

Green and Healthy Restaurants on the Strand

The Grand Strand resort area has a vast number of restaurants of almost every imaginable type and style, serving pancake breakfasts, café lunches and casual dinner dining that runs the full range of prices and quality.

This year, *Natural Awakenings* begins searching for restaurants that embrace the future of dining—that includes not only exceptional food quality, but better nutrition, accommodation for special diets, serving locally grown foods in an energy-efficient building, and reducing waste as much as possible.

Natural Awakenings readers look for restaurants that understand natural health and green living. Many of them are into fitness, and at the same time, are sensitive to the Earth and the plight of industrial farm livestock. They read ingredients on labels, shop at the local farmers' market and buy organic when they can.

Survey results:

Locavore

Nearly every restaurant that responded indicated that they serve local SC farm products, in season, as a percentage of their menu offerings. In our survey, several restaurants were making a bigger effort to include local produce for their menu: **Renaissance “Heart Healthy” Bistro**, in Surfside; the new **Venetian Grille**, in Garden City; **Black Thai**, in Myrtle Beach; and **Zoe’s Café**, in Market Common. Interestingly, when one enters the **Venetian Grille**, one is actually walking through a small herb garden that owner Sean Burke takes advantage of for the kitchen, daily.

Building Efficiency

Surprisingly, many surveys indicated zero points for conservation and energy efficiency. Simply installing energy-efficient lighting is a start. More efficient refrigeration and air conditioning is another step, along with better building insulation. Winners tended to be restaurants in newer or renovated buildings with the latest building technology, like the café at **Bay Naturals**, in Myrtle Beach, **Zoe’s Café**, **Black Thai** and **Renaissance “Heart Healthy” Bistro**.

Waste Control

Again, every business should be doing what it can to avoid waste by recycling. Simply contracting for collection of separated recyclable trash is an easy step to take. In this category, the grand prize goes to the lunch cafés at **Bay**

Naturals and **New Life Naturals**, in North Myrtle Beach, for not only managing recycling to a high level, but also using carryout packaging and tableware made from recycled materials. On the retail store side, **Bay Naturals** and **New Life Naturals** offer discounts to shoppers who bring in their own reusable shopping bags.

Whole and Natural Foods

Natural Awakenings readers search out natural farm foods, and taking that a step further, will buy organic where available and free-range, natural meats from farms where they know animals are well cared for. Restaurant owners may begin to consider adopting the organic trend. **New Life, Bay Naturals, Renaissance “Heart Healthy” Bistro** and **Black Thai** all report making that effort, buying free range and organic when possible.

Special Diet Accommodations

Many *Natural Awakenings* readers choose vegan and vegetarian diets, and find it difficult to get main entree items in some restaurants that satisfy their needs. Restaurants can make very simple adjustments to existing menu items to create a generous selection of special-diet and allergy-free options. For very serious allergies, always get a doctor’s recommendation and instructions. For vegan and vegetarian options, all restaurants offer salad and meatless dish selections, and the Thai restaurants—**Black Thai** and **Thai Season**, in North Myrtle—both have menus that feature a large number of items that can be made vegetarian. Pescatarian (vegetarians who eat fish) can find many seafood restaurants accommodating, especially **Mr. Fish**, in Myrtle Beach. Gluten-free and nut-free menu options are hard to find, due to the lack of knowledge by chefs about food allergies in general, but the **Venetian Grille** is planning an alternative menu with gluten-free pasta substituted for wheat pasta.

Sea Safe

The SC Aquarium has a sustainable fish program, as does Greenpeace and other organizations that are attempting to develop criteria that may help endangered fish populations recover. **Mr. Fish** owner Ted Hammerman uses farmed tilapia and local non-endangered fish, but also wild-caught fish from sustainable resources in South America. While Chilean sea bass, an endangered fish on watch lists, still appears on the **Mr. Fish** menu, diners can still vote with their wallets and choose to buy only the most sustainable fish instead, the same way we can choose to buy free range and organic.

The evolution of restaurant dining on the Grand Strand and the state will certainly continue, and our prediction will be that more organic, natural and whole foods will slowly appear in increasing amounts on menus. Our seafood selections will shift to more farmed fish, alternative-diet menus will become more common, and vegetarian and raw food options will increase to include more daily specials and signature dishes. Recycling and energy efficiency will expand when restaurants catch on to both the economic and good will benefits of doing so.