

Engaging the Senses: A Napa Restaurateur's Reflections on Sustainability

By T. Ryan Harris

I was asked to write this guest column about sustainability at Contimo, the restaurant I co-own in downtown Napa, after a guest noticed our team encouraging people to eat from real plates instead of using disposable packaging.

I appreciated that they noticed and wanted to know why.

The question forced me to revisit my own convictions. Like others, I try to minimize my environmental footprint where I can. It also gave me the opportunity to celebrate our progress as a restaurant, while recognizing there is still plenty to do.

We compost. We run a low-waste kitchen where nearly every scrap has a purpose. We source from local organic farms and use pasture-raised pork in our recipes. Those are worthwhile choices, but over time I've come to believe they are just part of the story.

Climate change won't be solved by better packaging alone. It won't be solved by one restaurant composting more diligently than another. It will be shaped by millions of ordinary decisions made every day by people like you and me. Sustainability isn't simply the responsibility of businesses; it's the result of the defaults we collectively choose.

For instance, consider how we eat.

My sister once asked what my favorite sound was. I think she expected me to say wind through the trees or waves crashing on the shore.

Instead, I told her it was the unified murmur of a busy restaurant. Conversations blending together. Chairs sliding across the floor. Glasses clinking. Forks meeting ceramic plates. The tear of fresh bread. Together they bring me an unexpected sense of calm.

It's the sound of people choosing to be together.

Dining out has always been more than eating. It's one of the few experiences that engages every sense at once. The room catches your eye before the food arrives. The aroma rising from a bowl of soup tells part of the story before the first bite. The weight of real silverware, the feel of a linen napkin, the rim of a well-made glass – details that quietly shape an organoleptic experience.

When the pandemic arrived, many of those moments disappeared. Restaurants adapted as they could. Disposable packaging became essential, helping countless small businesses survive. We all became accustomed to eating from paper boxes with plastic forks, often six feet apart or behind computer-screened Zoom meetings.

The necessity was temporary. The habits remained.

Today, compostable packaging is everywhere. While that's an improvement over traditional single-use plastics, it isn't impact-free. Every disposable container still requires resources to manufacture, transport, and process before serving its purpose for just a few minutes. The most sustainable plate

isn't the compostable one. It's the ceramic plate that's washed and used thousands of times. The most sustainable fork isn't made from bamboo. It's the stainless-steel fork that's been in service for decades.

There is a real impulse to grab lunch and keep moving. Most of us are juggling work, errands, kids, emails, and everything else the day throws our way. Convenience has become our default. Every now and then, though, the better choice is to stop.

Sit down. Let someone else cook for you. Eat from a real plate with a real fork. Give yourself permission to have lunch instead of simply consuming calories between meetings.

That small decision does more than reduce waste. It supports local restaurants. It strengthens community. It fills dining rooms with conversation instead of silence. It reminds us that slowing down isn't always an indulgence; sometimes it's required.

Climate change can feel impossibly large. Most of us won't invent cleaner energy or rewrite environmental policy. But we all make dozens of ordinary decisions each day. Staying for lunch instead of taking it to go may seem insignificant. Yet multiplied across a community, small defaults become culture, and culture has a remarkable way of changing the world.

The next time you have the choice, stay a little longer. Clink a glass with a friend. Listen to the room around you. Enjoy the meal for everything it has to offer.

Sometimes the most meaningful acts of sustainability aren't the grand gestures. They're simply choosing, together, to waste a little less and experience a little more.

T. Ryan Harris is co-owner of Contimo Provisions, a casual restaurant serving customers in downtown Napa since 2015.

Photo credit: Emma Kruch @emmakcreative

Photo caption: Contimo Provisions owners Kevin Folan, left, and Ryan Harris, right.

