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# Educators as Leaders: Perspectives on Teaching and the Ethics Associated with Culinary Sustainability

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# Educators as Leaders: Perspectives on Teaching and the Ethics Associated with Culinary Sustainability

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author thanks SaVannah Bronson for her assistance with this study, and the chef educators who took time out of their schedules to participate in an interview.

## Educators as Leaders: Perspectives on Teaching and the Ethics Associated with Culinary Sustainability

Sustainability, often embedded within larger conversations about ethics, has become a topic of discussion and research in multiple sectors of society. Higher Education is no exception. A cursory examination of multiple university websites reveals references to sustainability in both campus-wide initiatives and across the curriculum. Universities that offer hospitality degrees have many opportunities to teach students about sustainability. In particular, those with culinary tracks can expose students to sustainable culinary practices. While the literature discusses the importance of including sustainability in culinary and hospitality curriculums, and there is some focus on methods used to teach students about sustainability (Rusinko, 2010), there is not much discussion on how culinary educators themselves acquire and continue to develop their knowledge of sustainability. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to develop a preliminary understanding of how culinary educators in a culinary/hospitality program learn about and subsequently teach students culinary sustainability concepts. The author was additionally interested in what resources and support would help culinary educators further develop as leaders in culinary sustainability.

### **Literature Review**

In the early 1970s, experts in environmental, scientific, sociological, and economic fields began to jointly discuss problems resulting from unchecked development (Aber, Kelly, & Mallory, 2009; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002). By 1987 the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development wrote a report, commonly known as the Brundtland Report, in which the concept of sustainability emerged as a means to responsibly and ethically guide development. The Brundtland Commission, as the preeminent authority on

sustainability, went on to define sustainability as that which “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 8).

As sustainability has continued to ascend to the forefront of business and political discussions, the push for higher education to focus on sustainability has also increased (Boley, 2011; Calder & Dautremont-Smith, 2009). Universities have typically addressed the challenge to educate their constituents about sustainability by adopting campus-wide initiatives and/or adding sustainability into the curriculum (Boley, 2011; Natkin & Kolbe, 2016). Examples of campus-wide initiatives range from efforts to reduce carbon-footprints and energy use, to increasing the use of recycling and composting programs (Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, 2009).

The incorporation of sustainability into the broad university curriculum also includes a variety of paradigms, which Boyle, Wilson, and Dimmick (2015) describe as ranging from weak to strong. They consider academic programs that weave sustainability throughout the breadth of their curriculum to be strong, whereas those that address sustainability in a single, stand-alone course are not as strong. At the weakest end of their paradigm spectrum are those programs which “cover” sustainability more as an after-thought by bringing in guest classroom speakers or creating lecture series. Other researchers conclude that most academic programs address the three broad dimensions of sustainability - societal, environmental, and economic, but the means for doing so varies by program and instructor (Dale & Newman, 2005).

One academic discipline that can make a significant impact in the area of sustainability is the hospitality industry; an industry which encompasses foodservice to tourism and lodging to sports venues. The World Travel and Tourism Council (n.d.) reports the staggering economic

impact of hospitality related industries on their website. For example, in 2016, the industry generated 10.2% of the global GDP and supported 292 million jobs. In addition to contributing to the global economy, hospitality-related industries also further meeting the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Sustainable Development Sustainable Development, n.d.). Developed by the United Nations (UN) in 2005, the sustainable development goals are a means to improve life for people, while also considering the planet and prosperity. The goals and specific strategies related to hunger, food production, and sustainable use of resources are particularly relevant to the hospitality industry.

Within hospitality programs, culinary tracks are a typical offering, providing educators and students several options for studying sustainability concepts. The use of water and energy, food waste, and composting are just a few examples. Additionally, the rapidly growing field of food ethics can provide students and educators with an understanding of the ethical implications of food production, distribution, marketing, shopping, preparation, and consumption. Barber, Deale, and Goodman (2013) share that eighty percent of the respondents in their study indicated examining food ethics should be a priority topic in hospitality curriculums.

