

Line Producers Guide to Sustainable Catering for Film & TV

by Emily Williams

Sustainable catering is lauded as a key contributor to reduce the carbon impact of a production, yet few caterers embed sustainable practices in their business model because it is expensive, preferring to hide behind a façade of tick-box adjustments that Line Producers are ill equipped to interrogate. Catering is often a last-minute booking where costs alone are discussed, with maybe a nod towards compostable disposables and meat-free Mondays is made but little else is discussed or considered.

Catering can provide an enormous contribution to reducing the carbon impact of a production but if LPs have little knowledge of what makes a film caterer sustainable, then it's unfair to expect higher sustainability standards.

Sustainability in film catering is not just about the carbon footprint of the menu. Providing a figure of how many beef dishes versus vegan dishes were served, or discussions on how to reduce single use paper products is merely the cocoa sprinkles on a deeply extravagant cup cake.

How can producers and production assistants get a better grasp of the questions to ask and the red flags to spot? To ensure that the catering contributes the utmost to reduce a production's overall carbon footprint, small adjustments and considerations will massively reduce your production's carbon footprint. Here's what you need to know.

What is Sustainable Film Catering

You know it's more than just the food selection. It's about:

1. Where the food is grown/raised
2. Agricultural practices employed and their environmental impact on the land
3. Reducing fertilisers and pesticides
4. Animal welfare
5. Transport food miles
6. Packaging
7. Fair wages for staff
8. Ethical purchasing and Fair Trade
9. Intelligent Menu planning
10. Waste management especially food waste, compostable waste and paper cup recycling collection

The aim must be to reduce poor practices and encourage positive systems to improve sustainability.

Reducing poor practice

Poor practice thrives without due diligence. The three key areas of poor practice are:

- a) Customer food choice – wanting meat every day, wanting chips with meals or deep-fried items, use of single-use disposables including paper, compostable, plastic and polystyrene each with their own sustainability issues.
- b) Budget/cost – the lower the per person spend the greater the incidence of cheaper lower-welfare meat/fish, heavier fertilised dry goods from poorer land, internationally airfreighted goods, use of monocrops and non-seasonal items.
- c) Weekly pre-planned menu – cheaper produced packaged items/bulk-buy catering packs of processed food/meals, less nutritious meals, plant-based foodstuffs often having a greater carbon footprint in their production, packaging and distribution than vegetables, carbs and dairy/dairy alternatives (globally, soy is 90+% GMO and most often within the supply chain deforestation has occurred, almond milk is the worst offender using 5 litres of water to create one almond)

Encouraging good practice

Customer food choice

Weekly menus that include meat-free days can only reduce the production's footprint if those meals are replaced with freshly cooked vegetarian meals and not by bulk-buying highly processed, carbon-heavy plant-based foodstuffs like tofu or Quorn or catering-size refrigerated/reheat meal items made in a factory with multiple supplier lines; items such as vegetarian lasagne, vegan rolls, tofu-anything; foodstuffs that are not nutritious and often source the cheapest ingredients from non-sustainable sources or processes and are heavy with transport miles.

It's also worth remembering that air-freighted vegetables and fruit can create greater gas emissions per kilo than poultry sourced from a local butcher. Some vegetables are carbon-heavy, like asparagus which if not locally produced has the highest carbon footprint of any vegetable eaten in the UK; 5.6 kilos of carbon dioxide for every kilo because much of it in the UK is airfreighted from Peru. And dairy alternatives like almond milk or coconut milk have their own horror stories with water usage greater than dairy (3.2 gallons of water per almond seed), pesticides and GMO (soy milk) to meet international demand, very poor wages for the growers (coconut milk) and deforestation (soy products).

- Insist that all crew members provide their own drinking vessel for hot/cold drinks eliminates the need for disposable paper cups.
- Book a waste company that accepts food waste *and* compostables disposal.
- If your production/caterer has to use paper cups, then it is essential your waste provider has signed up to the National Cup Recycling Scheme which offers paper cup disposal for specialist recycling to remove the plastic (polyethylene lined cups are 95% fibre paper and 5% polyethylene plastic lining which makes the cup waterproof).
- Without a protective dining space, the practical choice for crew is to eat from disposables. But this is not the sustainable choice. A meal bus/dining tent allows crew to choose metal cutlery as opposed to single-use wooden spoons or compostable/plastic cutlery and choose metal plates over paper clam shells or cardboard meal boxes. In doing so they massively reduce single-use waste including plastic, cardboard and compostable plus there's usually less food waste as food isn't being eaten on-the-go.
- Ask your caterer to advise you on where they are sourcing most of their meat, fish, dairy and groceries. Raise this in discussions before booking their services as the per person cost will be higher, and if it is not, then something doesn't add up.

