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Clean and Green

by Ruben Kobe

Cleanliness is next to profitability in the restaurant business; it's an accepted maxim that customers judge dining establishments on the pristine – or not – state of their restrooms. Local restaurateurs, like the rest of the population, are more conscious than ever of doing their part to decrease environmental impact. The trick is determining how to balance clean and green.

The Green Restaurant Association, with a Western regional office in San Diego, includes using non-toxic cleaning products on its list of steps restaurants have to make progress on to be Green Restaurant Certified™, and with good reason. GRA Director Michael Oshman refers to statistics indicating that a third of chemical used today are harmful, and that “six out of 100 professional janitors are harmed by the chemicals they use.”

Toxic cleaning chemicals not only create a long-term negative impact on the environment, Oshman points out, they can create dangerous situations on restaurant premises. Using safer products means, “You don't have to worry about somebody that's a new employee mixing two chemicals together that are fine on their own but together could put somebody in the hospital.” That doesn't happen often, he concedes, “but just in terms of your own liability, I'd sleep better.”

While green cleaning products are far more widely available than ever before, determining the best ones to use can be overwhelming for already-busy restaurant owners.

At the Linkery in San Diego, owner Jay Porter just hits the basics. “We use Seventh Generation, a green laundry detergent, for washing our napkins. We use Simple Green

for cleaning. For (replacing) more hard core chemicals, we're still trying to figure out what to buy.” For the time being, he's buying retail.

While the Green Restaurant Association endorses Earth Alive, produced in Canada and launched into the US market at the National Restaurant Show in Chicago this year, Oshman says many other products are also a step in the right direction.

“The best thing to do is look for the ones that are GRA endorsed, on our website. Second best is to go on the Green Seal website and look for (products) there. The standards there are not as strong as GRA standards, but there are a lot more products.”

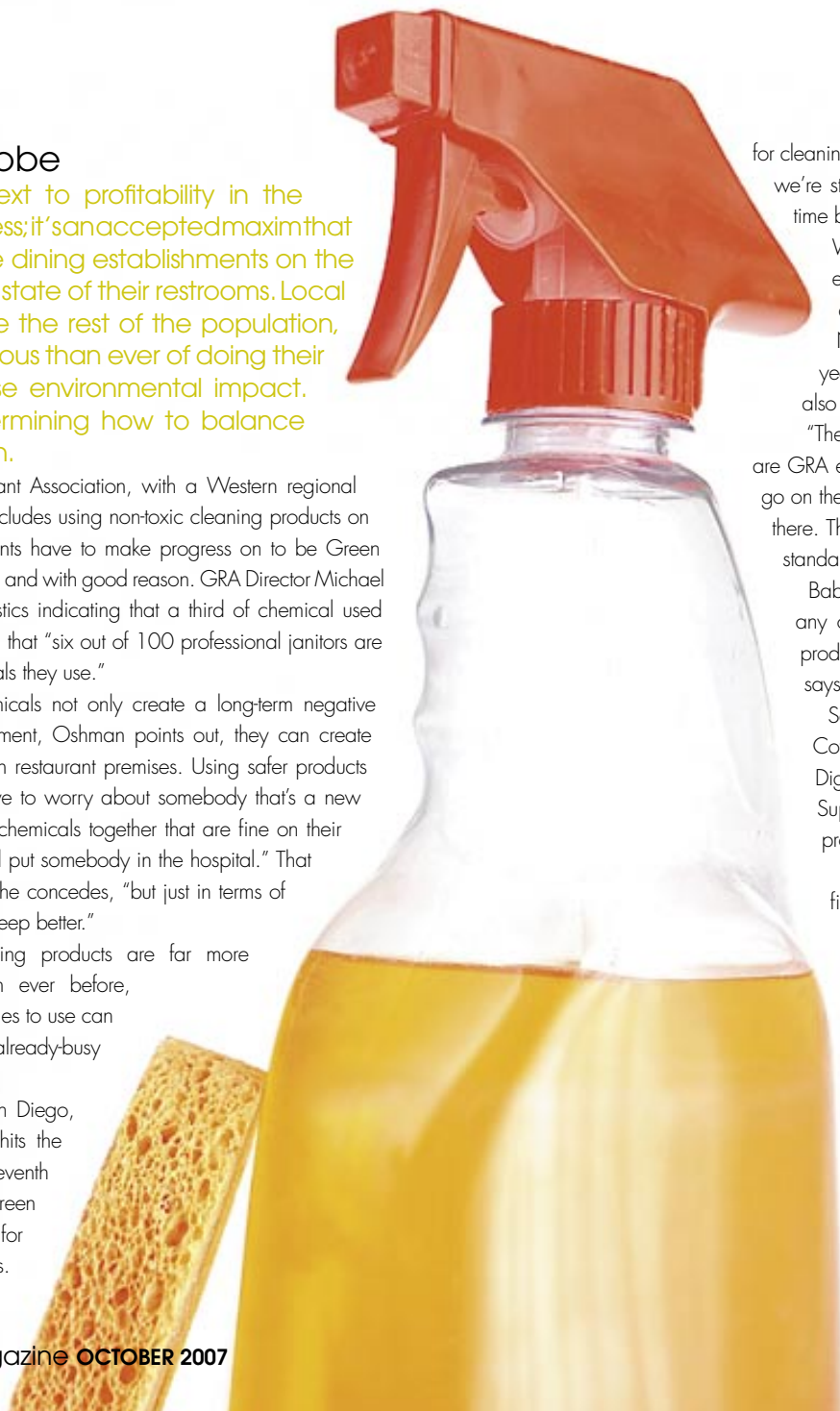
Baby steps count. “For most places, going to any of those rather than just using conventional products is going to be making a big step up,” says Oshman.