Consumer demand for green initiatives and environmentally friendly products continues to grow, as do the multiple sustainability issues facing the hospitality and foodservice industries (Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009). The formal incorporation of sustainability into the general hospitality curriculum, however, has lagged behind other disciplines (Deale & Barber, 2012; Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009). Hospitality industry professionals are regularly confronted by sustainability issues such as certifications, resource management, and food production, yet:

It appears that sustainability education remains an afterthought or an add-on in many classes. If hospitality educators are to be in step with where the industry appears to be

with regard to sustainability, hospitality courses and curriculum need to include sustainability as a more prominent focus. (Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009, p. 7)

The most common technique hospitality programs utilize to integrate sustainability into their curriculums is to leave it to the discretion of the instructor (Deale, Nichols, & Jacques; 2009). In examining the degree to which individual instructors incorporate sustainability into their courses, there are several factors to consider. First, as sustainability is a spectrum and there are differing extents to which sustainable practices can be applied, the degrees to which faculty teach students about sustainability varies greatly.

Second, much like global warming has become fodder for good versus evil, sustainability has been lumped to distinguish positive or negative characteristics. Thus, faculty teaching sustainability must decide what they believe about its multiple facets. Wals and Jickling (2002) agree stating “teaching about sustainability includes deep debate about normative, ethical, and spiritual convictions” (p. 227). McFarlane and Ogazon (2011) suggest that it is cultural heritage which shapes peoples’ norms and attitudes towards sustainability:

Culturally, people in the U.S. are used to bigger, but not necessarily better, products and production methods, and processes have in the past adapted themselves to producing and manufacturing the bulk or excess that unfortunately defines success and the American Dream for a majority. Thus, it is culturally difficult to adapt sustainability practices and foster sustainability education on a prominent national level, especially when levels of education or literacy are already low across some groups and communities. (p. 88)

Third, each of the sustainability dimensions (societal, environmental, and economic) are multi-faceted, complex, and require in-depth study. Faculty likely did not learn about sustainability while becoming formally educated, and thus have varying degrees of

understanding about sustainability (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011). Velazquez, Mungia, and Sanchez (2005) make similar assertions in their study stating, “Few educators are being taught how to teach about sustainability, most of them are learning in the field, but in the process mistakes are made” (p. 386). Natkin and Kolbe (2016) concur noting that the infusion of sustainability concepts in curricula presents a challenge of “expanding faculty understanding and capacity to teach sustainability-related concepts” (p. 541). While most faculty are in need of professional development to understand sustainability concepts and create effective teaching strategies, universities often do not provide such support (Bartlett & Rappaport, 2009). Instead, faculty interested in sustainability create their own pathways to learning, often undertaking independent studies in order to become comfortable with the material. Multiple researchers have concluded that once faculty consider themselves to be knowledgeable enough about sustainability, they then implement a variety of strategies to teach sustainability concepts. These teaching strategies range from solo projects, to collaborations with faculty across disciplines to introduce interdisciplinary problem-based learning or case studies (Aber, Kelly & Mallory, 2009; Dale & Newman, 2005; Posch & Steiner, 2006; Stauffacher, Walter, Lang, Wiek, & Scholz, 2006). However, without systemic support, prioritization, formal training, funding, reward structures, and protected learning time, many faculty eventually lose interest in learning and teaching about sustainability (Beringer, Wright, & Malone, 2008; Velazquez, Munguia, & Sanchez, 2005; Rusinko, 2010; Wilson & von der Heidt, 2013).

To address the gap in the literature as to how culinary/hospitality educators develop knowledge of, continue to learn about, and teach culinary sustainability, a pilot study was conducted. The results will be used to propose professional development opportunities and resources for culinary educators, and to possibly develop a larger study.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Five culinary educators teaching both part and full time at a large regional university in the American Southeast were interviewed. Those who were part-timers also taught in culinary programs at other local colleges, and/or worked in the industry. All participants were male and had worked in the industry from fifteen to thirty years.

### **Instrument**

The author designed an interview protocol consisting of ten questions related to the topic of study (see Appendix A). An open-ended interview strategy was utilized with the questions being used as a general guide for conversation. As McNamara (2009) and Turner (2010) note, this approach gives participants the freedom to highlight what they deem to be most important in their responses.

