

Eatery claims hard to verify It's 'eater beware' for restaurant sustainability claims

By Anne Marie DiStefano
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Something new is appearing more and more often on Portland restaurant menus. It's not a dish, but a promise.

Many restaurants are telling customers they cook with sustainable ingredients – if they can.

“Whenever possible,” reads the menu at Junior’s Cafe on 1742 S.E. 12th Ave., “we choose to purchase locally farmed and organic produce as well as locally made bacon, sausage and tofu.”

Audra Carmine, owner of the neighborhood breakfast spot near Hawthorne Boulevard, has given a lot of thought to that statement, and puts in a lot of time fulfilling its promise. Carmine stocks locally made Secret Aardvark hot sauce, hand-picks fruit from nearby New Seasons Market and buys Stiebrs Farm eggs from Sheridan Fruit Co. rather than a big distributor.

She’s carefully gone over the complicated give-and-take between ideals and finances, flavors and logistics, that are distilled in the phrase “whenever possible.” Her eggs come from cage-free, hormone-free, antibiotic-free, vegetable-fed hens. They’re not organic – that would cost about 75 cents a dozen more, she says. On the other hand, she will never serve factory eggs, although they cost less than half as much, because she says their quality is noticeably inferior.

Carmine comes across as thoughtful and sincere, which is fortunate, because her word and her judgment are all customers have to bank on. Although there’s a federal standard for what can be called organic, there is no legal definition of “local” or “sustainable,” and certainly not for a phrase like “whenever possible.”

“In concept, it is conceivable to create standards for anything,” says Scott Exo, executive director of Food Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit that provides third-party certification for sustainable agricultural and food-handling practices.

With a concept as broad as sustainability, that’s not easy.

“The challenge with the S-word, as I sometimes like to refer to it, is that it leaves a lot to the imagination,” Exo says. “It is challenging in the absence of any clear definition or somebody verifying these kinds of claims,” he says. “When I go into a restaurant, I’m looking for those authentic demonstrations that put some meat on those one-word bones.”

Food Alliance certifies farms, ranches, food processors and food distributors, but not restaurants.

“We’ve been asked about it,” Exo says. “We’re not approaching that any time soon.”

For now, gauging a restaurant’s sustainability practices is a personal judgment call. What it boils down to, Exo says, is transparency.

Some restaurants try to do that by listing the names or origins of the food they serve, whether it’s Carlton Farms pork or Hood River pears.

“There are limits to it because you don’t want to read a tome when you read the menu,” Exo says, “but the more detail and the more transparency about what’s really behind that, the better served consumers are.”

Pearl District seafood restaurant Bay 13, on 701 N.W. 13th Ave., is “committed to serving sustainable seafood,” according to the mission statement on its website. The shrimp is from the Gulf Coast and the crab is Alaskan king crab, says Joe Moreau, a partner in the restaurant, which is part of the California-based Moana Hotel & Restaurant Group.

Both the shrimp and the crab are rated “green” on the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program, the most widely-used standard for seafood sustainability in the United States.

Moreau makes the same claim for the Scottish salmon served at Bay 13. But it’s farmed salmon – generally considered unacceptable by environmental advocates. Moreau says the salmon is raised in a process called “eco-farming.” He says the choice to use this salmon, rather than wild Pacific salmon, is based on consistent availability, not price.

Seafood Watch spokeswoman Alison Barratt says no farmed salmon of any kind has been given its seal of approval. “Buyer beware,” she says.

The Marine Stewardship Council, an international seafood certifier, also doesn’t recognize eco-farmed salmon.

During a follow-up interview, Moreau stands by the credentials of his Scottish salmon, but adds that Bay 13 is no longer serving it.

A new chef, Mark Lusardi, took over the kitchen on Feb. 15 and decided to remove salmon from the menu until wild Pacific salmon becomes available.

“It’s tricky, and there’s no question that sometimes it’s a toss-up as to how do you define sustainability, and what qualifies and what doesn’t,” Lusardi says. “It’s a moving target.”

EaT: An Oyster Bar, on 3808 N. Williams Ave. in North Portland, specializes in southern food, creating a new set of logistical difficulties.

The fine print on the menu reads: “We use as many local producers and farmers as possible . . . We’re dedicated to providing the finest ingredients with a sustainable philosophy.”

Owners Ethan Powell and Tobias Hogan found all the produce they needed locally, except for okra. That comes from Mexico in the winter and the Southern United States in the summer.

EaT serves Gulf Coast shrimp. Ironically, Powell says, many Louisiana restaurants import their shrimp from Thailand.

“I definitely could spend less money and get shrimp from Thailand,” Powell says.

He’s hoping customers won’t mind paying more for products that are better for them, and for the environment.

“I absolutely love the idea of sustainability,” he says. “It’s definitely more in people’s minds here than it is anywhere else in the country.”

As far as accountability goes, Powell would rather just deal with people face to face. “I will tell my servers, if any of those questions come up, let me know. I am more than happy to tell the story.”

At Junior’s as well, it really comes down to an issue of trust.

“There are lots of choices out there for breakfast and people come here for a reason,” Carmine says. “I think if they found out that we were using bad eggs, that they would be sad, and feel angry and be disappointed in us. It’s personal with us.”

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