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restaurant heavyweights

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By Tara Mastrelli

Trend Alert!

Sustainable fast casual

Sustainability is popping up in the most unlikely of places: fast casual restaurants. From ingredients to packaging and design, burger joints, taco trucks, and pizza parlors alike are being reinvented with a conscience in cities like New York, London, and Vancouver.

Otarian, a new quick service restaurant chain and retail brand debuting in New York and London, markets itself as a low-carbon restaurant. With an all-vegetarian menu that measures the carbon

bringing healthy pizza to the masses with his new concept, Rev'd Up Pi. "Being healthful for the body, the mind, and the environment go hand in hand. We wanted to show the world how easy it is to be greener and leaner without much sacrifice, and how cool and modern a green build-out could be," he says.

With the help of designer David Graziano from Sky Studio Designs and Robert Nichols of Berkshire Consulting, Melamedov



footprint of each menu item, a no-airfreight policy, cooking oil that is recycled into bio fuels, and 98 percent of both the front of the house and kitchen waste being recycled, composted, or re-used, it seems founder Radhika Oswal means it.

The design is built to match, with sustainable materials used throughout: floor tiles made from recycled glass, tabletops made from recycled plastic, ceiling décor made from recycled aluminum, and chairs made from sustainably sourced bamboo. And the restaurant's decorative recycled newspaper baskets are made by a group of rural women in India, with proceeds from the sales going directly to them. "In the future, we would like to continue to support developing communities, and also source local materials in the U.S. wherever possible," says Oswal.

Alex Melamedov wants to create a pizza revolution in New York,

Clockwise from top left: A rendering of Rev'd Up Pi; fun graphics cover the wall in Otarian; and YEAH! BURGER's industrial interiors.

created a "new age, futuristic establishment." The new build is registered for LEED Platinum. "In the short term the cost of the green build-out cannot be justified and currently there aren't enough incentives to go LEED, other than one's desire," notes Melamedov. "But through energy and water efficient operation, solar panels, wind turbines, and the public's awareness of the importance of

supporting restaurants trying to make a difference, it will pay off in the long run.” As for future locations, Melamedov says the design will be similar, but the finishes may vary. “We have used local materials and will continue to support local vendors in the future.”

In Atlanta, Erik Maier and partner/chef Shaun Doty have opened their first location of YEAH! BURGER, which aims to re-imagine the classic burger joint with a commitment to sustainability. The menu features customizable burgers made with White Oak Pastures grass-fed beef from South Georgia, nitrate-free hot dogs, hand-cut French fries, organic salads, and Straus Family Creamery organic ice cream.

“The client wanted to keep it clean and simple,” says designer Stacey Kirby of local firm Seiber Design Inc. To that end, the 2,500-square-foot space, which seats 55 guests in the dining room and more than 40 on the large, concrete-tiled patio, maximizes the existing warehouse windows, and even added some more. “The design really responded to this particular building shell,” says architect Ed Seiber.

Cypress wood paneling made of reclaimed, river-recovered wood, also known as “sinker” Cypress, covers the walls, contrasting the white subway tile arch illuminated with LEDs that frames the bar and kitchen, while reclaimed heart pine tabletops contrast classic Tolix café chairs made of galvanized steel. The restaurant also offsets its energy usage with wind power and uses 100 percent compostable cups and to-go packaging and utensils. “We hope at a certain point we don’t talk about green design anymore,” says Seiber. “We just talk about what is good practice and what is good construction.”

In Hoboken, New Jersey, Jason Scott and chef Roberto Santibañez (of Fonda and Rosa Mexicana fame) opened a fixed location of their popular taco truck concept, The Taco Truck (TTT). With floors that resemble street sidewalks, banquettes that resemble park benches (made out of recycled wood pallets), and high service windows with awnings, the essence of the truck has been retained.

“The store features various design elements that echo the signature aesthetics of the truck all while keeping in line with the brand’s dedication to authenticity and commitment to eco-friendly practices,” says Scott. TTT recycled 90 percent of the demolition waste and even took old cabinets from the previous restaurant and created wood tiles in the restrooms. Other green design features include bamboo dining room fixtures, LED lighting, recycled pressed paper tabletops and countertops, and 100 percent of all food packaging and utensils are either biodegradable or fully recyclable.

“We always needed to find a balance between what was doable



Above, from left: The Taco Truck’s interior; bright colors inspired by its healthy menu define Fresh Bowl.

and economically viable for a small start-up and what was our grandiose vision of building the greenest restaurant in the country,” says Scott. “In the end I think we struck the right balance and stayed true to our company’s core philosophy.”

Vancouver-based Moeski Consulting Inc. re-imagined a sit-down Malaysian restaurant as Fresh Bowl, a quick-service concept that screams fresh and healthy. Inspired by the menu, Moeski used a bright palette of orange (like Laksa) and yellow (Malaysian curries) punctuated with green in the form of live plants throughout. “The concept had to be one that could become a franchise, meaning that it would be easy to reproduce, and we also wanted the design to be clean, contemporary, and fun,” says Karin Bohne, co-founder and interior designer, Moeski Consulting. “Sustainability was a key factor.”

Custom oversized lampshades are printed on FSC certified paper; all the paint is zero VOC; tabletops and countertops are made with Laminart laminate with recycled content; accent tiles in the washrooms are made with recycled glass; the new acoustic ceiling panels contain 82 percent recycled content; and by converting the cooking systems and equipment from gas to electric, the owners are able to avoid running the hood vent overnight, leading to a 50 percent savings in monthly hydro.

“There are so many great companies that are incorporating sustainability in their products now that creating an exciting and interesting design that is eco-friendly was easy,” says Bohne. “Suppliers are recognizing the importance and demand for eco-friendly products and blowing the budget on green initiatives isn’t a concern anymore like it used to be.” And she has the results to prove it: the restaurant was stripped and rebuilt in three weeks—and under budget.