### **Procedure**

The researcher, who at the time the research was conducted, worked in the same academic department as the participants, emailed all part and full-time culinary educators (N=12), and extended an invitation for them to participate in the pilot study. Five individuals accepted the invitation. Interviews were conducted over a two-month period from March - April, 2017. Interviews were recorded and uploaded to a secure site.

The author employed constant comparative analysis techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to make a general, broad analysis. Next, the author used open coding strategies (Boyatzis, 1998) to consider context, establish a framework, and identify key words and phrases. Then, the author identified categories, codes and themes. With the use of axial coding, a hierarchy of the categories, codes and themes was created by the researcher. In the



final data analysis stage, the researcher used selective coding to create key statements, which served as the foundation for the general study conclusions. To establish credibility and triangulate the results, the author also had a student researcher listen to the interviews and create a chart of findings. Additionally, the findings were sent to the participants for verification.

## **Results**

Two broad themes emerged from the results, with the first theme having two sub-themes.

### **Theme I - Initial Exposure to Culinary Sustainability was Impactful and Led to Subsequent Internalized, Habitual Practices.**

Participants described early personal and professional experiences that shaped them and laid the groundwork for continued interest in culinary sustainability. The first sub-theme is how sustainable culinary practices were instilled at home. Several participants were raised to be mindful of water and energy usage, avoid waste food, and eat what was locally available. As one participant noted, “Sustainability wasn’t for our environment, it was a way of life.” Another participant shared that what he learned as a child stayed with him; he now follows his wife around turning off lights in rooms she has left.

The second sub-theme is how early career experiences shaped participant thinking about sustainable culinary practices. One participant described how he learned from an older chef that the best meals were prepared with fresh, local ingredients, which were often purchased from fishers or farmers who showed up with food at the back door of the restaurant. He also learned that all parts of an animal could be used to make multiple dishes, and now teaches his employees to do the same stating that “waste is the enemy of the kitchen.” Another participant, who was trained in the French classical method, recalled learning that with French cooking you “used everything but the oink.” He now passes on the same principles of cooking to his students.

In some instances, it was the participants, not their supervisors, who inquired about or initiated sustainable practices. For example, one participant recalled questioning why fish was being shipped in from Hawaii at an exorbitant cost, when the establishment in which he worked bordered the Gulf of Mexico. The same participant also inquired about the lack of recycling. When he subsequently changed jobs to open a new restaurant, he instilled culinary sustainability practices in his employees and colleagues on day one.

## **Theme II - Continued Learning about Culinary Sustainability is Primarily Self-Driven.**

Learning about sustainable culinary practices is mostly an independent undertaking. Participants were generally not taught about sustainable culinary practices while obtaining their degrees. As one participant stated “We learned very little about sustainability in culinary school at that point.... You learned to cook.” Participants also had not received formal, extensive, or consistent workplace training. Rather, they noticed when things could be improved in their workplaces and began to do research and suggest changes.

Participants shared that they most commonly searched online for culinary sustainability implementation ideas and resources they could share with their students. Some also read industry publications and newspaper articles, brainstormed with their colleagues, and tuned in to relevant television shows. Several participants stated a lack of time prevented them from regularly looking for resources. Others noted it was difficult to sort through the voluminous amounts of information available online, or to ensure the information they were reading was accurate and from a credible source. All participants expressed a desire to learn more about culinary sustainability.

## Discussion

An examination of the results, as well as limitations of the study, and suggestions for practitioners and future research follows.

### **Theme I - Initial Exposure to Culinary Sustainability was Impactful and Led to Subsequent Internalized, Habitual Practices.**

Participants discussed the foundation for their learning about culinary sustainable practices.

#### **Sub-theme I.**

For several participants, their first exposure to culinary sustainable practices was at home or around extended family. The practices they used at home were not termed culinary sustainability though, rather that was just the way things were done. Food, water, and energy were not wasted. The author relates to the participants' experiences and recalls being told by her older relatives that food waste was not only uneconomical, but also immoral. We were fortunate and should be thankful; neighbors were in need and people were starving in other parts of the world.

