

Serve It Safe: A Reuse Case Story

A partnership with Upstream, Dishcraft and Tootsie's at the Stanford Barn

Highlights

- **Serve It Safe pilot ran for 1 month** (April 20 - May 17, 2021)
- **1,600 non-reusable containers** and **171 pounds of waste eliminated**
- **Overwhelmingly positive response** from diners
- **Seamless transition** into existing operations
- **Serve It Safe will continue** at Tootsie's beyond the pilot and will expand to offer reusable flatware

Introduction

In collaboration with Upstream, an environmental nonprofit sparking solutions to plastic pollution, Dishcraft successfully launched a reusable foodware pilot dubbed [Serve It Safe](#) to reduce the increasing volume of waste produced by take-out foodware during Covid.

It's simple for diners to participate in *Serve It Safe* – they do not need to have a membership, install an app, pay a deposit, or scan any codes. After they place an order at the restaurant, diners receive their meal in Dishcraft's reusable container. When finished, diners just drop off their empty, unwashed container in one of the Dishcraft collection bins located at the restaurant. Dishcraft picks up containers for cleaning, sanitization and delivery back to the restaurant. For restaurants, the cost is often similar to (or even less than) what they pay for disposable containers and includes the dishwashing service.

Tootsie's at the Stanford Barn, a local favorite in Palo Alto, CA, was the first restaurant to pilot *Serve It Safe*.



Environmental Impacts

From 4/20/21 - 5/17/21:

Reusable Containers used: 1,600

- Annual projection = 19,200 non-reusable containers eliminated

Waste Reduced in one month: 197 pounds

- Annual projection = 2,362 pounds

Carbon savings: .825 metric tons (equal to greenhouse gas emissions from 2,073 miles driven by an average passenger vehicle)

- Annual projection = 9.9 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (equal to greenhouse gas emissions from 24,881 miles driven by an average passenger vehicle)

Serve It Safe pilot goals

Prior to Covid-19, Dishcraft provided delivery and washing services using ceramic dishware primarily to corporate campuses and hotels. They had never worked in the restaurant space and had only recently added reusable take-out containers to their operation. The goal of the *Serve It Safe* pilot was to learn as much as possible about consumer behavior and reusable containers by partnering with restaurants and their diners.

The container selected was tested for functionality and durability. Varying marketing strategies were developed and deployed for testing, including the messaging on the containers, to see what resonated with diners and therefore increased or decreased the rate of container return. The team was curious to learn how diners would react to *Serve It Safe*, what the rate of container loss would be, and to see if it is possible to perform at scale. The pilot was implemented to identify any opportunities and challenges early on.

Serve It Safe Pilot Results

The pilot ran at Tootsie's for four weeks, from April 20 - May 17, 2021. An average of 400 containers were used per week, totalling 1,600 reusable containers in operation during the pilot (and 1,600 non-reusable fiber clamshells avoided from the waste stream). Dishcraft delivered clean, sanitized containers and picked up used containers twice each week.

The average product loss for the month was 26%, which was consistent with initial, month one trials at other customer sites. (That loss rate typically drops to <5% after 3 months of regular service.) Out of the four messages on the container labels, the "I am reusable, please don't trash me" label produced the highest return rate over the other messages: "Help our community be clean and green," "Every container returned helps feed a healthcare professional," and the least successful message, "One single-use container = 300 reusable containers."

I AM REUSABLE
Return to Tootsie's



Please don't trash me



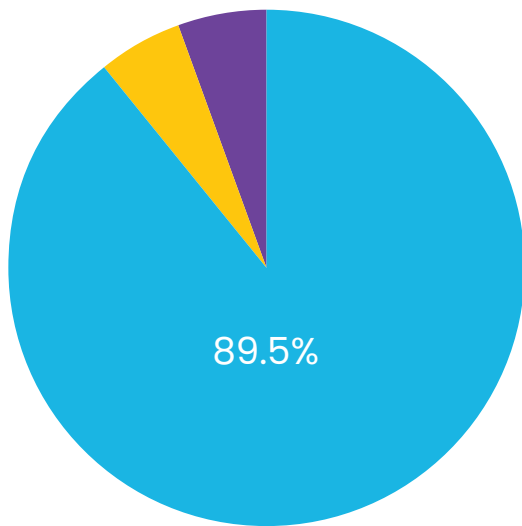
Safe, Sanitary, Sustainable

 dishcraft.com

Upstream Solution Brief

In addition to tracking the environmental impacts, Upstream also used a customer feedback survey to gain valuable insights from diners about how they perceived the new reusable program. Out of the 38 survey respondents, 56% of diners reported that sustainability is extremely important to them, while 42% said it is very important. Additionally, 30% of diners reported that they think about food packaging waste all the time, 47% think about this waste frequently, 19% reported sometimes, and 4% reported rarely. When asked if they would consider paying more for products or services that are environmentally friendly, an overwhelming 90% of respondents said yes. Finally, 87% of respondents would like to see Tootsie's continue offering the reusable container service for dine-in and take-out.

