

Healthy and wise: Aurora Health Care is greening its foodservice operations

Milwaukee, WI-based Aurora Health Care chose Earth Day in 2008 to announce that it was eliminating most of the Styrofoam cups and containers at its hospitals and clinics, under a plan that involved not only switching to reusable items where practical, but also converting items such as cups and tableware to environmentally friendly materials made from renewable resources.

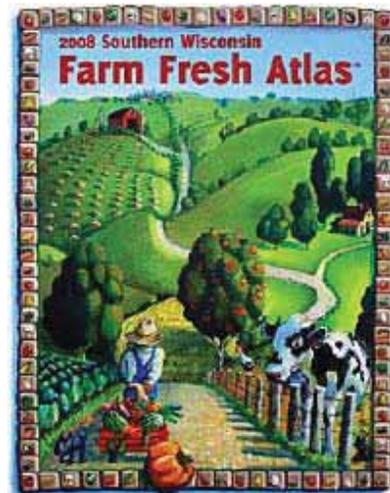


While the announcement made headlines across the country, the huge, 13-hospital system nationally acclaimed for high quality patient care was already well into a comprehensive program designed to “green” its overall foodservice operations. Today, Aurora Health Care’s model foodservice program is doing everything from converting spent cooking oil to bio diesel fuel and recycling items such as plastic, glass and paper (even batteries), to growing its own organic food and herbs, composting, hosting farmer’s markets, and purchasing a wide variety of pesticide-free organically grown food such as free trade coffee.

Green efforts are certainly not confined to Aurora’s cafeterias; after establishing a central warehouse to inspect and refurbish the items and an eBay-like web site to market them, the hospital system is expected to recover more than \$1 million through its [Asset Investment Recovery \(AIR\) program](#), a full integrated cradle-to-grave approach to maximize the remaining value of unused or underutilized medical equipment.

“Aurora Health Care and its employees feel very strongly that we need to be responsible stewards of the environment, and our food services team has done a wonderful job at helping us work toward that goal,” Aurora Health Care president and CEO Nick Turkal, M.D.

Indeed, Aurora signed on early as a member of Health Care Without Harm, an international coalition of over 473 organizations in more than 52 countries working to transform the health care sector so it does not harm the environment; this include encouraging food purchasing systems that support sustainable food production and distribution, and provide healthy food on-site at health care facilities. Aurora also is among a growing list of organizations that have committed to the Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge, which endorses, among other things, the use of food packaging and products that are ecologically protective.



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John Riegler
Regional director of food management



Among those consumers who say they are willing to pay more for “green” items, the percentage who say they are willing to pay between a 1% and 10% premium.
(R&I 2007 Tastes of America Study)

What “Green” Actions Do Consumers Value?

R&I’s Tastes of America Study asked consumers how important they consider a variety of actions a restaurant can take to be more “green.” Recycling efforts are considered most important.

ACTION	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT
Has taken steps to improve recycling of food and paper waste	40.9%	27.5%	12.6%
Uses environmentally friendly cleaning/laundry supplies	45.6	40.8	13.6
Uses biodegradable materials for cutlery, napkins, beverage cups or takeout packaging	45.3	41.3	13.4
Has implemented design changes, such as adding thermal windows or ceiling fans, to conserve electricity, gas or oil	38.8	46.4	14.8
Has taken steps to reduce its use of electricity, gas or oil for cooking, heating or cooling	38.7	47.1	14.2
Purchases and serves organically grown or raised foods	24.0	51.2	24.8

Source: “Eco-Friendly Foodservice: Green and Growing;” Restaurants & Institutions, 9/1/2007

Aurora takes that commitment so seriously that it works closely with Premier, its purchasing group, as well as its vendors to reinforce its interest in foods whose source and production practices (i.e. protect biodiversity, antibiotic and hormone use, local, pesticide use etc.) are identified, in order to have informed consent and choice about the foods they purchase.

‘Greening’ Aurora’s foodservice

In April 2008, Aurora Health Care began an ambitious plan to convert most of its to-go containers like clamshells and most beverage containers from Styrofoam to more compostable, eco-friendly Solo “Bear” cups, made mostly from corn derivatives, and available through Premier’s foodservice purchasing program. The system also provided employees with reusable tumblers for beverages. As an incentive to use them instead of disposable cups, employees can now refill a 16-ounce beverage for the 12-ounce price.

While the conversion was fairly easy for Aurora’s retail operations, it’s a little more complicated in the patient care area, according to John Riegler, the healthcare system’s regional director of food management. They’re still using Styrofoam in patient care because they haven’t yet been able to find eco-friendly cups that come in graduated sizes (for measurement purposes) or can retain cold and heat for long periods,” said Riegler, who is a member of Premier’s Foodservice Committee. “But we’re working on that.”

“The amount of green product we keep adding to our contract is enormous,” said Riegler, noting that Aurora’s entire retail foodservice operation was more than 90 percent Styrofoam-free at the end of 2008. “Acceptance by staff and visitors has been phenomenal systemwide.”

