyst Colleen Ryan. “Major companies have jumped on board, promotional messages have changed and the American public is increasingly looking at green products as a normal part of everyday life.”

For today’s restaurant and bar operator, going green is one way to differentiate and cater to a growing customer demand. Some restaurant operators are finding that being eco-savvy also can pay off in other ways.

“Business is very good,” says Alberto Gonzalez, owner of the all-organic restaurant GustOrganics in New York City, which opened in January and is, according to Gonzales, the city’s first certified organic eatery. “We will be at break-even point next month. Almost 70 percent of our business is repeat customers.” While he awaits liquor license approval, he offers free corkage to patrons who bring their own organic wines. In time, he hopes to develop a certified organic bar in the eatery, as well.

Operators like Gonzalez, and a growing number of their customers, share concerns about long-term climate change, adulteration of food and water supplies and the role of pure food in optimum health. These concerns are converging to create a consciousness that is pushing the bar as well as the kitchen to use products that are more in harmony with the environment. But going green at the bar requires creativity and resourcefulness, not only in product knowledge and drink development, but also in purchasing and cost control.

CREATING CONSCIOUSNESS

“People are asking, ‘Where and how is [this] spirit made?’ more frequently,” says Hunter Leigh, bar manager of Kuleto’s Italian Restaurant in San Francisco, which touts an organic cocktail list.

Leigh reports that organic spirits account for 18 to 20 percent of monthly beverage sales at Kuleto’s, which is part of Larkspur Hotels and Restaurants, based in Larkspur, Calif. To put it in perspective, that is slightly higher than the amount of Grey Goose Vodka the bar moves each month.

The bar stocks several organic spirits, including TRU Organic Vodka, Square One Organic Vodka, Juniper Green Organic London Dry Gin, 4 Copas Tequila, Highland Harvest Organic Scotch Whisky, Papagayo Organic Spiced Rum and Loft Organic Cello. The only staple yet unsecured is organic brandy, he says.

However, gathering that portfolio took some hunting. “There was a lot of Google time spent and a lot of calling around,” Leigh says. “You read about a product on a blog, and then you call four or five people to find out how to get it.” He says that’s easing, however, as beverage distributors discover the wide appeal of organics.

During Kuleto’s Organic Happy Hour, weekdays from 3 to 5 p.m., the eight organic cocktails each are reduced in price from \$13 to \$8. Offerings include the Spicy Ginger Margarita, made with Loft Organic Ginger Cello, fresh basil and 4 Copas Organic Blanco Tequila, as well as the Fresh Mint Lemon Drop, made from organic TRU Lemon Vodka and muddled organic mint. On draft, Stone Mill Organic Pale Ale, New Belgium Mothership Wit Organic Wheat Beer and Deschutes Green Lakes Organic Ale drop from \$6 to \$4.

“We’re not trying to push people away from what they normally order, just suggest that they try something organic,” says Leigh.

