

Recycling vs rubbish

It's quick to consume a takeaway snack or coffee yet the packaging persists in the environment for decades. So how can the industry clean up its act? By **Clea Sherman**

WHEN THE ABC'S *War on Waste* (hosted by *The Chaser's* Craig Reucassel) aired on TV in 2017, it unveiled an inconvenient truth: our daily takeaway coffee habits are on the brink of causing an environmental disaster. Fifty-two megatonnes of waste are generated in Australia every year, with disposable coffee cups and food packaging making up a large part of the rubbish going into landfill. As *War on Waste* revealed, Australia is ranked fifth highest globally for generating the most municipal waste.

Before the program aired, many Australians reassured themselves that coffee cups can be recycled. Unfortunately, the plastic lining of most of these cups means this is not the case. Those billions of vessels are ending up in landfill, where they take up to 50 years to break down.

Reucassel's investigation, along with rising awareness across social media, has led to a strong push from consumers for environmentally sustainable food packaging options. This has resonated throughout the

industry, with many cafes, restaurants and catering businesses taking steps to be part of positive change.

Sustainable solutions

Tom Lunn is group general manager for marketing and innovation at Detpak. While he has noticed the calls for eco-friendly food packaging options have been increasing over the past four years, *War on Waste* prompted a frenzy of feedback on the subject. "The pressure from consumers means brands have become more willing to act," says Lunn.

To supply consumer and venue requests for sustainable solutions, Detpak has now released its first completely recyclable single-use coffee cup. Instead of being destined for landfill, Detpak's RecycleMe™ cups can be turned into usable paper.

Along with the US and Ireland, Australia is one of the first countries to offer RecycleMe™ coffee cups. As Lunn explains, the cost of the product will initially add around an extra 10 per cent to what would be paid for 'normal' cups. However, this cost is

expected to decrease as demand rises.

Large venues hosting sporting events and festivals have also been seeking planet-friendly packaging alternatives. Australia's Vegware offers plant-based, compostable takeaway food packaging. As director Paul Rayner says, consumers don't require a container that is going to last forever when they buy a hot dog or hamburger. "It only needs to last the amount of time it takes to eat your food!"

Vegware supplies venues around

"The pressure from consumers means brands have become more willing to act."

Tom Lunn, marketing and innovation group general manager, Detpak



Kristin Camery and Byron Liang sitting on a bail of shredded RecycleMe™ cups.

“At Three Blue Ducks, we are making every effort to reduce our dependence on packaging, however the real challenge is to make unnecessary packing irrelevant in the future.”

Laura McKenna, head chef,
Three Blue Ducks



Australia with coffee cups and food containers that can be commercially composted and take only around three months to break down. In terms of the return on investment, Rayner explains that it can cost up to \$300 per tonne for businesses to send non-biodegradable waste to landfill. In contrast, organic waste removal per tonne can cost closer to \$100.

Growing the eco-revolution

Three Blue Ducks in Sydney's Bronte has a mandate for serving authentic, ethical food and being at the forefront of 'conscious consumption'. This extends to takeaway packaging. Head chef Lauren McKenna comments, "We try to use biodegradable or recycled packaging, offering products such as 100 per cent recycled paper envelopes, paper bags instead of plastic and compostable coffee cups, lids and straws.

"These small actions we take as an establishment ensure the safety of our environment. By using sustainable packaging, we are reducing our carbon footprint and reducing our impact on the planet," adds McKenna. "Plus, using sustainable packaging is cost-effective as it is roughly around the same price or cheaper."

Three Blue Ducks is part of a local plastic-free initiative, which aims to reduce the use of single-use plastics. "Our neighbouring establishments are all working with us to make a difference," McKenna explains, "and the majority of our customers

are happy with our packaging."

Restaurant & Catering Australia (R&CA) also acknowledges it has a significant role to play in minimising the carbon footprint of the food and hospitality industries. "The issue of eco-friendly and sustainable takeaway packaging and what can be done to prevent food waste more generally is generating increasing traction among the industry, with various restaurants, cafes and caterers implementing their own measures to tackle this growing problem," says CEO Juliana Payne.

To encourage more responsible practices, R&CA has been running its Green Table Accreditation program since 2009. This education and certification program recognises those restaurants, cafes and catering businesses that adopt practices to reduce their environmental footprint such as using products that are recycled and biodegradable wherever possible.

The bigger picture

While compostable and recyclable coffee cups are a step in the right direction, they need to be part of wider change. As Lunn explains, introducing coffee cups that can be recycled into paper is only the first step. The next part of the process is to encourage consumers to dispose of their cups in the right places and to make it easy for establishments to make ensure the cups are recycled.

"Food service outlets using RecycleMe™ cups need to have a

collection station in their restaurant and back of house bin," says Lunn. "From there, they can call on a paper recycling company, which will come and collect used coffee cups."

At Three Blue Ducks, as well as being offered planet-friendly packaging, customers are encouraged to either eat in or bring reusable coffee cups and containers. The restaurant also works to minimise waste by purchasing in bulk and using milk bladders instead of bottled milk. "We are making every effort to reduce our dependence on packaging but the real challenge is to make unnecessary packing irrelevant in the future," says McKenna.

R&CA's Payne agrees. "Using eco-friendly packaging can be beneficial both on a cost level and for the environment but these strategies need to be complemented by other environmental initiatives. A wider approach towards sustainability encompasses all aspects of running a business, whether that be electricity, water usage or minimising food waste."

As well as reducing landfill, food and beverage outlets can leverage their use of sustainable practices to stand out in a crowded market. With many consumers actively seeking to support environmentally responsible businesses, implementing even small changes can provide return on investment in the form of good publicity and a broader, more loyal customer base. **R&C**