Over the past year, Aurora’s retail foodservice program has been converting more and more of its tableware (including flatware, silverware and plates) to single-use environmentally-friendly substitutes made from renewable resources such as sugar cane, bamboo, corn, potatoes and limestone – all of which are biodegradable and can be composted.

In 2008, the cafeterias at many Aurora hospitals converted to eco-friendly plates, cups and tableware. Riegler said the conversion is expected to have a huge and positive environmental impact. In 2007, for example, the cafeteria at Aurora Lakeland Medical Center, Elkhorn, WI, used more than 461,000 pieces of plastic and Styrofoam related materials. Studies indicate it takes 400 years for Styrofoam to decompose. The new eco friendly products are proven to take up less landfill space and require less energy to make. Made from a material using starch from renewable sources such as potatoes and corn, the new materials are microwaveable, cut resistant, and moisture resistant.

Aurora’s other “green” foodservice initiatives include:

- Converting fryer oil into bio-diesel fuel – Aurora located a local organization that collects restaurant fryer oil, refines it and turns it into bio-diesel fuel, which is cheap to produce, clean burning and can be used in any diesel engine. “Efforts such as these is helping to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels,” Riegler said, noting that the initiative is in place across the Aurora Health Care system, except in the Racine-Kenosha area.
- Recycling – Aurora’s foodservice program recycles as much material, including glass, paper and cardboard, as possible. To save money from purchasing multiple kinds of disposal containers, it co-mingles the materials into the same bin; a local recycling company then sorts the materials. Aurora West Allis Medical Center, for example, has commingled cans, plastic and glass for more than 10 years. Many of Aurora’s kitchens have also implemented their own hospital wide battery recycling programs, using recycled salad dressing containers as collection bins. A local company recycles the batteries at no cost.
- Healthy food – In order to benefit from healthy, organically and locally grown produce, most of Aurora Health Care’s hospitals conduct weekly farmer’s markets. Many facilities also have their own culinary herb gardens. Aurora West Allis Medical Center and Aurora St. Luke’s Medical Center, for example, use the herbs they grow in many of the meals served to visitors and patients.



An Aurora Health Care chef tends to one of the many herb gardens at the system’s hospitals.

- Composting – Scrap produce discarded from Aurora’s kitchens make a natural compost material for their gardens.
- Purchasing healthy, organic food alternatives – Riegler said finding suitable organically grown food alternatives is an ongoing process throughout the system. For example, “free trade coffee,” which is produced without pesticides or child labor, is now available throughout the health system. When Riegler brought to Aurora UTZ (derived from the term, "Utz Kapeh", which means "good coffee" in the Mayan language QuichÚ) certified coffee, available through the Premier foodservice program, it was an instant hit. Riegler said the system chose UTZ certified coffee because UTZ is the most credible and comprehensive certification program that supports sustainable goals that include the responsible use of fertilizers.
- Buying locally – When possible, Aurora buys locally to support the communities in which it operates, but also to reduce its carbon footprint. For example, Riegler said the decision to recycle locally not only reduces landfill waste, but also reduces greenhouse gases because less fuel is used to transport the material long distances.

Aurora Health Care’s foodservice program also is considering other initiatives such as:

- “Smart” vending machines that go into sleep mode when not being used.
- “Close to Home” menus using food that is grown or available within 150 miles, including meat, fish, seafood, vegetables, fruit and dairy.
- Plastic biodegradable water bottles made of corn that will degrade within 75 to 80 days in a commercial composting situation.

Perspectives

Aurora’s foodservice greening efforts are emblematic of the system’s entire culture. “As a large and highly visible organization, we feel a social responsibility to set an example



Coffee bar in the Women’s Pavilion at Aurora’s West Allis Memorial Hospital. When Riegler brought to Aurora UTZ certified coffee, available through the Premier foodservice program, it was an instant hit.

and to try to make a difference in the communities we serve.” said Bruce Parker, Aurora West Allis Medical Center’s manager of food services, who helped establish a “Green Team” at the hospital to communicate current green initiatives, identify additional opportunities and encourage staff and community participation.

Riegler said where once it was a hard sell to staff, environmental stewardship today is something “everyone

gets. It's amazing how accepting people are to change when the reason is the environment," he said. "People have a much greater level of forgiveness for change if it means a positive change for the environment. I certainly couldn't have said this five years ago."

So committed are Aurora employees, starting at the top of the organization, that they understand the importance of changing behaviors and sourcing different products, regardless of cost. "What's really cool about working at Aurora is our philosophy: If something is going to cost a little more to be environmentally friendly, we do it because it's the right thing," he said. Even so, Riegler and other managers at Aurora are constantly looking for ways to neutralize the higher cost of some items. For example, switching to a less expensive brand of coffee mitigated the additional cost for eco-friendly beverage containers.

Aurora's advice to any hospital foodservice program looking to green:

- Find out what your organization's commitment is to being more environmentally conscious.
- Be cautious and informed. Even though you have the best intentions, understand the impact from all the sides of trying to be more environmental friendly.
- Don't get overwhelmed. Keep it simple. Start off by doing the smaller or easier things first.

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