One participant commented that what people term culinary sustainable practices today is actually the way people have lived and eaten for millennia. Hesterman (2012), who writes about problems with modern food systems, agrees. Previous generations ate organically as pesticides were not an option and processed food did not exist. People grew, fished, and hunted for their food, or in today's terminology, they ate locally and seasonally. Importation of crops from other parts of the world did not exist, and travel was rare. What little food was not eaten was composted, and farmers did not mass produce single crops, rather they rotated multiple crops.

With time, the culinary sustainable practices that were instilled early in the participants became their own, which they then passed on to others. One participant recalled he taught his

college roommates a) how to cook a whole chicken, b) that fresh, natural, foods were a better alternative than fast food, and c) to conserve water by taking shorter showers, which also ensured all roommates got a hot shower.

### **Sub-theme II.**

For some participants, early culinary sustainability home experiences were further reinforced as they began their culinary careers. Participants recalled the first time they were instructed to use sustainable culinary practices in the kitchens in which they were working was in the late 1990s – early 2000s. The impetus for implementing the practices was not primarily motivated by concern for the environment, but rather the bottom line. Food waste and misuse of resources is equated with a diminished profit margin, described in length in Cicatiello, Franco, Pancino, Biasi, and Falasconi's (2017) meta-analysis of sixteen articles on the topic. As one participant mused, those who pay attention to food waste costs are more likely to keep their restaurant doors open.

All of the participants reported the use of sustainable practices has become much more the norm than when they first started working in the industry. One participant felt sustainable culinary practices were primarily being used by restaurants today as a marketing gimmick, and he might be correct. Consumers have become more educated about sustainability, often selecting restaurants and other dining options that support their green preferences (Deale, Nichols, & Jacques, 2009).

### **Theme II - Continued Learning about Culinary Sustainability is Primarily Self-Driven.**

The participants personally value culinary sustainability and choose to continue to learn about it, often on their own time. As one participant said, employers tend to have a 35,000 foot view. They do not typically provide information on what should be done on a routine and daily

basis to promote culinary sustainability. For example, one participant did his own research and introduced batch cooking and repurposing of items to save four cents a plate at the university at which he was working. Interestingly, his cost-saving measures were initially met with resistance as those who were opposed to change wondered if he was pilfering food or taking some short of short-cut to savings.

Another participant shared that in the early 1990s he was advising local chefs as to what fish they should feature on their menus. At the time, fishing seasons, quotas, and stock were not taken into consideration for species beyond game fish. He began to notice that the red snapper which was prolific one year, was less abundant in subsequent years. He did some research and not only changed his fishing habits, but also convinced the local chefs to change their menus.

Additionally, as the participants became college culinary educators, they felt compelled to become more educated themselves. As one participant remarked, current students often arrive in culinary classes with a strong foundation of sustainable culinary practices. Sometimes the students teach their teachers. One participant recalled a student reminding him to use the composting bin. Another chef educator remembered a student asking about grass-fed beef on the first day of class.

Participants shared that they typically search online for implementation ideas, and resources they can share with their students. They also disclosed that they felt their own learning was sporadic and not as in-depth as they would prefer. Natkin and Kolbe (2016) reported similar findings from their survey:

Interestingly, survey respondents also pointed to two areas related to their own capacity as potential barriers to teaching sustainability content. More than half reported that they encountered challenges (“to a great extent” or “somewhat”) making “content

connections,” and a similar percentage perceived a “lack of learning activity resources” as limiting their ability to integrate sustainability content into their courses. (p. 551)

## **Suggestions**

Based on the findings from this pilot study, the author offers the following suggestions to culinary educators and those who manage/lead them.

First, establish an ad hoc task force or research team to gather data on what a) defines or constitutes culinary sustainability at your institution, b) current practices are being used in your curriculum, c) best practices are being utilized in the industry and/or at other culinary/hospitality programs, d) practices would your faculty and students like to adopt, and e) resources are needed support faculty and implement new strategies in the curriculum. The findings from the ad hoc committee could be used to advocate for resources, particularly if sustainability aligns with some aspect of your university’s mission.