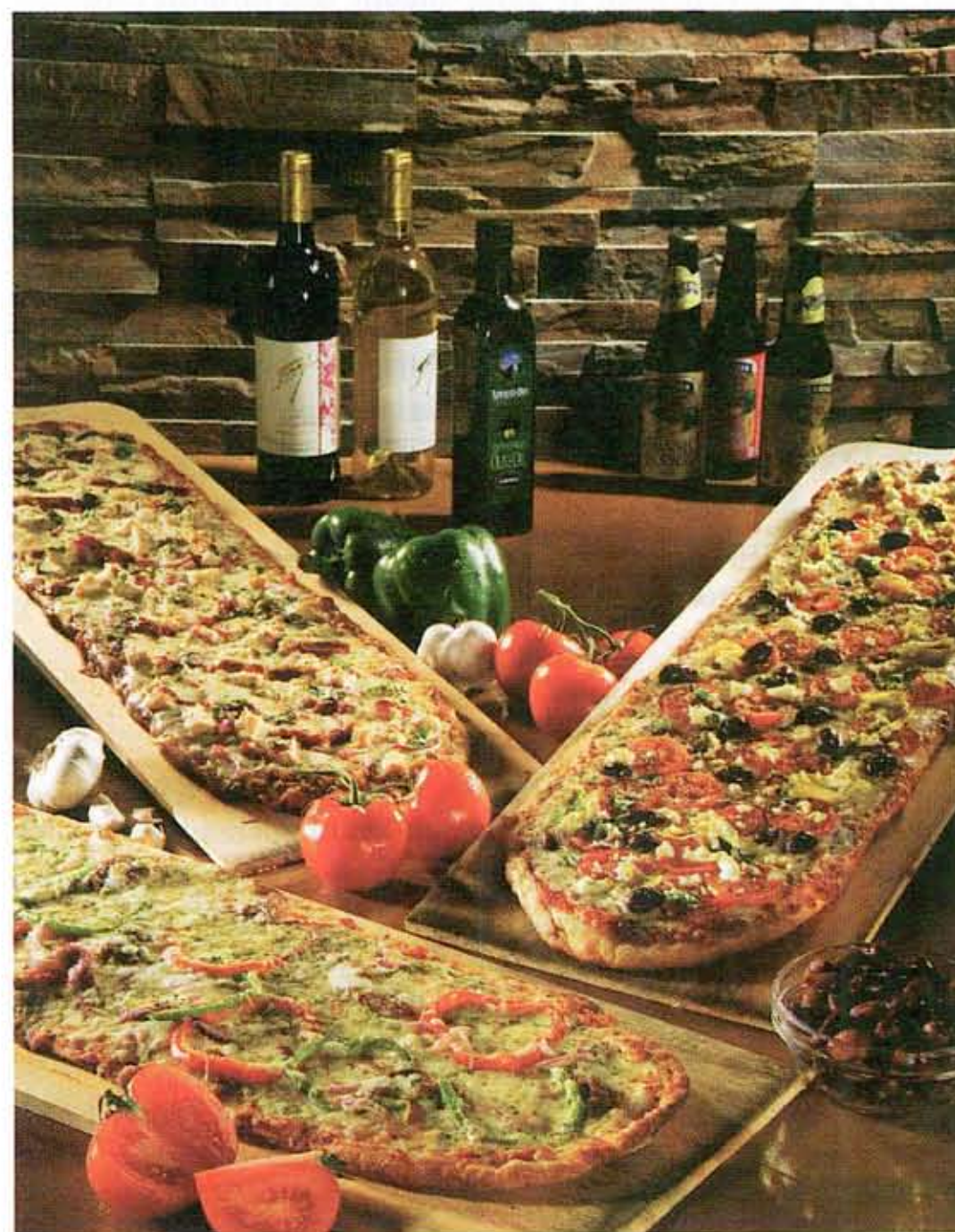
CONTROLLING COSTS

Concern about profitability plague green beverage initiatives, ostensibly because costs are higher and the customer base is narrower. Committed operators are developing strategies to keep costs down while ensuring customers return and profits continue, however.

Operators agree that using local products currently in season, both for spirits and mixers, moderates costs while still boosting quality and lessening a bar’s carbon footprint. At Uncommon Ground, a Chicago restaurant with a bent toward seasonal, regional and organic ingredients, general manager and mixologist Nick Luedde seeks seasonal organic produce from local farmers and changes the drink list frequently to leverage what is plentiful. He and the chef often collaborate on purchases. “If it’s organic blood oranges, for example, we decide on ways to use them that work well in both the bar and kitchen,” he says.

At Roots Restaurant and Cellar in Milwaukee, owned by chef John Raymond and local organic farmer Joe Schmidt, a penchant for pure, seasonal and local fare pervades both the kitchen and the bar. Bar manager Brian Ojer’s popular Naked Bloody Mary, priced at \$7.50, relies on tomato water—the virtually clear and intensely flavorful liquid pressed from ripe organic tomatoes—mixed with fresh organic herbs and Rain Organic Vodka.

Purchasing savvy comes in handy at Mrs. K’s Toll House Restaurant in Silver Spring, Md. General manager and wine director Spiro Gioldasis has plenty of big names on his 640-item wine list, but he also searches for high-quality organic wines at moderate prices for his increasingly eco-savvy clientele. At press time, he was preparing for a four-course, \$60-per-person organic wine dinner in the restaurant’s new Wine Press room, featuring organic wines like Perlage Prosecco, an Italian sparkling wine, and Masciarelli Montepulciano, an award-winning Italian red.



● Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.-based Pizza Fusion offers 21 green wines, including sustainable and “carbon zero certified” bottlings to pair with its organic pizzas.



● High-quality organic wines appeal to environmentally-conscious imbibers at Mrs. K's Toll House Restaurant in Silver Spring, Md.

Gioldasis points out that while such wines wholesale for less than \$10, they sell readily at three-times markup, a testimony to their quality and his clientele's organic awareness.

At Elixir, San Francisco's first certified green bar, proprietor H. Joseph Ehrmann watches fresh ingredient costs carefully. If an organic cocktail becomes too dear, it's off the list, popularity notwithstanding, until costs come down. "In winter, things like organic limes go through the roof," says Ehrmann. "I, like a lot of people, have to answer to investors."

Lacking fresh produce, he takes other flavoring tacks that are more cost-efficient, such as using organic teas in spirit infusions and adding organic jellies and jams to drinks.

One example is Ehrmann's Ruby Chai Appletini, made with two infusions of Numi Organic Ruby Chai Tea, one soaked in Square One Organic Vodka, the other in organic apple cider. The infusions are combined with muddled organic gala apple, organic agave nectar and shaken with ice. Ehrmann says the muddled apple is the secret to the drink's velvety mouthfeel.

In warmer weather, the Ruby Natsumi uses a similar chai-vodka infusion shaken with muddled ripe strawberries and Soho Lychee liqueur, garnished with fresh mint.

"I try to keep cocktail prices at \$9," says Ehrmann. "In downtown San Francisco, I could get \$12. But being a neighborhood bar, I'm trying to be sensitive to my customers while still making a profit."

DO IT YOURSELF

No beverage is more local than tap water. Gonzalez at GustOrganics is one of a growing number of operators who filter, chill and carbonate their own "house waters" to replace bottled waters, since some say bottled water is ecologically suspect. "It makes no sense to ship water from Fiji or France," he says.

Instead, he uses the Italian-made Natura system to sanitize and filter all his cooking and drinking water. It zaps microbes with ultraviolet light and strips chlorine and contaminants with carbon filters, producing pure still water that Gonzalez offers for free. A house-made sparkling water is priced at \$3.50 per bottle to cover the cost of processing. The waters are served at the table in attractive, refillable bottles.

Even the quintessential American convenience meal, pizza, is getting greener. Seattle-based Organic To Go, a certified organic retailer with 26 organic cafés and 120 wholesale locations on the West Coast, delivers its 18-inch stone-hearth-baked organic pizzas along with various flavors of Jones Organics (\$2.95), Honest Tea Organic Iced Tea (\$2.95), Santa Cruz Organic Soda (\$1.79) and Athena Water (\$1.50). Pizza Fusion, a Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.-based chain with five restaurants in Florida and Pennsylvania and a mission to be "fresh, organic and earth-friendly," has a similar line-up of bottled beverages for delivery with organic pizza. Organically made beers and wines are available for in-restaurant dining.

The wines on Pizza Fusion's 21-item list come in several shades of green. A number of them, like Francis Ford Coppola Rosso (\$17 by the bottle, \$7 by the glass), are sustainable wines because the grapes are farmed by eco-friendly methods. Some, like Gypsy Dancer Pinot Noir (\$63), tout organically grown grapes, meaning they were grown without synthetic fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Grove Mill Chardonnay (\$38) is billed as a carbon zero certified wine, meaning that the winery has taken environmental steps to reduce and offset its carbon dioxide emissions. However, none of those wines can be certified USDA Organic because they contain tiny amounts of added sulfites to prevent spoilage, a nearly universal winemaking practice.

On Tuesday nights, complementary samples of organic wines are served to dine-in pizza customers. That's not only a traffic builder, "it's a great way to test out new wines," says Ashley Rathgeber, supply chain developer for Pizza Fusion. "We get the customer who buys organic food regularly and is very excited to see beverages they usually only find in Whole Foods."

For operators willing to tackle the challenges of going green, the pay-offs can include both delighted guests and ripe profit margins.

James Scarpa is a Chicago-based freelance writer who frequently covers food and beverage topics.



● Numerous organic spirits are available at Kuleto's in San Francisco, where an Organic Happy Hour entices guests to sample eco-friendly libations at a discount.