



Secluded East Portlemouth beach is reached by ferry from Salcombe.



Photo: Guy Harrop



Photo: Venus Company



# Handing us greener beaches on a plate...

The owners of a legendary beach food chain tell GLEN KING how sustainability is in their DNA and all about their latest investment to help to save Devon's beaches

**M**ulti-award-winning South Devon hospitality business The Venus Company – which has four beach café locations across the county – recently commissioned an in-depth case study on the environmental impact of switching to sustainable palm plates for their eateries.

Michael Smith, Louisa Newman, and Lee Porter originally opened The Venus



Photo: Guy Harrop

Venus Company founders Louisa Newman, Michael Smith and Lee Porter.

Café 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, opened



Photo: Venus Company



Photo: Guy Harrop

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 judges' commented that Venus Co was "a rare example of a sustainable cafe-chain".

The Venus Company recently 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 cafe and shop operator," says Michael Smith, "and that is why we made a significant investment into research to analyse the environmental impact of home compostable versus 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 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, and harvested from 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 adds: "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 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 focused 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) compared biobased, once-use 'crockery' utensils with conventional ceramic utensils that are washed by machine and used repeatedly.

Dr Adrian Williams of Cranfield University confirms: "Venus reduced its recurrent carbon footprint from serving food by 66 per cent 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.

## KEEPING THE BEACHES CLEAN

Some 75 per cent of Venus' customers take food away to consume on the beach. Environmental measures the company has introduced to reduce litter and waste include:

All food packaging is now home compostable/biodegradable.

In 2021, Venus introduced new bins, allowing customers to separate their waste into cups/lids/food and cans.

None of the waste goes to landfill. Food waste is separated at each site and collected to go to a processing plant, where it is used to generate electricity.

Chlorine and phosphate-free cleaning materials are used to minimise toxic emissions, reducing risk of spillage into the ecosystem.

Paper beer cups will be introduced this year.

Venus is making a big push to eliminate glass in favour of cans, which creates less CO2 in transport and is easier to recycle.

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." ♦ [lovingthebeach.co.uk](http://lovingthebeach.co.uk)

**ABOVE LEFT:** 'Life's a beach' for the happy Venus staff.

**ABOVE CENTRE:** A Venus Company Full English breakfast served on a palm plate.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Dog friendly, four-legged customers are welcomed at three of the Venus Beach Cafés.

## AT THE FOREFRONT OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

20 years' ago, Venus Co banned plastic straws.

It has never used polystyrene, plastic plates, or cutlery.

Venus hot cups and lids compost at home within six weeks.

Venus won't sell any product in a plastic bottle or container.

Many customers take used cups and plates

home to re-use as plant pots.

This year Venus' plastic use will be further reduced with introduction of Earth-friendly packaging Natureflex™ to wrap their hand-made products produced on site and to replace plastic clingfilm. This material is made from wood cellulose and is home compostable.