Second, build on the above findings to create professional development opportunities and resources for chef educators. Examples include a) holding monthly or quarterly trainings or workshops, b) sending educators to conferences, c) registering for industry webinars, d) subscribing to journals, industry publications, and trade magazines, and e) creating and maintaining a resource library or database of online credible sources such as blogs and videos, as well as teaching strategies related to culinary sustainability.

Third, invite faculty to do their own research and share their findings with their colleagues. One participant noted that the National Restaurant Association sustainability newsletter, *Bright Ideas*, provides some great suggestions for implementing sustainable practices.

Fourth, encourage faculty to become involved with other known sustainability efforts on your campus. Such involvement could lead to partnerships, support, and professional

rejuvenation. As culinary sustainability is just one facet of a much larger conversation about sustainability and ethics, it would behoove culinary educators to join faculty from other disciplines to start book clubs or as Natkin and Kolbe (2016) recommend, faculty learning communities.

Fifth, seek out industry partners who value sustainability. Invite them to help create case studies for students and be guest speakers in classes, or ask to bring faculty or students to their workplaces for demonstrations of culinary sustainable practices. Industry partnerships give students opportunities to bridge theory and practice. While other areas within hospitality curriculums often have a disconnect between theory and practice, culinary emphases can easily provide experiential hands-on learning opportunities that better prepare students to enter the industry (Boley, 2011; Jurowski, 2002; Paris, 2016).

### **Limitations of the Study**

As the sample size for this pilot study was small and self-selected, it is difficult to make generalizations to the greater population. Additionally, all participants were male. Female culinary educators may have had different perspectives. Also, the academic program from which the participant pool emanated emphasizes sustainability. As such, the participants may have been drawn to teaching in the program, and their viewpoints may not reflect those of the majority of culinary educators. Finally, as the author was an interim administrator in the department in which the participants worked at the time the research was being conducted, it is possible the participants may have been hesitant about being completely forthcoming.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

In future studies, the author recommends that research samples include demographic questions and be as diverse as possible. In order to conduct a more robust qualitative study,

further research in this area could involve a larger sample. Alternatively, the study questions could be adapted to conduct a large scale quantitative study. Additionally, focus groups could be established in which the current study findings could be discussed in more depth. Finally, the thematic findings could each be further explored in a stand-alone study.

### **Conclusion**

Today's students are tomorrow's leaders in the hospitality industry. Throughout their careers, students will grapple with food ethics and environmental, economic, and social sustainability issues. Students must be equipped to incorporate sustainable practices that maximize profit and enhance efficiency, while still being environmentally friendly. As society continues to examine the many issues associated with food ethics, it is important that culinary and hospitality educators be leaders in preparing their students to understand the complexity of the issues. The culinary educators in this pilot study have embraced what Meyer and Land (2005) call a threshold concept of sustainability. They are modeling and teaching students that learning about sustainability is integrative, irreversible, and transformative. Furthermore, sustainability knowledge is troublesome; it requires action on the part of the learner (Meyer & Land, 2005). Culinary and hospitality program educators who combine theoretical and applied education can help produce qualified graduates prepared to respond to the growing crises on local, state, national and international levels in terms of health initiatives, agricultural integrity, and sustainable practices.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. What is your professional/educational background and training?
2. Do you recall when you first started hearing about sustainability as related to your industry/profession?
3. How did you initially learn about culinary sustainability (e.g. formal organizational support, self-study, etc.)?
4. Do you recall when you began teaching others about culinary sustainability?
5. What are some examples of culinary sustainability practices you have incorporated into your courses or kitchens?
6. Culinary sustainability is multi-faceted, quickly evolving, and sometimes associated with much debated larger conversations about sustainability. As such, how do you make decisions regarding what to teach students about culinary sustainability?
7. What kinds of obstacles or challenges, if any, have you faced as you learned about and proceeded to teach about culinary sustainability?
8. How do you stay informed about current culinary sustainability issues?
9. What type of resources or support would be helpful to you as you continue to learn about and teach culinary sustainability?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation?