

The Suffolk Times.

Barbara Pepe and Bia Lowe of The Old Mill Inn in Mattituck, with some of the eco-friendly products they use, on the deck of the restaurant overlooking Mattituck Inlet Monday evening

News-Review photo by Denise Civiletti



The Old Mill Inn Gets Certified

August 8, 2007

By Denise Civiletti

Long Island has its first "certified green" restaurant and it's right here on the North Fork.

The Old Mill Inn in Mattituck received certification last month by the Green Restaurant Association, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that helps the restaurant industry implement environmentally sustainable practices. The Old Mill is the only downstate restaurant in New York outside of Manhattan to be "certified green," according to Michael Oshman, the association's executive director.

The certification means the restaurant has adopted at least four "green" practices designated by the association and has committed to implementing at least four additional eco-friendly practices each year, Mr. Oshman said. The organization signs a contract with a participating restaurant and acts as its consultant, helping the restaurateur identify ways to "go green."

"It's just the right thing to do," said Bia Lowe, a managing partner of The Old Mill Inn. One of the restaurant's seven partners, Elaine Lafferty, read about the Green Restaurant Association in The New York Times earlier this year, and they decided to look into it for The Old Mill.

The restaurant now uses recycled paper products and compostable disposables — made from corn syrup and sugar cane instead of petroleum-based plastic and foam. They've changed some of the light fixtures from incandescent bulbs to new low-wattage LED bulbs, Ms. Lowe said. They are also now separating cardboard and glass from the rest of their waste, reducing the amount of trash they throw away by at least half, she said.

And The Old Mill Inn is now recycling its used frying oil — Shinn Estate Vineyards takes it and converts it to biofuel to power its farm equipment. That's a very progressive innovation for a restaurant and something The Old Mill Inn should take pride in, Mr. Oshman said.

The Green Restaurant Association works to help the restaurant industry reduce its "ecological footprint" in terms of waste generated, energy consumed and products used. The average restaurant produces 50,000 pounds of garbage each year, 95 percent of which can be recycled or composted, according to the association. The industry accounts for one-third of all retail energy use in the U.S., the group says, and is five times more energy intensive than other retail, office and lodging industries. Restaurants also typically use environment-damaging chemicals for cleaning and pest management. The industry also consumes massive quantities of water — an average of 300,000 gallons per facility each year, according to data published by the association. Buying produce shipped from distant

farms and/or grown using non-organic practices is another way restaurants adversely impact the environment.

Green practices are not all that difficult to adopt, Ms. Lowe said. It's a question of thinking about damaging practices and identifying alternatives. That's where the Green Restaurant Association comes in.

"It can seem daunting, especially to small-business owners," Mr. Oshman said. The association helps them take it one step at a time, he said.

An environmental consultant is assigned to each restaurant, to "help them go from A to Z," Mr. Oshman said. First, the association undertakes an environmental assessment of the restaurant. Then they work with the restaurant managers to decide which steps make sense, he said. "We help them work with their vendors. We provide solutions, find organic farms, and work with their landlord or property manager," he said.

"They have an amazing database of vendors who supply environmentally friendly products," Ms. Lowe said. "They helped us find new disposable cups and take-out containers to replace the plastic and Styrofoam items we used to use."

Some of the products are more expensive, noted Old Mill Inn managing partner Barbara Pepe, who manages the day-to-day operation of the restaurant with Ms. Lowe. But other alternative products and practices, such as LED bulbs or recycling cardboard and glass, produce significant savings for the business, she said.

There is some trial and error in finding the right products, the partners admitted. They are not completely satisfied with the bagasse take-out containers they've purchased. Bagasse is sugar cane fiber, so it is completely biodegradable. But the restaurateurs said the containers "weep" when food is stored in them for more than a day. "We don't want people to find their meal has leaked through in the refrigerator the next day," Ms. Lowe said. They are now looking into using containers made of 100 percent recycled paper instead of sugar cane fiber.

They've also replaced the incandescent outdoor lighting on the deck where guests can dine overlooking Mattituck Inlet. The deck is now illuminated by strings of tiny LED bulbs that look like Christmas lights. "We're not able to do this in the dining room yet, because they don't yet make a small enough florescent bulb that can fit inside the globe of the lamps and is dimmable," Ms. Lowe said. "I'm sure they'll refine that in a year or two."

The Old Mill Inn is putting water conservation measures into place, as well, installing flow-limiting apparatus in fixtures, for example, she said.

Using locally grown produce and fresh fish caught by local fishermen is an important part of being green, Ms. Lowe said. She pointed to a lobster boat tied up across the way, on the east side of the inlet. "That's our lobsterman, Jeff Kaminsky," she said. The restaurant also buys produce and other products from local growers and purveyors such as Sang Lee Farms, Catapano Dairy and Crescent Duck Farm. Framed black-and-white photos of the Old Mill's local suppliers adorn the wall next to the restaurant's entrance — "our local vendor gallery," Ms. Lowe said.

"We want our customers to know and appreciate that we're using fresh local foods here," she said — not just because it's better tasting, but because it's better for the planet, too, she noted.

Standing on the restaurant's deck, Ms. Lowe points to the osprey nest on the undeveloped waterfront across the water, where a pair of ospreys are raising three chicks. "How can you do business in an environment like this and not be aware of the impacts you're having on the environment, and not do whatever you can to preserve it?" she asked.