

Where Eco-Friendly Fare is Always on the Menu

Thought California took the prize for eco eateries? Not true. New York rules in this category, with over 120 Certified Green Restaurants, the most of any state in the U.S.

The Green Restaurant Association (GRA), founded in 1990 to create an environmentally sustainable restaurant industry, is not just a masthead for selected dining establishments. It has a rigorous certification point system to qualify. Guidelines require restaurants to meet criteria in seven environmental categories – water efficiency; waste reduction and recycling; sustainable furnishings and building materials; sustainable food; energy, disposables; and chemical and pollution reduction.

“Food is the main ingredient for a restaurant, but it’s important to look beyond the menu when determining if a restaurant is ‘green’ or not,” says Colleen Oteri, GRA spokesperson. “Restaurants consume a lot of resources from cleaning ingredients, water, to-go packaging, recycling, food sourcing, building materials and more. The GRA’s program helps restaurants make real environmental changes that improve their overall impact.”

Candle Cafe, New York’s first Certified Green Restaurant, received its certification nine years ago. The vegan establishment, who procures produce from local farmers and composts their food waste, stays true to its cause with refurbished furniture, and walls covered in eco-friendly fabric. Its delivery bike crew wears organic t-shirts and safety vests made from recycled plastic.

Mark Doskow, director of business development for Candle Cafe and the recently certified Candle 79, feels that serving vegan food (which contains no animal products) is the greenest thing one can do.

“It is the most eco-friendly diet,” he explains. “Factory farming, and this includes dairy farming, is the biggest contributor of greenhouse gases and is extremely wasteful in its conversion of energy into calories. It takes at least 16 times as much energy to create one calorie of meat as it does one calorie of vegetable matter.”

Sustainability is an evolving process, he concedes. “We even cut out using wooden chopsticks because they are wasteful

and we are constantly adding new things like the green version of a printed receipt.”

But you don’t have to go vegan to be certified green. Another Green Certified Restaurant is the American Museum of Natural History’s Food Court, managed by Restaurant Associates (RA). The five eateries cover the spectrum from organic to regular snack food. You can pick up everything from hamburgers and tofu stew to free-range eggs and sustainable sea food. Local produce is culled from a radius of 150-300 miles (depending on the season) and the restaurant just employed an in-house baker.

Yet, the museum was well ahead of acknowledging the green effect – they have had a sustainability committee for over 10 years.

“Throughout the museum, we have installed energy efficient lighting, used non-toxic/low VOC paints, refurbished furniture with sustainable materials, and even updated old water fountains,” says Youn-Jung Lee, senior director, event and conference services at the Museum.

The food service area has filtered water fountains, to-go containers made from sugarcane and corn, and pumps instead of individual packets of condiments.

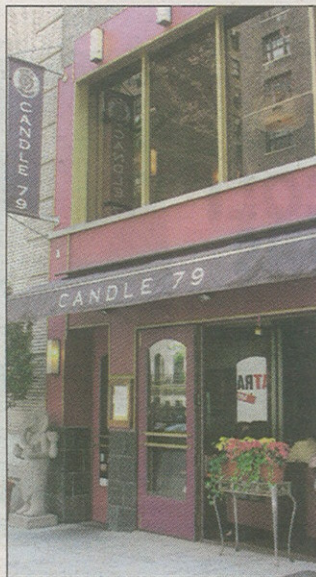
Another part of their process is educating their audience. “There’s always something one can do to help the environment,” says Michael O’Brien, general manager of Restaurant Associates at the Museum of Natural History. “There’s a captive audience that we can inform about what it is to be sustainable and help them on their way to be a little greener. By the time people finish here they may be educated not only about the dinosaurs, but also food and healthy choices.”

Healthy choices even extend to pizza. Otto Pizzeria, one of Mario Batali’s six Certified Green Restaurants in New York, is for vegans, vegetarians and meat eaters. Like other Certified Green Restaurants, there is no bottled water on site, napkins and bath tissue are 100% recycled, cleaning products are eco-friendly and pizza boxes are made from recycled cardboard. In addition, the menu is printed on chlorine free paper. And of course, all deliveries are made on foot or by bicycle.

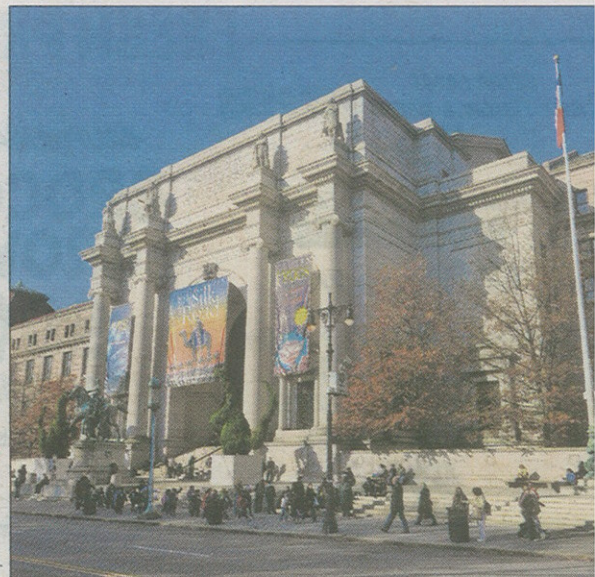
– Holly Reich



Mario Batali (top) has six “green” restaurants in the city.



Candle 79 (left), a vegan restaurant, has been certified green for nine years. The Food Court at the American Museum of Natural History (right) features free range eggs, local produce and sustainable seafood.



About Big Town **Going Green**

Big Town Going Green is a series of articles showcasing local companies and initiatives that support the environment through innovative “green” programs or services.