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To protect and serve: Product packaging even your composter will love

It is hard to ignore the trend. Bio-based plastics and eco-friendly disposable materials are hitting the mainstream, and are all the rage in foodservice. Even supermarkets carry plates, cups, utensils and bowls made from bagasse (a sugar cane derivative), PLA (a plastic resin made from corn starch), and other materials derived from potato starch and fermented corn starch. Foodservice professionals can easily find clamshells, hot cups and other service items that are biodegradable, and therefore compostable.

Unfortunately, application of bio-based products and biodegradable plastics is limited when they are intolerant of heat variations. These materials are effective for foodservice but are not necessarily shelf-stable, which can make them unsuitable for packing and storage of coffee and tea. Fortunately, some companies are finding and using eco-friendly materials that also protect the integrity of their products.

PULP FACT—PROTECTING AND SERVING THE LEAF

Tea packagers have stepped up to the environmentally friendly plate by using recycled cardboard and paper products for boxes and tea bags, and by finding alternatives to tree-based tea bags. Tea Forte of Concord, Mass., and Mighty Leaf Tea of San Mateo, Calif., use corn silk tea bags, while Ojai, Calif.-based Zhená's Gypsy Tea uses both corn-silk and hemp tea bags. Both types can be recycled in a home composter along with food. "I have them all over my garden," says Zhená Musyka, owner of Zhená's.

Musyka sources her hemp-pulp tea bags offshore. She says she chose hemp because it's renewable and strong, and she was trying to avoid tea-bag paper made from regular wood pulp. "We're trying to make a zero-waste product."

WHAT ABOUT THE BEAN?

Whether ground or whole-bean, coffee needs protection, and roasters have few options. Even recycled kraft bags must be

lined to protect the product. Bags with polyethylene linings are neither recyclable nor compostable, and few are strong enough to be reused more than once. Plastic bags offer protection but not sustainability.

Jack Macy of the San Francisco Department of the Environment says composite materials such as plastics made from a combination of petroleum-based and bio-based materials are problematic



DON'T TRASH IT

"Just because it's biodegradable doesn't mean it will disappear," says Steve Mojo of the Biodegradable Products Institute in New York. Biodegradable items put in traditional landfills are typically mummified in the capping process that is performed to protect groundwater. One study cited at bpiworld.org found 40-year-old newspapers that were still legible in a San Francisco landfill. Biodegradable disposable products can be recycled through the composting process. While materials such as PLA and bagasse may not break down in a home compost pile, they decompose within 45 days in the commercial composting process.

Eco-product distributors and manufacturers

worldcentric.org

treecycle.com

biodegradablestore.com, a division of ecoproducts.com

baristaworks.com, a division of stralt.com

planetcanit.com

independentcan.com

because they contaminate the recycling stream and effectively degrade the quality of post-consumer resin.

While recyclability is important, Macy acknowledges that across the United States, there currently is little economic incentive for individuals, businesses or governments to change their habits. "A lot of places have these really huge landfills. It's cheaper and more profitable to landfill it."

Cereplast Inc. in Hawthorne, Calif., is now the largest bio-based plastic manufacturer in the country. Yet the problem with compostable plastic, according to Cereplast CEO Frederick Scheer, is the lack of federal legislation and composting infrastructure. "You have only 4,500 sites, and less than 500 will accept food waste," he says. Compostable plastic is considered food waste.

In that vein, Steve Mojo, executive director of the Biodegradable Products Institute, cautions businesses to take care in selecting

Educate and empower yourself and your customers

An informed consumer is an empowered consumer. For further information about packaging, recycling and composting that you may pass onto your customers, visit these Web sites:

bpiworld.org: Look for the article "Bio-based, Biodegradable—Are You Confused?"

recycle-steel.org/PDFs/brochures/foodservice.pdf

epa.gov/garbage/recycle.htm

materials while acknowledging that there are applications where it is highly beneficial to increase the use of renewable materials. "You need to understand all of the life cycle impact, so that selection is informed and supported by data, not just by what you think is good."

Scheer notes that, even with bio-based and biodegradable plastics, we are several years away from seeing an impact on the plastic industry. "It is a concern for everyone," he says. "The first thing we can do is recycle, and then second is reduce our consumption."

Of course, one way to reduce consumption is to reuse products. Packers, roasters and retailers are becoming increasingly aware of the length of a product's life cycle. An emerging goal of forward thinkers is to extend the life of their packaging. Mark Inman, president and cofounder of Taylor Maid Farms, says that despite the push toward biodegradable PLA, he is less interested in biodegradability or recyclability and more interested in reusability. A box that is recycled only once or twice and then tossed in the landfill does not save as much energy as a container that can be reused for years.

One sustainable option for packaging your coffee or tea for retail is glassine-lined kraft bags. Glassine is a very thin air- and water-resistant paper that is non-toxic and disintegrates in the hot waters used to recycle paper. Inman is not impressed with this method, however. "If you look at printed bag runs from a small company, usually they're on tight budgets," says Inman. "The bags look terrible, don't fit well, and that package looks nowhere near as good as a printed can."

RECYCLING AN OLD IDEA

For both coffee and tea, an old idea is re-emerging as a new way to stand out from the crowd with gorgeous, strong packaging. Steel cans are shelf-stable and recyclable. According to the Steel Recycling Institute, consumer product recycling of cans has increased from about 15 percent per year in 1988 to more than 60 percent per year in 2006. More importantly, steel cans are infinitely recyclable and equally reusable.

