

Buncombe Environmental Leadership Award Nomination

Nominee: The Partnership between the Blue Ridge Sustainability Institute, the Asheville Independent Restaurant Association, and the Asheville Green Restaurants for their environmental leadership in greening the Asheville restaurant community.

Category: Business.

Contact:

Tim Ballard
BRSI Green Restaurant Initiative project manager
1 Battery Park Ave., Suite M2
Asheville, NC 28801
828-348-5191

Nomination submitted by: Erika Schneider, Outreach Coordinator for Sundance Power Systems.

Relationship: Green restaurant initiative solar provider

Contact Information:

Erika Schneider
11 Salem Hill Road
Weaverville, NC 28787
828 645-2080 X 122



Solar installation at Posana Café and the French Broad Chocolate Lounge.

From left: Katie Cavert (BRSI), Jael and Dan Rattigan (the Chocolate Lounge), Peter Pollay (Posana Café), and Tim Ballard (BRSI).

In the spring of 2011 the Asheville Independent Restaurant Association and the Blue Ridge Sustainability Institute partnered together with 17 local independent restaurants to establish Asheville as America's Greenest Dining Destination with the broader goal of establishing Asheville and Buncombe County as the first green travel destination in the United States. Over the course of 2011, AIR and BRSI were able to secure a \$258,140 grant from the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Green Business Fund, allowing them to expand the impact of the project. After a year of opportunities,

challenges, and successes, 17 local independent restaurants are in the final stages of achieving nationally recognized green certification through the Green Restaurant Association and plan to launch Asheville as America's Greenest Dining Destination in the next few months.

Restaurants provide a unique environmental challenge. In addition to requiring significant food inputs and generating significant waste by nature, they are among the most energy intensive of all commercial buildings, consuming an average of 258,000 BTUs¹ per square foot. While this is about two and a half times more energy than the average commercial building, some small Asheville restaurants use even more. We know one small 2,400 square foot Asheville independent restaurant that consumes a shocking two billion BTUs, equivalent to the energy consumption of roughly 19 homes of the same size.

We feel that in our community there is the need for strong environmental leadership roles to be taken by highly visible local businesses. When citizens see for-profit enterprises taking the lead supporting the environmental well-being of our community, they begin to more clearly recognize the benefits of environmental responsibility and begin to let go of persistent barriers of "I don't have time for that" or "I can't afford that". Restaurants are the ideal businesses to take on this challenge as they are highly visible social fixtures of our local community as well as staples of the Buncombe County experience for all of our out-of-town visitors.

Restaurants provide one of the most challenging case-studies for sustainability. One of the most cash-strapped small business types, most independent restaurants run on a shoe string budget, are over-committed, and work with extremely small profit margins. Even the most well-intentioned have little free time to figure out which type of take-out container is most environmentally friendly. As hospitality businesses, restaurants also have very specific aesthetic, comfort, and operational needs that can conflict with conventional environmental solutions. Finding ways to satisfy the operational needs of a restaurant while reducing its environmental impact can be particularly challenging.

Our local community has been able to tackle this challenge through the leadership of the Asheville Independent Restaurant (AIR) Association and the Blue Ridge Sustainability Institute (BRSI), demonstrated by the establishment of a partnership committed to the environment, to sustainability, and to a cooperative spirit. AIR is remarkable organization in that it is a group of competing private businesses that have chosen to work together to support each other with the belief that the strength of the Asheville culinary community lies in its diversity and in the well-being of each constituent part. BRSI is a regional non-profit that builds partnerships between diverse partners who will drive sustainability knowledge into action. AIR's collective industry knowledge with its existing 80 member network and BRSI's nuts and bolts knowledge of sustainability, project management, and grant writing make this partnership distinct. Collaboratively, these two organizations have been able to uniquely address the challenge of environmental leadership in the restaurant community. Successful implementation of this partnership has required consistent and effective communication avenues between the two partnering organizations, the 17 restaurants participating, and other community partners.

Results from this partnership are striking. BRSI and AIR together quickly obtained a \$250,000 grant from the NC Green Business Fund to assist participating restaurants with the cost of solar hot water installations, energy efficiency upgrades and energy conservation. Between this grant and the \$100,000 investment made by participating restaurants in energy efficiency and renewable energy upgrades the following results have been achieved:

- Seven solar installations totaling 41 best-in-class, made-in-NC panels installed by Weaverville-based Sundance Power Systems.
- Four high-efficiency condensing natural gas water heaters
- Two refrigeration heat recovery water heaters
- One high-efficiency refrigeration rack system, an energy saving technology never before used in an Asheville Independent Restaurant
- Comprehensive lighting retrofits using dimmable compact fluorescents, cutting-edge LEDs, and high-efficiency fluorescent lighting
- Installation of one high-efficiency HVAC unit
- Installation of assorted walk-in cooler strip curtains, weather-stripping, low-flow pre-rinse spray nozzles, programmable thermostats, and pipe insulation.
- One spray-foam attic insulation project
- One interior storm window installation project

These infrastructure measures are expected to reduce on-site energy consumption by **2.5 billion BTUs per year**, reduce primary energy use by **6 billion BTUs per year**, and prevent **287 tons of CO2 emissions per year**. Together AIR and BRSI also established a unique energy education program designed to help participating restaurant identify means of reducing energy consumption through behavioral changes.

Additionally, all participating restaurants have been actively pursuing Green Restaurant Association certification. This certification process is comprehensive and time-consuming, addressing seven major environmental categories including: waste, sustainable furnishings & building materials, sustainable food, energy, disposables, and pollution & chemical reduction. To achieve certification, a restaurant must achieve a minimum number of points in every category as well as a minimum total number of points. There are three levels of certification: two- star, three- star, and four- star. To date, Posana Café, The Green Sage, and the French Broad Chocolate Lounge have achieved three- star certification. Tupelo Honey Café, Tupelo Honey South, and Neo Cantina have achieved two- star certification. Restaurants nearing certification, or in the process of implementing environmental changes, include Luella's BBQ, HomeGrown, Laughing Seed Café, Jack of the Wood, Rosetta's Kitchen, Bouchon, Green Sage South, Frankie Bones, Burgermeister's, Strada, and Corner Kitchen.

Non-energy related measures are specific to each category but have included implementing comprehensive recycling and composting programs (reducing solid waste by up to 95%), buying local and organic produce, using environmentally friendly cleaning products, and switching to compostable take-out containers. This is but a sampling, as measures implemented by each restaurant are extensive. In addition to the air quality improvements of the energy improvements, these more comprehensive environmental measures touch on every aspect of conservation, from clean air and water, to ecosystem preservation, to preservation of fertile soil and farmland.

The leadership shown by AIR, BRSI, and the 17 pioneering restaurants has provided a program model and associated knowledge that will allow additional restaurants throughout Buncombe County and WNC to more easily and more effectively reduce their environmental impact. Additionally, once all restaurants have achieved GRA certification, the Asheville Metro Area will become America's Greenest Dining Destination, providing the nation with a leading example of the region's commitment to the environment and garnering national publicity. This achievement is expected to additionally contribute to the sustainability of the local economy by attracting increased tourism. While the changes made in each restaurant will last for the lifetime of that restaurant—both in terms of culture and infrastructure—the broader community impact will stretch much further. I highly recommend the partnership between AIR, BRSI, and the 17 AIR restaurants for the Buncombe Environmental Leadership Award.