Scottsdale's Spaghetti Western group includes Cowboy Ciao, Sea Saw and soon-to-debut Digestif. They rely on Bradley Zall at Accurate Supply for environmentally friendly cleaning products.

“With advances in raw materials we're finally able to find green products that work,” says Zall. “Green is cool, but if it doesn't clean or sanitize it's no good.”

Accurate offers a variety of cleaning supplies. “Bio Clean is an enzyme based floor cleaner. You mop it down and leave it there and the enzymes continually eat at the grease.” The laundry detergent they offer has received a Total Impact Program, or TIP, award from the EPA.

“On the ware wash side, we have rinse aid, silverware soak and pot and pan wash that are all EPA certified.” Zall says, “I believe in the revolution.



Environmental issues were introduced in the education system years ago and those folks are finally growing up and becoming the decision makers."

His company was pushed into its current aggressive stance on non-toxic supplies by its customers, though. "Mark Tarbell challenged us eight months ago. He was an early adopter." Accurate also services DC Ranch Country Club, and the LGO group that includes Chelsea's Kitchen, La Grande Orange and Postino. "At Radio Milano, we're all green," Zall says proudly.

In contrast to Accurate's array of products, Earth Alive promotes the KISS approach, according to Marketing Director Avy Cohen. Their RapidAll cleaning product "replaces every product for hotels and restaurants except sanitizer," he says. A sanitizing product is waiting for approval.

While Cohen is passionate about the technical background of his company's product, he's clear on the bottom line, too. "For floor cleaning, our product costs less than 50 cents a gallon, compared to six to nine dollars for other products." Used in a different concentration, it cleans and polishes stainless steel, "at a fraction of what stainless steel polish costs."

He has anecdotes galore illustrating the genius of a product that can clean,

degrease and polish ovens even while they're hot, and be kept at the counter since its NSF certified. And while "We can't legally say non-slip, because as in the US, in Quebec you can get sued for anything," Cohen is confident that mopping with Earth Alive creates safer kitchens. "The floor is not slippery after mopping with

RapidAll. It makes your restaurant a safer place to work."

Oshman confirms that some products on the market labeled as green are not as environmentally friendly as they claim. Like "natural", the term green is not so regulated that manufacturers can't indulge in "green washing", the currently popular term for jumping on the green bandwagon without credentials. That's why Oshman reserves the GRA's strongest endorsement for products the association has verified with its own research. "(Earth Alive) is so much better it's not even regulated. You'll find their salespeople spraying it in their mouths!"

The best news is, green cleaning supplies, with their multiple functions, can actually be cheaper than many more toxic options. "My existing customers that want to go green, I'll match the cost of any other products they've been using," says Zall.

That makes being clean and green a pretty sparkling proposition. ☺



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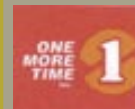


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