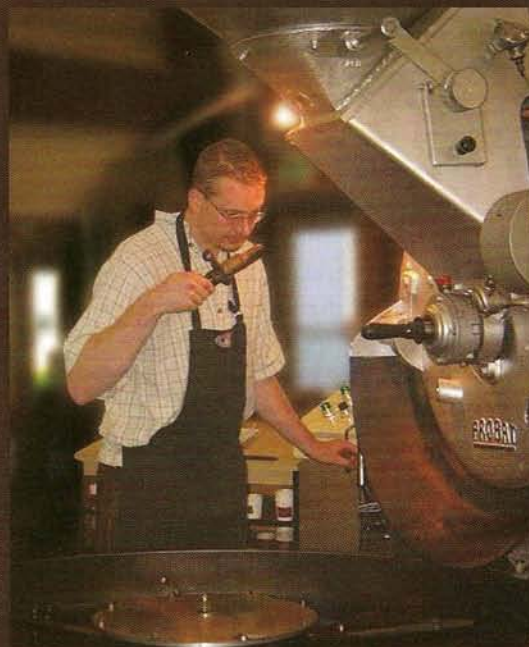
Virginia Price, president of Planet CanIt (packager for Silver Joe's Coffee, Harrods Tea and Rishi Tea, among others), says it's more cost effective and more sustainable for manufacturers to use recycled steel than virgin ore. She claims, "Recycled tinplate uses 70 percent less energy in its production."

Steel manufacturers have been recycling tinplate and industrial steel for more than 100 years. Price boasts that cans are the perfect packaging for eco-friendliness, and adds that because of their premium look, most of the products avoid the recycling process. "They rarely get thrown away," she says. "People reuse them, fill them with something else and re-gift them. It really doesn't have any limitations."

Steel is food-safe, odorless and stronger than other types of packaging. Coffee and tea packaged in steel have an increased shelf life over beans and leaves packaged in paper or plastic because the metal barrier does not allow light into the package.

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MASTER LEVEL ROASTERS KNOWLEDGEABLE CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPERT BUSINESS SUPPORT



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"You can also have very high-quality, high-grade printing, which makes it upscale in its appearance," Price says. She notes that another benefit of metal is that it can be easily shaped. "We consider shape to be one of the biggest differentiators on the shelves today as far as getting attention from the consumer."

Musyka of Zhená's Gypsy Tea uses tea tins that are shaped and printed with her signature logo using a non-toxic ink that bonds with the metal—no glue or paper is used, so the tins are 100-percent recyclable for those who opt out of reusing them. While she does not share information about her suppliers, Musyka says that rather than going through a broker, she works directly with the factory where the tins are printed. "Packaging is a lot of fun, but it's really difficult to be totally sustainable."

One of the original building blocks of Taylor Maid Farms is that its products have to be certified organic and come from farms that believe in whole-system agriculture. The other company tenet is that everything it uses must be sustainable. Taylor Maid began using steel-can packaging in 1994, and customers are invited to refill the cans anywhere Taylor Maid coffee is sold, with any of its fresh whole-bean or ground coffee, for \$5. This represents a huge savings over the price of a 12-ounce bag of coffee.



TIN-TASTIC: Taylor Maid's steel tea tins are reusable, recyclable and biodegradable.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Every year in the United States, **27 million tons** of garbage is thrown away. Much of that is food waste or recyclable material. If you see a lot of food going into the trash, you might consider serving less food in each order and/or putting a "compostable waste only" bin at your bussing station. This waste can include food scraps, tea bags (without staples), and biodegradable plates, cups and utensils.

To ensure the bio-cycle continues, go to findacomposter.com to find a commercial composting facility near you. Biodegradable plastic will not break down in a home composter.

Inman says the model has been wildly successful. "The customers love it. They act as if it's some revolutionary idea, but it's actually a very old idea. It harkens back to the milk man when you would leave your container on the porch and they would take it and trade it out for full bottles." Taylor Maid's sales quadrupled in the first year it initiated the refill program.

Inman follows the same basic practice with his loose-leaf teas, but with smaller cans. He uses Maryland-based Independent Can because when he switched to steel, Independent was able to do smaller runs of cans and custom printing for companies. Says Inman, "One of the ideas was for a fully printed can in colors that

not only looked more professional, but also when you were trying to sell your products wholesale, the can would 'pop.'"

He has maintained the relationship with Independent Can over the years, even though Taylor Maid's runs are now large enough to use a bigger manufacturer. Planet CanIt also works with startups that need small runs. "We have clients who do as few as 6,000 tins to start, and then we sit back and watch them grow," says Price. "We'll do the deferred gratification."

Short runs of steel cans can actually be less expensive than paper bag runs, even when considering unit-by-unit cost; when you factor in reusability, you're making less packaging. Inman says Taylor Maid's average customer owns four cans that they fill once a week—which adds up to a lot of coffee. "I am not positive if they are consuming all 40 ounces themselves or if they are purchasing for their household, but this has been the average for some time now."

When customers come in and say, "I forgot my can," it's a perfect opportunity to sell them a new can at a higher cost, but Taylor Maid has instituted a loaner program at its locations." Says Inman, "It would be silly for them to buy a new can if they don't need it. In the long run, I'm not in the business to sell them a new can; I'm in the business to create repeat refills." If a customer refills a can five times, which they're likely to do, Inman has more than made up the profits from a new can. This practice also creates goodwill and customer loyalty. "I see many cans that are 15 years old, and they're refilling them every week, and there's a certain amount of pride with that, to see them coming through." ■