

The Daily News.

Galveston restaurants open to reducing plastic, but not sure how

By JOSÉ MENDIOLA The Daily News
Jan 5, 2023



Victoria H. Newsome talks about avoiding single-use plastics for the to-go packaging at EATcetera, 408 25th St. in Galveston, on Wednesday. The restaurant uses compostable and unbleached paper products for to-go orders.

JENNIFER REYNOLDS/The Daily News

GALVESTON

Some island restaurateurs are open to the idea of investing in reusable foodware to reduce single-use plastics but say they need more answers about exactly how that would work in a tourist-centric beach town.

Last month, nonprofit Perpetual said it wanted to encourage island restaurants to consider voluntarily moving to a system of using reusable foodware and containers when serving to-go meals. Under the concept, restaurant consumers would buy food in reusable foodware and return the containers to a specific bin to be washed and sanitized by a third party.

“If you get a to-go meal you will get it in a reusable receptacle and a reusable cup,” Perpetual spokeswoman Kristina Gerken said. “Instead of putting it in a trash can, you can put it in a bin that people will collect and wash and sanitize.”

The initiative will be directed at all restaurants in Galveston, including major chains, Gerken said.

We want everyone to use it,” Gerken said. “A reuse system works best when it’s immersive and full-scale and that includes all your chain restaurants and your local ones. Coffee shops and hotels or even getting soda from convenience stores.”

Reusable foodware programs have the potential to be better for the environment than single-use plastics, create good local jobs and be economically sustainable over time, Gerken said.

Programs can help cities manage their waste generation and collection, and be cost-competitive with disposables for local businesses, Gerken said.

There are about 75 reuse programs around the United States.

“I’m intrigued by the idea,” said Johnny Smecca, principal at Galveston Restaurant Group, which owns such island restaurants as Papa’s Pizza, Mario’s Seawall Italian Restaurant and Taquilo’s Tex-Mex. “We’ve seen the increase of our containers double over the years. It sounds like a great opportunity if it can be implemented systematically.”

Many of the restaurants use microwavable Styrofoam to-go containers that have been difficult to order, specifically custom containers, Smecca said.

“I like the idea of decreasing the excessive use of plastics or single-use containers,” Smecca said. “This is the first I’ve heard about it, but the idea itself sounds good.”

Although the idea of the program sounds great, there are certain things that need some clarification, said Victoria Newsome, owner of EATcetera, 408 25th St. in the island’s downtown. EATcetera uses cardboard to-go containers and some compostable products. The restaurant also embraces recycling.

One of the pitfalls of the Perpetual program is there really isn’t a recycling program on the island, Newsome said. One of the problems is millions of visitors travel to Galveston each year and the question is whether tourists would return the reusable containers to the appropriate bins, Newsome said.

Perpetual’s idea is to hire a third party, which hasn’t been named, to clean and wash the dishes placed in the reusable bins, Newsome said. The third party also will charge a fee to the restaurants using the program.

If Perpetual were to successfully develop the concept in Galveston, it would be best to start out smaller, rather than island-wide, Newsome said. Closed off areas such as events like Dickens on the Strand or Lone Star Rally would be a great place to start, she said.

Program organizers also would have to spend years educating the public on how to use the program, which might take some patience, especially with tourists who might just visit once, Newsome said.

Conceptually the idea sounds great, but there has to be more clarification on Perpetuals half, Newsome said.

Fish Taco Company chef and owner Daya Myers-Hurt agrees the program sounds like a good idea for the island where plastic pollution threatens marine life, but there has to be more clarity about executing the program, she said.

“The concept is intriguing,” Myers-Hurt said. “I approve of something that provides ecological sustainability to the island. There’s no point of living on a beautiful island if people are going to trash it.”

Fish Taco Company, which advocates for a cleaner environment through biodegradable foodware, uses wooden utensils and provides compostable to-go containers, which isn’t very common on the island, Myers-Hurt said.

“I feel if they were approved by the health department, we would be in favor of it,” Myers-Hurt said.

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