

The Last Plastic Straw

UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Cafés foster university ties to go zero-waste

BY ROBIN ROENKER



FOODSTORY'S Jonny Chirnside; the University of Aberdeen's zero-waste café and window signage.

As college students head back to classes for the start of the semester, many will reach for a daily cup of coffee or tea to keep their study momentum going strong. Across the globe, a growing number of cafés are working to ensure that a steady stream of student customers doesn't necessitate a steady stream of cup and paper waste.

Building a University Partnership

Last September, Foodstory Café, a vegetarian restaurant and coffee shop based in Aberdeen in the United Kingdom, opened its second location, a zero-waste café on the campus of the University of Aberdeen, one of Scotland's top universities.

The university reached out to Foodstory about setting up shop on campus as a way of improving onsite dining options for students, but the owners, who are alumni, thought, "Why not up the stakes a little and try to make it a zero-waste campaign?" explains Jonny Chirnside, a business development executive at the café.

So far, the partnership has been ideal. "We've felt very supported by the university. And it's given us the freedom to push the boat [on sustainability] a little bit more than if we were doing it fully independently," says Chirnside, noting that, to his knowledge, Foodstory's Uni café is the first zero-waste café operating in Scotland.

To cut out waste, Foodstory's Uni café does not offer takeaway cups; all

takeaway is done in reusable containers that customers either bring in or purchase on site.

"To be fair, students are quite possibly the best group to do this with, in that they're super open to the idea, super progressive, and quite likely already have a similar kind of value system," says Chirnside.

The café also offers discounts to encourage students to save and bring in used plastic takeout containers from other restaurants, which Foodstory then washes and reuses in order to provide its own food takeaway without additional waste.

To avoid plastic milk jug waste, the café sought out a local milk supplier who agreed to deliver to them using returnable glass bottles. And to skirt the

use of coffee bean bags, which are often not compostable, the Uni café sources its beans from Obadiah Coffee Roasters, based in Edinburgh, using reusable tubs that incorporate a CO₂ valve to maintain the coffee's freshness and quality.

"Building relationships is so key when you're trying to do something like this," says Chirnside, who characterizes the café's location on campus as "mutually beneficial."

"There's been a real flexibility and supportiveness on their side to work with us, and on our side, I think we've benefitted the university," he says. "It's good for the students to have a cool place on campus [to eat] that's quite progressive on the sustainability side as well."

Making Sustainability Accessible

This past June, Vertex Coffee Roasters opened its first location near the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor. Its name stems from its location at the intersection of campus and the broader Ann Arbor community.

Co-owner Kara Huckabone, who operates Vertex with business partner Matt Bjurman, owner of sister café, Milan Coffee Works, has been implementing zero-waste strategies in her personal life for more than a decade, so she knew right away that she wanted the café to do the same.

"I wanted to make [sustainability] approachable for people," says Huckabone. "You have to be really intentional [to reduce waste], and I wanted to provide choices that make it a little easier to pick the sustainable option."

From day one, the café has enacted a number of steps to reduce waste, including using cloth roll towels in the bathroom—or, alternatively, bandanas that customers can purchase and take with them—rather than disposable paper towels or napkins.

Customers can also get their whole coffee beans and takeaway food in reusable to-go tins, which they can later

return for a deposit. The shop uses no disposable cutlery; instead, Huckabone purchased an inexpensive inventory of stainless forks, spoons, and knives at the Salvation Army that customers can use while dining in. Reusable, bamboo cutlery is also sold on-site. To avoid paper waste, customer orders are taken via an app-based system, rather than written by hand.

Right now, the café serves its to-go coffee in compostable cups, but Huckabone plans to move away from single-use cups entirely by January.

"We're still exploring how that will work," she says. "I know other cafés in

other cities are doing a few different things—either a deposit system for reusable containers, or just not offering anything to go. We're still taking feedback from our customers and considering our best options."

Already, many customers at Vertex bring their own, reusable containers. Huckabone is optimistic that the young student clientele frequenting her café come fall will be on board with her zero-waste approach.

"The university has a really big sustainability program, and so I've been in contact with them to see how we can work together," she says. 



VERTEX offers beans in reusable to-go tins.

