

Pioneering hospitality company funds environmental research study on benefits of using sustainable home compostable food packaging

Proprietors of independent Venus Co. tell GLEN KING how sustainability is in their DNA, and their latest investment to help to save our Devon beaches.

Internationally multi-award-winning South Devon hospitality business, The Venus Company (loving the beach®) with four stunning beach cafe locations across the county, commissioned an in-depth case study by Cranfield University on the environmental impact of using sustainable palm plates for their Venus cafes.

Michael Smith, Louisa Newman, and Lee Porter opened The Venus Cafe (loving the beach®) at Blackpool Sands, the site of the original 'The Venus Tea Hut', started by Louisa's mother, Lady Newman in 1958. Today the company is an environmental champion with three beautiful South-Devon beach locations open all year round with cafés; takeaway and shops, located at Blackpool Sands; Bigbury-on-Sea and newly opened Broadsands in Paignton. A fourth site, East Portlemouth a short, picturesque ferry ride from Salcombe opens from Easter through the summer season.

The ethos of this pioneering business is sustainable development. They were honoured with the Queen's Award for Enterprise in Sustainable Development in 2005 for 'providing the best al-fresco Mediterranean-style dining experience in a UK beach setting whilst integrating environmental and social care into every business decision'. Winning the award again in 2010, the Judge's comment was 'a rare example of a sustainable cafe-chain'.

The Venus Company commissioned Cranfield University, a British postgraduate public research university to carry out a study on the difference between using environmentally friendly palm plates, wood cutlery and home compostable packaging vs. ceramic and china crockery with metal cutlery.

"Our mission is to be the greenest café and shop operator, says Michael, and why we made a significant investment into research from Cranfield University to analyse the environmental impact of home compostable v. china and dishwashing all day. We've found resistance from some of our customers struggling to understand the benefits of using palm plates and paper cups which are more environmentally friendly, than reusing china cups and plates and sending to landfill when broken. We want to educate people that by eating with us contributes towards lower CO2 and helps safeguard our lovely Devon coastline."

Palm plates are made from the Areca palm, indigenous to India with dense forests. Local villagers and farmers collect dead leaves, rinsing each raw sheath with water to remove dirt and air-dry naturally. The leaves are then hand-stretched and flattened, turning what would have been an agricultural waste product into disposable and environmentally friendly dinnerware, which is disposed of along with food waste, or on the compost heap.

Michael explains: "There are minimal carbon emissions involved as the palm plates and wooden cutlery are single use; so, shifting to eco-friendly products is our priority to protect the planet for future generations. It's essential for the hospitality and food industry to develop



Venus Co. Founders: Louisa Newman / Michael Smith / Lee Porter



Four-legged customers are welcomed at three of the Venus Beach Cafes



'Life's a beach' for the happy Venus staff - Photo credits: Guy Harrop



Petit sole n fries served on sustainable palm plates

natural and renewable home compostable materials, eg. corn, wood, fibre, grass, leaves. Our home compostable palm plates and hot drinks cups and lids are made of components and materials that should fully decompose into the soil within a matter of weeks, leaving nothing behind but nutrient rich compost."

The research by Cranfield University focuses on the environmental impact of tableware by comparing ceramic and palm leaf plates, stainless steel, and wooden cutlery to identify which has a lesser effect on the environment. The comparative life cycle assessment (LCA) of biobased, once-use 'crockery' utensils with conventional ceramic utensils that are washed by machine and used repeatedly.

Dr Adrian Williams, Cranfield University confirms: "Venus reduced its recurrent carbon footprint from serving food by 66% through swapping conventional serving utensils for bio-based, single-use plates and cutlery. The biggest benefit was eliminating the necessarily energy intense washing up, therefore,

reducing electricity and water consumption. Being early adopters maximises the benefits, but excessive over-exploitation of the bio-resources will have negative effects. Negative waste management reduces the benefits while positive waste management increases them."

He concludes: "The study carried out a comparative, cradle-to-grave, life cycle assessment to quantify climate change and water impacts of ceramic plates and palm plates, steel cutlery and wooden cutlery. The results show that making and using palm plates and wooden cutlery have lower global warming potentials and water impacts than reusable ceramic plates and steel cutlery, which incur very high manufacturing impacts. In conclusion, the overall impact of changing to palm plates and wooden cutlery; potentially saves Venus causing the emissions of 3.2 tons of CO2 equivalents per site."

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www.lovingthebeach.co.uk