

# SmartSummit: How chefs and restaurants are working toward a more sustainable food system

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Our food system – from the farms and facilities that produce our food to the restaurants and foodservice operators that prepare and serve it – is shaped by a number of social, environmental and economic factors. In recent years, more and more people – both leaders in the industry and consumers – have started questioning the status quo in the interest of creating a more sustainable food system for both people and the planet.

A panel of experts discussed what is driving this call for change and how restaurants can be a part of it during SmartBrief's April 21 SmartSummit, "The Future of Food: The Role of Restaurants in Creating a Sustainable Food System."

## An appetite for change

In a live poll conducted during the webcast, about 93% of attendees said their customers have shown increased interest in sustainability over the past several years, either by asking questions or mentioning ethical and sustainable practices, or voting with their dollars by purchasing items or donating to causes that fit this category.

Consumer interest in sustainable food systems has been steadily growing for the past several years, said Shelley Balanko, senior vice president of The Hartman Group. She noted that the effects of climate change and personal and public health issues related to industrialized food production are among consumers' chief concerns when it comes to food sustainability. Historically, concern for these areas has been driven by interest in "acquiring higher quality of life for a longer period of time" on an individual level, Balanko said, but in the past two years consumers' concerns have shifted to not be just about self-interest but how these systems affect people in their communities and people who work all along the supply chain.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this growing interest in food sustainability is even more pronounced among people who work or are training for careers in the food industry.

Taylor Reid, assistant professor of applied food studies at the Culinary Institute of America, cited a [2019 survey of CIA students](#) that found more than 75% of the 546 students surveyed said they believe chefs have a responsibility to address climate change through their purchasing and menu decisions. More than 80% of those surveyed said they hope to promote environmentally sustainable food systems through their work as a chef.

"We're seeing a different generation of students that are coming through culinary school and that their interest in sustainability is one of their primary drivers when thinking about what they want to do in the restaurant world," Reid said.

Daniel Kedan, a chef instructor at the Gatehouse Restaurant at The Culinary Institute of America's Greystone campus in California, echoed Reid's sentiment, explaining that more students are coming to the CIA with a desire to learn more than the technical aspects of cooking. Many students arrive at the CIA having done their own research into food sustainability issues, hungry to learn more about how they can help create positive change.

## **Start with small changes**

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When it comes to creating this positive change and working toward a more sustainable food future, it can be difficult to know where to start. Luckily, there are simple ways chefs and restaurant operators can begin introducing more sustainable practices, and many have already begun.

In fact, all of the attendees who responded to a poll during the webcast said they have either already made changes at their restaurants in recent years to integrate or increase sustainable practices or they plan to do so soon.

All the panelists agreed that sourcing is a great place to start when looking to improve the sustainability of a restaurant operation. Restaurants should make sure they are sourcing ingredients locally when possible and sourcing from companies that have fair labor practices, Balanko said.

For restaurants looking to transition to more local sourcing, Kedan recommended starting with one ingredient. “Maybe you get your lettuce from a local farm. Maybe you get your chicken from a local ranch...one incremental difference and you can see how that process is and you can learn without having to invest wholeheartedly into a concept,” he said.

Before becoming an instructor at the CIA, Kedan owned a restaurant with his wife in California’s Sonoma County called Backyard, where they sourced about 90% of ingredients from the local community.

In addition to local sourcing, restaurants should also pay close attention to the carbon footprint of the ingredients they put on their menus. As much as 80% of the carbon footprint of a restaurant comes from ingredients, Reid pointed out. He recommended that restaurant operators do a carbon footprint audit to see where the majority of their carbon footprint is coming from so they can make more informed decisions about what is on their menu. For many restaurants, switching to more plant-forward menus that don’t rely on animal proteins at the center of every plate can make a huge difference, as meat and dairy production are responsible for a large portion of the food industry’s carbon output.

The path toward a more sustainable food system is certainly an uphill climb, and while chefs and restaurants may be saddled with a big responsibility, Reid said it also presents a big opportunity. “Those of us that work in the food industry can do small things that have a much bigger impact than somebody, say, choosing to buy an electric car,” he said.

## Look to leaders for a path to follow

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Many chefs and restaurants have already made meaningful strides toward a more sustainable food system, blazing a trail that others can follow. Here are some of the inspiring people and organizations the panelists mentioned:

- Chef Dan Barber’s work with [Row 7 Seed Company](#) to create vegetables bred for flavor and soil health
- Chef Jose Andres’ food-focused humanitarian work with [World Central Kitchen](#)
- Chef Sean Sherman’s work with the nonprofit [North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems](#) to revitalize Indigenous food systems
- [Farmer Leah Penniman](#)’s work as a soil steward and food sovereignty activist
- Chef Anthony Myint’s nonprofit [Zero Foodprint](#), which works with restaurants to provide grants for farmers to switch to renewable farming practices
- Chef [Dominique Crenn](#), who took meat off the menu at all her restaurants in 2019, helping to elevate the perceived value of vegetables among fine dining customers
- The [Marine Stewardship Council](#)’s efforts to increase seafood sustainability by ending overfishing and supporting responsible seafood production
- The [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#), an alliance of over 100 grassroots organizations advocating for federal policy reform to create more sustainable food systems

- [FEED Sonoma](#), one of many community distribution hubs popping up around the US that helps connect restaurants with local farms
- The Culinary Institute of America's programs, including [Plant-Forward Kitchen](#), [Menus of Change](#) and the new [online master's degree in sustainable food systems](#)

**To watch the event in its entirety and hear more insights from Balanko, Kedan and Reid, [access the SmartSummit on demand](#).**

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