

La Fiamma Wood Fire Pizza

Recently I sat down with Ken Bothman, co-owner of La Fiamma Wood Fire Pizza at Railroad and Chestnut in downtown Bellingham, to talk about how he's working on being as sustainable as possible in his business. Ken had called me to see if he could take the Whatcom Watershed Business Pledge, a volunteer waste & water pollution prevention program the local Department of Ecology administers through Sustainable Connections. As I was preparing for our meeting I thought to myself, "Ken is a member of Sustainable Connections, he's active in the Think Local First campaign, I'm sure he's doing pretty well recycling, using non-toxic cleaning products, maybe minimizing his car trips, probably using local produce as much as possible..." But I had no idea what I was in for.

The first hint that should have clued me in was that Ken called me. Usually, it's the other way around – I spend time contacting businesses that have taken the Watershed Pledge in the past or have indicated interest in some way, and encourage them to set up an appointment to take it for the first time or recertify their existing Pledge. Not with Ken. One day I got a call from him saying, "Cathy, I'd like to take the Watershed Pledge. On my coupon in the Think Local First Coupon Book last year there was no Watershed Pledge logo where other businesses had one, and I don't want La Fiamma customers thinking I'm not doing everything I can to run a responsible business."

As I sat down with Ken to go over the Pledge checklist (Do you use rechargeable batteries whenever possible? Do you encourage employees to walk, bike or take the bus to work?), I started with, "Tell me a little about what you're doing at La Fiamma to promote and encourage sustainability?" Ken focused his eyes on me in his composed, unassuming way and said simply, "Well, we've almost achieved zero-waste."

Oooh-kay.. um... (sure Ken).

"What do you mean by 'zero-waste'? Can you tell me a little more?" I asked absently, thinking mostly about what I would order for lunch if we were meeting at La Fiamma instead of my office.

"This August we switched out our trash dumpster for a food scrap compost dumpster. We were able to make some changes in our product purchases and practices that allows us to recycle/compost nearly ninety percent of our disposables.

We have found a plastic alternative made of cornstarch that can be incorporated into SSC's food scrap recycling program. This allows us to 'throw away' all of our leftover food scraps as if we're using a conventional disposal system. Our staff has been very excited by this change!"

What? Wow! Is this for real? Through the course of the Pledge interview, I learned about a myriad of activities Ken has been involved in over the last few months to achieve his zero-waste goal. Over the last year or so La Fiamma has installed hand dryers in the rest rooms – eliminating paper towels, purchased a steam cleaner for most cleaning activities – cutting down on chemicals, and even found cornstarch straws for a compostable sipping alternative!

And in light of the commitment that each Sustainable Connections member makes to Strong Community, Healthy Environment, Meaningful Employment, and Buying Local First, Ken has also installed bike racks in front of the restaurant, complete with a

complimentary company bike and lock for employees to use around town. If only all of us had that kind of encouragement at work to leave our cars at home!

I got to know Ken at the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies conference a little over a year ago in Philadelphia. Our Sustainable Connections team all attended, and so did Ken – the only local business owner from our region to do so. We were sitting at a banquet table over breakfast the second morning when I caught his eye across the table.

“So what made you decide to take the trip all the way out here for this conference, Ken? It’s really cool you came, but I’m just curious – why did you want to come?”

He kind of shrugged and looked away, cast his eyes around the hall of entrepreneurs, community activists, academics, and innovators, and explained, “I’m just really interested in learning more about sustainable business and communities. Well, and plus – I haven’t had a good Philly Cheese Steak in a long time.”

Ahh... way to go Ken, a two-pronged approach to research: sustainability and food. Good combination – that’s what I’ll order.

Ken and his partner Dan have recently embarked on a new business venture, Fiamma Burger, which currently serves all-natural burgers out of a food truck at the farmer’s market. They have a burger fan who’s also an organic farmer (Mike from K&M Farms) that agreed to grow organic iceberg lettuce. Who knew of such a thing? I really wouldn’t be surprised if the Bothman’s eventually served up a mean Cheese Steak in addition to their fabulous sustainable business practices some time soon.

What’s next for La Fiamma on their journey towards sustainability? Visit them online at www.lafiamma.com.

Sustainable Connections is business network establishing and supporting a local living economy that sustains itself, our community, and a healthy environment – now with almost 500 members! Learn more about our programs and how you can join by visiting us online at www.sconnect.org or www.thinklocal.org.