Main Event Caterers captures caterer of the year award

Going green, for Main Event Caterers in Arlington, Va., started from the ground up. The ground, being the home compost pile of Chef and Partner Joel Thevoz, where he transported the company’s kitchen scraps to grow juicy tomatoes, bright bell peppers and emerald cucumbers.

He shared his gardening secret with friends and neighbors, supplying them with brown paper bags stuffed with compost to promote community growing. This launched the company into an undivided commitment towards reducing its waste and awakening to more environmentally sound business practices, which in turn awarded them this year’s Catering Magazine Caterer of the Year.

Burying the trash
Main Event’s green initiatives ignited over two and a half years ago by a spark of
observation of the amount of waste they were creating as a byproduct of running a business.

“It was a rather sobering moment,” says Thevoz. “It’s similar to looking at the dirt gathered along the baseboards of your house – when you really look you start to notice that you have it all over the place.”

He and Nancy Goodman, vice president and partner, witnessed truckloads of bags filled with plastic and trash hauled away as a result of sizable events.

“When you look at that, when you look at the overflow of garbage, you get this kind of sickening feeling and you think this is just not right,” Thevoz reflects.

Goodman and Thevoz started to explore ways to mitigate the excess. The first step involved transferring Thevoz’ home compost operation to the back of the Main Events building, where it became more manageable. Donations of brown leaf mulch from the county helped the process, since the property backs up to county land.

Curtailing off the philanthropy of his home garden, the company continues to offer the community its compost. It also donates used cooking oil to a bio diesel cooperative, which turns it into fuel for its delivery vehicles, reducing the need for fossil fuels.

Wilting away

The second facet of wrangling-up the garbage was getting its recycling program in check.

Apprehensive about the challenge of managing recycling off premise, where some control is lost because the off-premise staff comprises independent contractors, Thevoz says having designated recycling bins allowed him to create a new policy for staff.

“We thought the off-premise staff would fight us tooth and nail, but on the contrary, they were very receptive and thought it was a great idea to recycle on a large scale,” says Thevoz.

Between the recycling of organic and plastic products, Main Events has eliminated up to 70 percent of its landfill waste. It measures this by the number of garbage pick-ups required, which was reduced from everyday to every other day.
He hopes the rooftop greenhouse, with a hydroponics system, will support the growth of mainstay crops such as tomatoes, onions and herbs.

During the time frame, the company looked at what disposable products it was using, especially Styrofoam. Though Styrofoam wasn’t a big part of its waste, it still showed up, such as with seafood shipments. Thevoz told his fish supplier that it no longer wanted to receive seafood in Styrofoam boxes. He also started using disposables made from palm tree scraps and cups made of corn starch.

“I feel really good about the fact that whatever trash we create, is trash that will actually disappear within a reasonable amount of time,” he explains. In the right environment, the disposables will biodegrade in a few weeks or months, according to Thevoz.

He’s also toying with the idea of melting the company’s recycled glass from beer, wine and water bottles to develop a line of buffet platters and small dishes.

Main Events will install a water purification and gassing station in the spring, which will allow for the bottling of its own natural and sparkling waters. These types of systems are common in high-end restaurants, according to Thevoz.

“Ultimately, we will be incurring less waste by reusing glass bottles and also mitigating the transport of water from Europe,” he says.

Let the sun shine in

The green movement became kinetic. The company recognized the vast amount of electricity and therefore natural resources consumed. After going though a usage audit, it found a company that matched its usage to an equivalent amount of electric power created from wind power – in other words, it purchased carbon credits.

“We are not powered by wind, but what we did was purchase the wind power for someone else to use,” Thevoz explains.

Furthermore, the company studied other utilities used in the form of gas and travel. By keeping a tally on the amount of miles its trucks were driven and a tally on the expected commute of its employees, a measurement is taken of the amount of natural gas used. It then purchased carbon off-sets to neutralize its footprint. The offset is equivalent to 200 metric tons of carbon dioxide.

Main Events installed sunlight concentrators on its roof for solar power. The big, plastic bubbles allow light to funnel through a highly reflective conduit 20-feet down into the offices and warehouse.

The company can operate during the day without having to turn on any lights, which offers a vast amount of energy conservation, considering large industrial lights in the warehouse can remain off. “Our building is similar to that of a concrete bunker,” jokes Thevoz. “Without the addition of the sunlight concentrators, it would get very little light.”

It also partnered with a Web hosting company that is powered by solar panels and uses Opteron powered IBM servers. These servers use 60 percent less energy and generate 50 percent less heat.

Let it rain!

When the sun doesn’t show its face, the opposite weather can be just as beneficial. Main Events is developing a system to reclaim rainwater to use in its facility. Based on initial calculations, this project would reclaim more than 400,000 gallons of water per year.

Thevoz says the plan is to place rainwater harnessing systems at the back of the building, which would consist of a 10,000 to 20,000 gallon tank. The tank would catch the water that cascades down from the rooftop. The rooftop can generate approximately 40,000 gallons of rainwater a month.

“Obviously I don’t need that much water, but if I can capture a certain part of that, I would be wealthy with free water,” he shrieks with excitement.

Thevoz plans to use the harnessed water to irrigate a rooftop garden, which is another ambitious project of his. The rooftop garden would erect on the flat, 10,000 square-foot roof space of his warehouse. While hurdles consist of zoning, licensing, and structural issues, he hopes the rooftop greenhouse, with a hydroponics system, will support the
growth of mainstay crops such as tomatoes, onions and herbs.

One vision Thevoz has for the rooftop garden is to be able to offer clients the possibility of participating in the growing of a crop for their future events. It would appeal largely to the bridal market. After the staff discusses the growing period of the vegetable or herb with the client, it would supply the seeds and plant them together. The staff would manage and harvest the crop.

"It’s a concept that I’m not sure is feasible to manage, but it’s worth a try," Thevoz says. "I’m always up for a challenge."

A hot topic

The idea of harnessing resources arises in the area of escaping heat as well.

A project still in initial stages, Main Events is working to engineer a system designed to reclaim wasted heat from the dishwasher, laundry machines and refrigeration units, which would be used as a heat source for many in-house applications.

Thevoz says the idea was one of those "light bulb" moments. "It’s interesting when you think about it, we’ve got 180-degrees coming out of our dishwasher and then going right down the drain, I started asking myself, what can I do?"

The municipal water arrives at 60-degrees and the washing cycles pushes 180-degrees, through the use of a closed loop geothermal process, they can raise the temperature of municipal water to 140-degrees, equaling 80-degrees of free heat, according to Thevoz. "The savings would be in natural gas, but most importantly in saving energy from going to waste."

An actual prototype for the geothermal heat transfer system was built through a new partnership with a company in Florida which builds geothermal systems. Main Events plans to move its laundry system and equipment to the adjoining warehouse, which will grant the opportunity to re-build the plumbing system.

"I feel that we’re doing things that are right and that have helped us in our mentality and the dogmas of our company," explains Thevoz.

"I believe that everyone here can say: ‘Alright, we feel pretty good about what we’re doing.’ I think most people are environmentally conscious to an extent and being able to work at a company that is following this path is good," he adds.