

Blazing a trail on composting

Anne Geske

Stop, sort and throw — that's what some Minneapolis coffee shop customers are learning to do as they bus their breakfast leftovers: bottles and cans in one bin, food scraps and food-soiled paper in another. These days, diners and restaurants alike are chomping at the bit to do their part for the environment.

"It's not that hard to do," says Danny

Schwartzman, owner of Common Roots Café, 2558 Lyndale Ave. S., which began composting when it opened last July. "We started from day one. For us, it was just one of the operating premises we started working under."

Schwartzman says his establishment either recycles or composts more than 95 percent of their trash — 26,000 pounds and counting. "We throw out a very small amount of trash — hopefully that will become more standard. Once you start doing it, it really doesn't make any sense to be throwing food scraps into the trash."

When it comes to small changes that pack a big punch for the environment, composting is a no-brainer. Food waste is difficult and costly to burn and creates greenhouse gases when dumped into a landfill but, when composted, is a valuable resource that makes excellent fill for gardens, roadsides and construction projects. Almost one-third of business-created waste in Hennepin County comes from food and food-soiled paper, called organic waste — "organic" in this case meaning biodegradable.

Although the benefits of composting food waste are undeniable, it can be tricky to transition from existing products and disposal systems. Cities like St. Paul, Wayzata and Minnetonka have already made substantial progress in composting of residential, school and business food waste. San Francisco runs the country's largest residential and commercial composting program, with more than 2,000 restaurants participating. By comparison, Minneapolis is just getting started, with a residential pilot program in the works for Linden Hills, as well as a growing handful of schools and restaurants getting on board.

Making the switch

When Dan Swenson-Klatt bought Butter Bakery Café, 3544 Grand Ave. S., over two years ago, some of the options available today weren't yet in place, but he started where he could with behind-the-counter kitchen scraps — even pulling food out of the customer-side garbage. "I came in knowing that this place had a long history of [being] organic, natural," says Swenson-Klatt. "That's what I wanted to do on the food side, but how does that translate into the other side of things? I saw there was a pretty big imbalance that way."

To start, one of his employees volunteered to transfer Butter's food scraps from a bucket in back of the shop to the Youth Farm Market's compost in the Kingfield neighborhood. This system worked well enough at first, but there was still a lot of trash neither recyclable nor compostable. Then last fall, when

Swenson-Klatt heard about a state grant available at that time to help with the costs of switching to all-biodegradable disposable products, he jumped on it. It's much simpler to compost when customers can throw their food and paper products in the same receptacle. The customer-facing side of composting is now working well—it just takes a bit of educating customers, getting good signage in place, and basically getting people to notice.

Taking it a step further, Swenson-Klatt continues to look for ways to eliminate anything that is neither recyclable nor compostable: it's down to the lids for hot to-go cups, potato chip bags, and the foil wrappers on pats of butter. "I push my vendors a little at times to say I'd like something that I can compost," says Swenson-Klatt. "So they're looking for it, too." He predicts that once demand increases for biodegradable to-go containers, vendors will eventually switch to carrying only compostables.

The transition with Butter's waste hauler is another story. Most haulers in the area still don't work with food waste, and Swenson-Klatt found that if he wanted to get started right away, he would be stuck having two different waste haulers because he couldn't get out of his existing contract. Although he's losing a little money in the transition, that will change once he can drop the first hauler. For food waste disposal, Butter signed on with Randy's Sanitation, a local family-owned waste management company.

There's been a startup curve for Randy's, as well. "We've taken a hit every month for the first year because of poor efficiency to get this done," says Dave Hepfl, senior sales account rep with Randy's. "But we're committed to doing what's right for Hennepin County and the state of Minnesota. We know first and foremost it's the right thing to do. And it's the way of the future. Whenever you do anything to step out there's always a time where losses have to be absorbed. As we pick up more accounts, our efficiencies improve, and we get closer and closer to breaking even."

Randy's provides food waste services to other businesses in the Southwest area, including the Corner Table restaurant, 4257 Nicollet Ave. S., and Clancy's Meats, 4307 Upton Ave. S. Eureka Recycling, a nonprofit that manages St. Paul's recycling and composting program, handles food waste for Common Roots, Bryant-Lake Bowl, 810 W. Lake St., and Barbette, 1600 W. Lake St.

While very few waste companies are offering organics collection service at this point, Paul Kroening at Hennepin County Environmental Services says that will change in the next couple of years, as customers demand the service and as waste haulers have enough customers to make it worthwhile. "It's the chicken and the egg," says Kroening. What comes first, customer demand or the hauler's offering the service? It's got to be a little of both."

As for Swenson-Klatt, the search continues for a biodegradable wrapper for his signature item, butter.

Contributing writer Anne Geske lives in the Lyndale neighborhood.