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Why your Clover food scraps might be headed for the dump



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Brick Ends Farm's chief executive James Gist sifted through the six-month-old raw compost pile composed of leaves and food waste, including compostable paper and plastic products.

By Janelle Nanos | GLOBE STAFF JULY 01, 2016

When the lunch rush ends at Clover, the local vegetarian food truck and restaurant chain, its customers only have one place to toss the scraps of their chickpea fritters: the compost bin. That's by design, as the restaurant's

founder, Ayr Muir, has painstakingly built one of the most ambitious composting programs in the city, one that costs him as much as \$200,000 a year to maintain.

Every few months, he spends a small fortune buying containers and utensils made of cornstarch-based plastics that will break down alongside the food scraps that his customers create, paying a hauler to truck it all away to nearby composting farms.

So Muir was outraged last month when he learned that Save That Stuff, the Charlestown hauler he hired to handle his compost, had been taking bags full of it from three of his restaurants to the dump. The problem, the hauler said, was that his compost was too “dirty” — often contaminated with outside trash that patrons tossed.

Muir’s frustration over the accusations spilled onto the Web in a series of widely circulated blog posts and has prompted a conversation about the efficacy of composting programs that ask customers to pitch in. And it’s raised questions: Can the public be trusted to sort out compostable materials from trash? Or are we too lazy and uninformed to do it right? Should we even be using compostable forks at all?

The answer, it turns out, is complicated.

The US Department of Agriculture has found that each year in America, 133 billion pounds of food go uneaten, or about 31 percent of the available food supply. To help stem this tide of trash, Massachusetts enacted an organic waste ban in 2014, mandating that all institutions that create over a ton of



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waste a week— from universities to supermarkets — find ways to divert food scraps away from landfills and compost it instead. Some large institutions have gone further and introduced programs that compost not just food, but the cups and other tableware you use to eat it, relying on customers to do the sorting. Smaller businesses, like Clover, aren't subject to the ban, though a handful have adopted such programs.

But composting only works if it's done right.

Organic food waste — potato peels, apple cores, and leftover scrapings from plates — breaks down without much trouble, says James Gist, who runs the Brick Ends Farm composting facility in South Hamilton. But when you add compostable tableware to the mix, things get tricky, he said, as it needs to be exposed to extremely high temperatures and can often take nearly a year to decompose, if it does at all. Some brands are so poorly made, they don't properly biodegrade.

“That stuff is hard to get rid of,” Gist said. “If it becomes too many cups and spoons we can't break it down.” He said he's had to turn away bags of compost that are just too contaminated. And once a year, he takes a truckload of utensils to the dump. It's typically a mix of metal and plastic tableware that has accidentally slipped into the compost bins, plus a sampling of biodegradable forks that managed to survive the year-long composting process.

When farms reject dirty compost, it puts haulers like Save That Stuff in a bind about what to do with it, said Adam Mitchell, the company's chief executive.

“You can't trust the public to do a clean sort that's acceptable at compost facilities,” he said. The problem might come down to a mismatch of how much the public is trying to compost versus what the composting facilities can actually handle.

“The consumer market for these items advanced far faster than the end-of-life processing outlets,” Mitchell wrote in a blog post responding to Muir’s complaints.

Haulers throughout the area say they face similar challenges.



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Compostable tableware offers the promise of less waste, but it doesn’t always break down as planned.

Gretchen Carey, the recycling and organics coordinator for Republic Services, the hauler that handles Harvard University’s compost, said that as the demand for composting has increased in the state, it is allowed the farms that process the organic materials to become more selective. “They really want the food scraps, they will put up with the compostable materials,” she said.

In 2011, when Save That Stuff first began to notice problems with consumer composting programs, it responded by splitting up its routes. Clean compost would go to nearby farms, and dirty routes would head to WeCare

Environmental, one of the region's largest mixed-waste composting facilities.

But that relationship soured when Save That Stuff and WeCare found themselves embroiled in a spat this past year. Save That Stuff claimed WeCare became unreliable. WeCare countered that it banned Save That Stuff from dropping off dirty loads last November because the hauler went months without paying fees.

The squabble boils down to one result: Boston now has fewer options for disposing dirty compost.

That's led Save That Stuff to reevaluate its mission. After years of helping businesses develop composting programs for their customers, starting in August the company will only truck away food scraps.

It will instead refocus its composting operation on the new anaerobic digester that's being built at its Charlestown headquarters, which will be used to create energy in the form of methane gas.

In the meantime, Mitchell, the chief executive, has announced a "reeducation" campaign, enabling companies to undo the very programs Save That Stuff helped them create.

The move has been watched closely within the city's restaurant and food rescue community.

"Save That Stuff has been around for a long time," said Athena Lee Bradley, a projects manager for the Northeast Recycling Council. "It would be a huge change for the Boston area."

Jonathan Burke, vice president of visitor experience and operations at the Museum of Science, has worked with Save That Stuff for over a decade and said he was surprised to hear of the change. He said they'd been in talks about

introducing a composting program for visitors. “I was under the impression that come fall, we could pilot something here,” he said when a reporter told him of the shift. “It sounds like that’s a little bit different now.”

Mitchell argues that the move is a reflection of the realities of the new composting economy. He says he hauls 35 to 40 tons of compost a day, but the economics don’t make sense for him to continue to encourage companies to use compostable dishware — and he says the risk for contamination ultimately creates more environmental harm than it does good.

That’s led forward-thinking businesses to reassess their plans.

“We need to make the determination: Is post-consumer waste composting something that is doable with our vendors?” asked Michael Oshman, president of the Boston-based Green Restaurant Association, which helps restaurants and organizations like Microsoft and the New York Times implement food waste diversion programs. “Sustainability and environmentalism have to exist within the marketplace,” he said.

Nora Goldstein, editor of BioCycle Magazine, which covers the composting industry, said she is skeptical of Mitchell’s claims that his company’s decision to move away from composting tableware is best for the environment. “It’s always a slippery slope when somebody decides to rationalize and explain their situation as something more global,” she said.

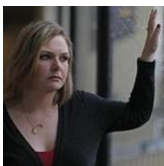
In the meantime, Clover says it will soon change haulers in an attempt to maintain its composting program, and Muir expects that it won’t be alone in making that move. Last month, Taco Party, a Somerville-based restaurant and food truck chain, ended its composting relationship with Save That Stuff after learning of its hauling shortfalls.

“I’m trying to do the right thing with the trash,” said the company’s owner, Keith Schubert. “The facilities have to catch up with what’s on the market now as far as those products. Recycling was probably a mess at first, too.”

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