

Calistoga restaurants step up to the plate

By Chris Benz

Café Saraforia in Calistoga is more than a local landmark with a mouthwatering menu. It's also a star example of how the city's food purveyors have reduced waste in response to the Foodware Waste Reduction ordinance that went into effect in March 2024.

The ordinance requires the use of reusable or compostable foodware for in-house dining, and compostable or recyclable foodware for take-out. The Calistoga Green Committee, which advises the city on environmental policies, developed the ordinance in response to the city's goal of creating an environmentally sustainable community and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Upper Valley Disposal & Recycling Services (UVD&R), the solid waste operator for Calistoga, explains the importance of composting food waste on its website:

"The average upvalley resident generates 4.5 pounds of trash per day ... approximately one-third of which is compostable organic material. When organic materials end up in landfills, they generate methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. UVD&R's compost facility instead turns this valuable material into organic compost. When compost is used in landscape and agriculture, it builds soil nutrients, conserves water, and reduces the need for fertilizers."

Sean Birge, a native Calistogan and UC Davis student, has served on the Green Committee since January 2024, and has hosted public workshops on the foodware ordinance. "The ordinance has been incredibly effective," Birge said. "It's great to see local businesses adapt and become environmentally responsible."

Café Saraforia manager, Roger Dierkhising, agreed. "We've always tried to be as green as possible. There's way too much plastic on the planet," he said. "But we had to get creative to find solutions for creamer, jelly, and catsup packages. We now use refillable containers for those items and have actually cut costs by buying in bulk and having our customers use just what they need."

Gayle Keller, co-owner with husband Alex Dierkhising (Roger Dierkhising's brother) of the nearby Hydro Grill, said the main challenge was finding a consistent supply of compostable take-out foodware.

"During and after the pandemic, more customers want to order restaurant meals to go," she said. "That requires the correct size of compostable foodware. It's been frustrating because we've seen supply chain interruptions, and some products labeled compostable aren't considered compostable by our local operator."

El Taco Feliz food truck owner, Edgar Carillo, was among the first to switch to compostable clamshells for the tacos and other Mexican dishes he prepares. "I feel good about it," he said. "Each of us has to do our part to take care of the earth."

The Cal Mart grocery store is possibly the city's largest food provider and had to make major changes. Longtime Compliance and Training Officer, Sue Beaman, worked with Green Committee members. According to Beaman, store owner Bill Shaw supported every aspect of the ordinance.

"It took about six months to become fully compliant," she said. "We don't use Styrofoam for the meat we package in-store. We use bamboo utensils for to-go, and they have to be requested. We trained our employees to compost all food and organic waste from the kitchen, deli, and employee break room. Composting and waste reduction have become a part of my life, and that's the message I share through our employee training."

The Calistoga ordinance also requires a \$0.25 charge per paper bag to encourage shoppers to bring their own bags. The bag charge collected at Cal Mart is returned to the community through donations to local non-profit organizations.

A Reusable Foodware and Waste Reduction ordinance similar to Calistoga's has been approved by the Napa County Climate Action Committee for other Napa County jurisdictions to adopt. It has been adopted by the Napa County Board of Supervisors for the unincorporated county.

Keller has some words of advice for other restaurants preparing for the ordinance: "We are stewards of the earth. Restaurants need to take a deep breath and step up to the plate."

Actions you can take:

1. Visit Calistoga's restaurants and thank them.
2. Check out the draft Napa County Regional Climate Action and Adaptation Plan at <https://climateactionnapa.konveio.com/>

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens' group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area. Info, napa.350bayarea.org

Photo credit: Chris Benz

Photo caption: Sean Birge (left) and Manager Roger Dierkehising with Café Sarafornia's reusable containers for cream, jelly, and catsup.



Photo credit: Chris Benz

Photo caption: Owner Edgar Carillo and Green Committee member Sean Birge at El Taco Feliz with compostable clamshells.



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