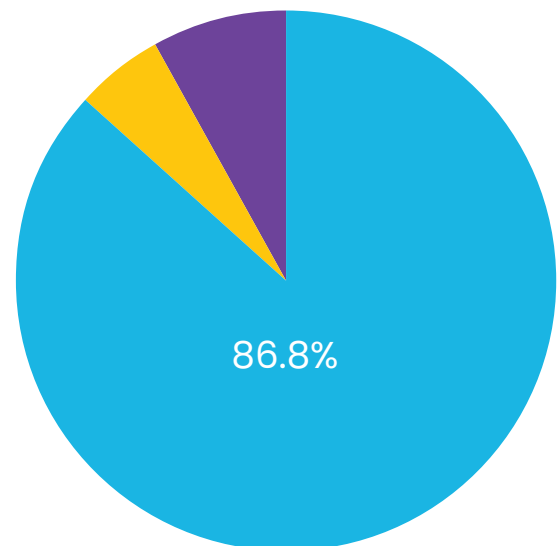
The pilot was deemed a success based on employee and customer feedback, and Tootsie's has executed a contract to continue services beyond the pilot scope.



Would you consider paying more for products or services that are environmentally friendly?



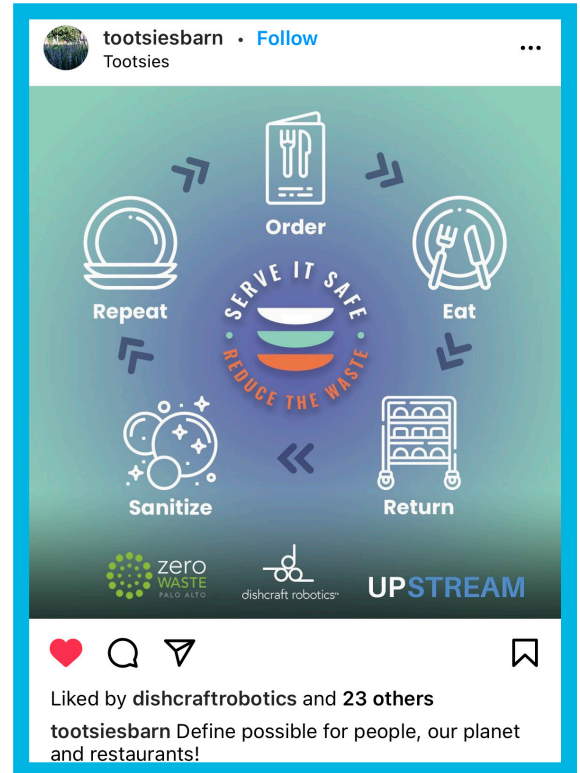
Do you want Tootsie's to continue offering a reusable container service for dine-in and take-out?



Marketing Strategies

Upstream developed and launched a marketing plan to promote the pilot to Tootsie’s customers and the Palo Alto community. Rocco Scordella, the owner of Tootsie’s, was supplied with a **Restaurant Marketing Toolkit** to educate his customers. This included signage, training for employees with talking points, website landing page copy, customer receipt copy, email templates, and copy and graphics for social media handles.

Additionally, Upstream created a **Community Social Media Toolkit** that included a [landing page](#) on Upstream’s website with a “Frequently Asked Questions” section, press release, sample email template, and social media copy and imagery. This kit was strategically shared with the City of Palo Alto’s zero-waste team, dozens of Palo Alto zero-waste activists, and local universities and the media to spread the word about the pilot.



Media Attention



WasteDive:
[Roundup: Stimulus funding for city waste initiatives, DC and NY inch toward zero waste goals](#)



The Spoon:
[Dishcraft Launches Serve it Safe Reusable Takeout Containers as a Service](#)

Turning challenges into opportunities

One month is not enough time for a new operation to stick and to produce robust statistics on the success of that operation – especially when asking consumers to participate in a novel system. But Upstream learned that most diners want to do the right thing when it comes to the environment.