- Bear in mind that frequent Unit Base changes does reduce the caterers ability to buy local.
- The earliest you can advise caterers on movements, the better the catering. Giving late updates on catering numbers seriously impedes their ability to plan and buy from local suppliers because small local businesses don't operate on a just-in-time model.
- Hot boxing is anti-green. The fuel used to transport the cooked food, keeping food hot not just on the journey but at location for the duration of lunch, the quality of meals/food deteriorates, risk of bacterial infection increases, plastic-lined cardboard and foil lined bags are difficult to recycle, additional wrapped plastic or compostable cutlery waste.
- Two hours continuous lunch service uses more heating than having a set period for lunch.

Budget

Increasing the per person budget by one- or two-pounds Stirling can either increase the profit for the supplier or give you a more sustainable menu. To get the latter and contribute to the former, here are the questions to ask:

- a) Where do they get their dairy, meat and grocery from? Food transport accounts for up to 50% of direct emissions from road vehicles, so it is essential for productions to keep food miles down. The answer you are looking for is 'a local business' (grown and processed relatively nearby to where they are sold, purchased and consumed) and not a national supplier delivering locally.
- b) How do they manage food waste? The answer is they have very little because their chefs use bones & veg peelings for stock, excess food is reused to produce afternoon breaks or the next days' meals/snacks, they produce very little cardboard as their chefs cook rather than open catering-sized boxes of meals ready to reheat/serve.
- c) What happens to oil waste? Sustainable caterers tend to shy away from deep-fried foods like chips, battered chicken/fish etc, because these items use a lot of oil which should not be reused as it holds no nutritional value and is 100% waste product. That said, all oil should be collected from a registered oil-recycling waste collector.
- d) Low budget often means minimum-wage staff = not adhering to the real living wage commitments, less experienced/committed staff.
- e) Lower pp charge pushes caterers to use cheaper foodstuffs from national distributors, oftentimes with lower welfare, higher carbon footprint, great use of pesticides or fertilisers in their production plus greater airfreight costs coming from mass monocrop producers.

The problem with Approved Suppliers

With few exceptions, large studios with Procurement departments partner with national catering businesses as approved suppliers. What's wrong with that?

- 1) Local: It is at odds with the values of sustainability which holds at its heart 'local'. National caterers may have local divisions which is great, but if they do not have a base in or within 40 miles of the Unit Base/s, then checking the Albert database for local film & TV catering would be preferable as it reduces accommodation charges, transport charges, increases the options for local food suppliers and local employment opportunities (pot washers, commis chefs).
- 2) Staffing: Large catering businesses invariable pay minimum wage and give zero-hour contracts which is against the spirit of sustainability.

- 3) Purchasing: large companies have approved suppliers too with foodstuff lines chosen for agreed bulk buying savings rather than quality. This reduces flexibility in the menu and can lead to boring, unimaginative meals produced by uninspired chefs.
- 4) Sustainably sourced items are more expensive and reduce profit margins. This means that larger caterers will not risk their 'bottom line' and therefore avoid producers that create more work or require a more flexible approach in purchasing or ordering.

Checklist

- 1) If there is an Albert-approved caterer within 40 miles of your production, use them.
- 2) Draw up a checklist to discuss with your caterer how they will actively reduce their carbon footprint on the production.
- 3) Increase your catering per head budget but insist on sustainable initiatives like compostable cups (if they can be collected), no beef (the least carbon-friendly meat), using local butchers & grocers, having chef-prepared meals rather than cooks reheating refrigerated catering packs, reducing hot boxing by having chefs serve from bain maries on location.
- 4) Insist on Fair Trade purchasing where possible.
- 5) Embrace the positive trade-off between the increase in the per person rate and the measurable initiatives your caterer can employ to increase sustainability and that you can report on, to reduce your production's overall carbon impact.
- 6) Book a dining bus/ dining tent and encourage dinner breaks for crew. It encourages set eating times, uses less fuel, uses less heating, easier for caterers to order from local suppliers, reduces caterers hours improving kitchen wellbeing – most catering is 11 hour shift which is lengthened with unit moves and hot-boxing.