

Sustainability has become a buzzword in the hospitality industry. It means different things to different people. The dictionary defines sustainability as “the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level.” It is also defined as avoiding the depletion of natural resources to maintain an ecological balance. As in “the pursuit of global environmental sustainability”

I attended a seminar many years ago at an ACF national convention on sustainable practices. I remember the presenter stating that being sustainable is great if your business can afford it. That was related to the cost of buying all the ecologically friendly packaging and service ware that was starting to hit the market. Which were, at the time, considerably more expensive than the traditional Styrofoam and paper goods.

I recently attended a major event in Las Vegas. While some of the service ware was clearly made for recycling, there was no effort at the event to separate them or the thousands of plastic water bottles that were consumed.

Like a lot of worthy ideals, I am worried that sustainability may have lost its hipness. I know that corporations such as Aramark and Levy have adopted sustainability practices because they saw the value and marketing appeal with their clients. But how many small properties other than 3 Michelin star restaurants care about sustainability. As the costs of food and labor soar, operators are more concerned about making payroll. So, that statement “about being sustainable only if you can afford it,” becomes more realistic. Many culinarians, especially the students I teach, are not concerned enough about sustainability. Maybe that issue, among others, has been filed under I cannot do anything about it.”

However, the sustainability issue is key to the very survival of many foodservice operations. A basic principle of purchasing is supply and demand. The more of something there is, the less it will cost.

Our industry is reliant on products that are being affected by changes in the global climate. It is important for us to be educated on this subject, as it could have a disastrous effect on many of the products we build our menus around.

Recently, I have seen stories about some of these products experiencing shortages due to climate changes.

It was reported on CBS that there is a severe crayfish shortage in Louisiana. The effects of severe drought are the cause. You might have also heard about a billion crabs disappearing from the ocean around Alaska. Scientists now believe this was caused by the crabs starving to death. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found a significant link between recent marine heat waves in the eastern Bering Sea and the sudden disappearance of the snow crabs that began showing up in surveys in 2021. Could this be another casualty of climate change?

As a result, the largest snow crab fishery in the world was shut down for the first time in a century. This has now continued into a second season. The red and blue king crab season in some parts of Alaska has been cancelled for the sixth year in a row.

Last summer, the state of Georgia suffered a catastrophic Peach crop failure. The dual weather events responsible for destroying the peach harvest — warming winters and spring frosts. Some research attributes this change in pattern to the shrinkage of the Arctic Sea ice.

The summation of this article is that we as chefs and culinarians have an obligation to be mindful of everything that affects our industry. Especially, the raw products we rely on. Sometimes it may seem

overwhelming. But there is an old saying that might apply. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

Here are some links that pertain to this article if you would like further information:

<https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/07/climate/louisiana-crawfish-disaster-us-climate/index.html>

<https://www.gpb.org/news/2023/07/05/dire-situation-what-caused-georgias-catastrophic-peach-crop-failure#:~:text=WHY%20DID%20THE%20PEACH%20CROP,hours%20and%20a%20late%20freeze>

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/us/alaska-crabs-ocean-heat-climate>

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