

Food



Everything's gone green . . . James Grainger-Smith and Arthur Potts Dawson, owners of the Acorn House Restaurant

It's no longer enough for a restaurant to flag up its organic credentials. Now chefs are trying to make sure that every part of their operation is eco-friendly – even if that means employing worms to help with the rubbish. **Vicky Frost** reports

Eat up and save the planet

And this is where we're going to put the wormery!" Arthur Potts Dawson is bounding around a room full of rubbish – or rather, not that full of rubbish. A bank of overstuffed recycling bins, a pile of crates to be reused and a sparse smattering of real, landfill rubbish are the only evidence of the 800 meals dished up by Acorn House Restaurant last week. Above us, on the bin-store roof, a few squares of turf mark the beginnings of a city

garden; a place for the seasons to flourish in the grimly urban landscape of King's Cross.

"You'll be able to look out of the kitchen window and see it all changing," Potts Dawson (formerly head chef at the River Cafe) says, leaping a fence at one bound on to his freshly laid lawn. He has the spring of a child in a playground, rather than an executive chef who has just set up a restaurant the hard way – oh, and has a week-old new baby. Because Acorn House has not just been about picking fancy chairs and

creating new dishes; it has been one great slog of uncovering the most eco-friendly way of doing things. This is a restaurant so green that even its fridges are doing their bit for the environment; the most sustainable restaurant in the capital.

"It just came naturally to me and Arthur," says James Grainger-Smith, the other half of the Acorn House partnership. "Restaurants create a lot of waste, you know, and this was a chance for us to really focus in on this. 'Let's touch everything we can with

sustainability and eco – from the chemicals to these table-tops.' Everything that's not recycled is recyclable. Everything we touch we're trying to find a way to deal with it properly."

The idea might have been straightforward, but the execution is less so. Sourcing seasonal, sustainable produce is time consuming; hunting down eco-friendly paints, cutlery and staff uniforms demands dedication. It has been, Grainger-Smith admits, hard work – and expensive.

The scale of the Acorn House project – it is also a training restaurant with the aim of turning out new green chefs (both Potts Dawson and Grainger-Smith were involved in Jamie Oliver's Fifteen) – makes it something of a groundbreaker. But the principles of reducing food miles, eating seasonal local produce, and recycling as if your life depends upon it (because, actually, it might) have already started to catch hold in the industry.

Just round the corner from Acorn House sits Konstam at the Prince Albert, which opened earlier this year to great fistfuls of publicity due to chef Oliver Rowe's decision to source all his produce within the M25. Organic? So what? It's eco-friendly that seems to be the current restaurant buzz word.

I mention this to Potts Dawson; that this swell of public opinion must have been useful when it came to opening Acorn House. He gets a bit cross: "I think we have to be really clear here – we haven't done this to be cool, we haven't done this to have a good press kit or have a unique selling point. We've done this because we want to open a training restaurant for young people to learn how to cook. And Jamie and I believe that these people have to learn the next step of cooking, which is understanding a product and where it's going after you've finished with it. Whether it's cool or not I don't care. We're doing it because it's important for the environment."

Of course, an industry that is so married to the environment (no crops equals no dinners) cannot afford to vaguely hope that everything will work out fine. But, equally, customers are no longer prepared to hand over their money for food with dubious origins; those air-freighted Kenyan beans are no more acceptable on a swanky restaurant plate than steaming away on the hob at home. Keeping up with your customers makes smart business sense, even if it that is not your primary purpose.

Certainly, Barny Haughton hopes so. A West Country champion of seasonal, local organic produce, the chef has recently opened his latest venture: a large deli/bistro/cookery school on the Bristol harbourfront. Everything has been done with 

Green grass of home

Unable to find a guide to guilt-free holidays in the UK, Laura Burgess decided to write her own

It's seemingly easier to find an eco lodge in east Africa than it is to source environmentally friendly places to stay in our own backyard. Not because of a lack of all things green in the UK – the Green Tourism Business Scheme has certified over 1,000 places in England and Scotland alone – it's just been difficult to put your finger on where they all are. Which is why, after spending an inspiring weekend at an eco lodge in Lincolnshire, Laura Burgess decided to write her own directory of over a hundred restaurants, festivals, child-friendly visitor attractions and places to stay in the UK that have “an ecological conscience”.

Imagine sitting in a bath looking out over a beautiful Welsh bay from the comfort of a tiny eco cottage, knowing that when you step out and pull the plug, you won't be polluting the sensitive coastline. Or tucking into an organic medieval banquet warmed by a roaring fire with wood that's been taken from a sustainable Suffolk forest. Or enjoying a gourmet meal in

a restaurant knowing that what you're eating has been caught that day or sourced from within 10 miles?

Even take aways can be green if you know where to look – Harbour Lights in Falmouth sources fish from sustainable stock and has ditched polystyrene trays in favour of cardboard.

A grander project is the Ecos Millennium Environmental Centre in County Antrim, one of the UK's leading green attractions, which has a multitude of interactive zones and nature-inspired activities. Entry is free.

Staying – and eating – guilt-free doesn't mean you have to compromise on standards. Strattons Hotel in Norfolk is as luxurious as it is eco-friendly and Acorn House restaurant in Kings Cross – one of the grittiest parts of London – has just won Best Newcomer in the Observer Food Magazine Readers' Awards. A model of sustainability, the restaurant provides fresh, seasonal menus and offers training to young people selected from the local community. And in Edinburgh you can enjoy a slap-up meal at the stylish, Apex Hotel, which recycles all its waste, donates its old furniture to local charities and uses eco-friendly washing powder to fluff up the towels.

And it needn't be a schlep to go green. Instead of chugging along



Local heroes... (clockwise from top) Acorn House; Strattons; Ecos



the Norfolk Broads on a diesel boat, you can ride on a solar-powered one that doesn't disturb the wildlife on the banks. Or hop on a bus out of Nottingham city centre and within 20 minutes you could be spotting kingfishers and bitterns flying over a nature reserve. Else make the most of a short break by visiting whisky distilleries in the Highlands of Scotland or explore the Kent Downs on foot by



joining a walking tour less than a mile from Faversham train station.

As Burgess says, “It's about looking closer to home and enjoying holidays just as much in this country as abroad.”

Richard Hammond

● *Ecoscape is free from the Britain and London Visitor Centre in London and other selected UK tourist information centres, and also at ecoscape.org with a charge of £3.65 for P&P.*