

How Composting Can Help Restaurants—And The Environment

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Barleymash chef Kevin Templeton at Olivewood Gardens.

By Kevin Templeton

As a chef, cooking is my passion. In pursuing that passion, I've learned that the waste our restaurant industry produces is both a major problem — and a significant opportunity.

Without oxygen, unused food decomposing in landfills will release methane gas, which is harmful to the environment and exacerbates global warming. Its impact is 21 times that of carbon dioxide, ranking it as one of the worst greenhouse gases.

But those scraps from our restaurant kitchens can become an important component of sustainable, local agriculture in San Diego and throughout the country, by helping to make compost.

“Compost is an essential ingredient in sustainable gardening and farming,” says Claire Groebner of [Olivewood Gardens](#), a historic center for environmental learning in National City. “Replete with nutrients necessary for healthy plant growth, compost is an alternative to synthetic fertilizers. Additionally, it improves the porosity and structure of the soil, helps to retain moisture, and attracts beneficial soil life that supports plant health.”

Working with Olivewood Gardens, my restaurant [barleymash](#) is part of a movement in San Diego. We’ve created a way to collect food scraps, minimize waste and give back to the environment. Walking through the back of barleymash’s kitchen, buckets for scraps are visible throughout. At the end of each week, unused food is collected and packaged for delivery to the gardens.

We move almost 600 pounds a week. Anything we aren’t able to reuse in our menu, we compost. For instance, the main dish might be a beautiful pork roast but we aren’t able to use the ends. We’ll top our Iron Fries with the best pieces of pork and toss what is unusable into our compost bins. We believe everything you take should be given back tenfold.

The team at barleymash purchases sustainable agricultural products and practices waste prevention. All of the seafood served at the establishment is fished properly to protect the ocean. The meat and chicken are ethically sourced from natural and cruelty-free producers.

We might not be able to use all of the bones or parts of fish, but we work with our seafood company to freeze the would-be-waste and turn it into a nutrient-rich cat food. How cool is that?

In addition to dropping off the composted scraps, my team and I lead classes for children from time-to-time regarding waste management, recycling and cooking.

“At Olivewood Gardens, we teach children and adults about the importance of recycling and reusing our resources, and we love when Chef Kevin is leading the discussion,” says Groebner. “Composting allows us to take waste and turn it into a usable, sustainable product. Food scraps become compost, which grows more food. It is the ultimate closed loop system.”

Composting is an easy way to grow beautiful produce without using a ton of fertilizer — and it is completely natural. There are other chefs out there who are as passionate as I am — if not more so. One of the pioneers in my book is my good friend and executive chef of [Urban Solace](#) Matt Gordon. He lives, eats and breaths for this.

I'm hoping that San Diego will soon make it mandatory for restaurants to compost food scraps.

One of my favorite days of the week is going out and visiting the farm to drop off our scraps. Walking around, breathing in the clean air and casting my eyes over the beautiful vegetation — appreciating where your food comes from is a big part of being a chef.

Kevin Templeton is executive chef of [barleymash](#) restaurant in downtown San Diego's Gaslamp District.