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Benedetti: The change you cannot see

Christine Benedetti, Time Out Food Columnist 10 hrs ago

While most of the attention at the base of Aspen Mountain has been on the opening of the W Hotel, next door, the Ajax Tavern, inside The Little Nell, saw some recent upgrades too. Local firm Rowland + Broughton has been busy this year; they were the conceptual design architects and architect-of-record for the W, and also renovated the tavern, among many other projects.

It was actually R+B that redesigned the Ajax Tavern 10 years ago. Among many upgrades this time, the most noticeable is that the entrance has moved from the far side of the patio closer to gondola plaza, orchestrating a smoother, more welcoming flow.

But, interestingly, some of the more important changes are the ones customers don't see — and that's in environmental initiatives.

"You have to walk the walk of sustainability," says Chubby Oveges, director of food and beverage for The Little Nell. He wanted to take advantage of the renovation to also improve some of the processes within the property's hospitality program. (It should be noted that they repurposed most of the furniture instead of replacing it entirely, as construction waste is the No. 1 contributor of the Pitkin County Landfill.)

Among those changes are the implementation of composting throughout the hotel. That means more work on the staff side, separating items that can and can't be commercially composted. It was an adjustment, he said, but it's working.

Oveges wanted to eliminate all single-use plastics. It's a lofty goal, and after months of research, he and his team were able to execute it on the side of all consumer-facing products. So, no more plastic straws, to-go containers, plastic trash bags or even espresso pods—of which they were using up to 10,000 a year.

Oveges noted that he can't control the supply side. For example, if strawberries come in a plastic crate, unless there's more demand from restaurants to see those in biodegradable containers, the strawberries will continue to come from farmers in plastic crates. But the industry is making advances.

The Little Nell is owned by Aspen Skiing Co. The resort is the largest employer in the upper valley, and aims to implement composting programs at almost all of its facilities including on-mountain restaurants.

About 40 percent of the food Americans purchase can be composted, and restaurants can theoretically compost 70 to 80 percent of their waste. Besides organic food matter, paper products and specifically designed biodegradable material can be composted. In addition to less waste going into the landfill — Pitkin County's is expected to fill up within the next 10 years — composting results in rich soil, through decomposition, which can be used again for fertilizer.

Composting is on the rise in Pitkin County. In 2018, the landfill doubled its composting capability from 3 to 6 acres. And they're making a profit to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars by selling soil that's made as a byproduct from composting.

For restaurants or households interested in composting, the city of Aspen offers free composting bins and education through its environmental health department.

Change is incremental and sometimes hidden, but happening. To that, raise a reusable or compostable cup.

Christine Benedetti writes about food here every other week. Mostly the plant kind. She's editor-in-chief of Aspen magazine, but you can reach her @cabenedetti.