- 1. Contamination of waste streams:** Diners want to do the right thing but often find themselves lost about how to sort their leftover waste and food scraps after a meal. This led to contamination and some lost containers, most likely to the recycle bin. Additionally, food and other plastic single-use foodware that should have gone into the organics or recycling bin ended up in the reuse collection bin.
- 2. Staff participation:** Tootsie’s staff did a great job transitioning efficiently from disposable single-use clamshells to the reusable containers and making the food look presentable. But the staff can be more proactive in explaining the program to diners or sharing simple prompts to remind customers to return containers from dine-in and take-out orders, as they are the last ‘touchpoint’ in the diner’s experience. Staff communication is key to starting the program on solid footing and maintaining it. This would also help reduce product loss.

- 3. Signage/communications:** Sign placement is important. It needs to be at eye level behind the reuse collection bin with a very clear message (mainly pictures). The reuse bin color is also important to avoid confusion. Reuse bins should not be blue – as is the current Dishcraft reuse bin – since all recycling bins in California are also blue.
- 4. Product loss:** The 26% average product loss rate during the four weeks of the pilot is expected to improve over time but will require additional action to reach loss goals. Dishcraft’s hotel and corporate campus services maintain a steady 99% return rate and 1% product loss rate. Seeing that the restaurant is not a closed system like a campus, there are more hurdles and challenges to get diners to return containers.

It was unclear to diners what to do with the containers if they had a take-out order or wanted to take leftovers home. When informed that they could take the containers and return them to the collection bins within one week, they all expressed that this was doable since they work within walking distance and frequent Tootsie’s.

“One of the key learnings from the *Serve It Safe* pilot was that there was not just acceptance from diners, but a genuinely positive response to participating in an innovative reuse program that decreases waste.”

-Linda Pouliot, CEO, Dishcraft Robotics



Serve It Safe next steps

Tootsie’s will continue the reusable container service beyond the pilot. Dishcraft will work with Tootsie’s on modified tools to enhance the program’s success. They will deliver better messaging and clearer images on signage to simplify the experience for the diners. They also plan to expand with more types of containers and add tracking to the containers and lids. The service will still be free to diners, but Dishcraft will test how to best offer a rewards program to incentivize container return, rather than impose penalties like charging for unreturned containers.

Upstream Solution Brief

Reusable flatware: Tootsie's also plans to expand the Dishcraft service to include reusable flatware, which will eliminate hundreds of pre-packaged sets (plastic fork, knife, and spoon with napkins, and salt and pepper packets) each week. This will happen later in the summer of 2021 when Dishcraft automates the process of wrapping and sealing flatware sets in napkins.

Catering: As the Tootsie's catering business picks up (which was 40% of the restaurant's business pre-Covid), there will be an opportunity to introduce reusable containers in catering, as well. The return rate for catering will likely be high because the food is delivered to one space or meeting room, and a Tootsie's employee will return after the event to pick up all the reusable containers. Tootsie's will add a small charge to the invoice to cover the return pick-up.

Redesigning collection bins: Dishcraft is in the process of redesigning their bins to allow for separating and stacking lids and containers. One of the major issues discovered was that the closed containers take up a large volume and fill the collection bins quickly, especially during a busy lunch rush. The new design will help alleviate the time staff spend sorting through and stacking containers and lids to create more space in the bin. Dishcraft is also moving away from the blue reuse bin and is designing a slim jim for the collection of reusable utensils.

Customized containers: On the horizon, Dishcraft will launch new custom containers, which owner Rocco Scordella is interested in bringing to Tootsie's as soon as they are available at the end of 2021. These containers are high quality and durable – they will last 1,000 washes in comparison to the current container that lasts for 300 washes – and work perfectly with the robotic washing system, so Dishcraft can wash more, faster.



“Customers absolutely loved it. It was a great success. They understood why we were making the change and they were all on board. We have to be involved in making a change for the future – for our kids and our grandkids. It’s a no brainer.”

–Rocco Scordella, Owner, Tootsie's



About Dishcraft

Founded in 2015, Dishcraft is the only reusable foodware delivery solution that combines robotic automation, process innovation, and service to solve the environmental and labor challenges facing the foodservice industry. Similar to a linen service, Dishcraft delivers and picks up a full range of reusable foodware items and washes them using advanced, patented technology that scrubs and inspects dishes multiple times.