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Green Globe International Talks Sustainability with Renowned Chefs and Restaurateurs Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger

Owners of restaurants in Los Angeles, Santa Monica and Las Vegas talk about going green in the restaurant industry and how they inadvertently became sustainability “poster girls”

Green Globe International, Inc. (stock symbol: GGII), the worldwide owner of the Green Globe brand, has partnered with the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, Green Seal, Inc., and dineLA, a part of LA INC., The Los Angeles Convention and Visitors Bureau to deliver a green business certification program for the City of Los Angeles. The program was announced by Los Angeles City Councilman Richard Alarcon at a press event hosted by celebrated chefs and restaurant owner/operators Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger at their Ciudad restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, California.



Green Globe recently had the opportunity to sit down with Mary Sue and Susan at Ciudad to discuss how they have implemented sustainability initiatives at their restaurants.

Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger have long been champions of the environment. Their restaurants, which include Ciudad and the popular and critically acclaimed Border Grill in Santa Monica, California and Las Vegas, Nevada, feature a variety of environmentally-friendly policies.

Business partners for over 25 years Mary Sue and Susan are authors of five cookbooks, including *Cooking with Too Hot Tamales*, *Mesa Mexicana*, and *City Cuisine*. They are television veterans, starring in almost 400 episodes of Food Network’s popular “Too Hot Tamales” and “Tamales World Tour” series. In addition, Border Grill and Ciudad dishes starred in the 2001 Samuel Goldwyn feature film, “Tortilla Soup.”

In addition to their commitment to the environment, Mary Sue and Susan are active members of the community, playing leading roles in many charities, notably Share Our Strength and the Scleroderma Research Foundation.

Green Globe met with Mary Sue and Susan at Ciudad, where the following sustainability policies have been implemented:

- Ciudad serves its customers water from the Natura water purification system instead of offering bottled water transported from around the world. The reusable glass bottles provide an environmentally-friendly alternative to the waste associated with the manufacture, transport, and disposal of conventional bottled water.

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Interview with Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger of Ciudad and Border Grill

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- As part of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program, Ciudad prepares lesser known, delicious, sustainable seafood like Arctic char, black cod, and barramundi as appealing as perennial favorites like salmon. As part of the Seafood Watch program, Ciudad also distributes pocket seafood guides to customers.
- Working with Oceana, a leading international conservation organization, in their Stop Seafood Contamination campaign, Ciudad does not serve swordfish or most species of tuna. Oceana aims to reduce the amount of mercury released into the environment, as well as educate the public about the risks of consuming fish with high mercury levels. As part of Oceana's campaign, Ciudad agreed to remove swordfish and most tuna from its menus because of high mercury content. (After much research, Mary Sue and Susan recently decided to occasionally serve albacore tuna as a low-mercury alternative to high-mercury bluefin, bigeye, and yellowfin tunas)
- Ciudad also does not serve Canadian seafood and has joined the Humane Society's "Protect Seals" Campaign. Ciudad took a pledge to boycott Canadian seafood products until Canada ends its commercial seal hunt.
- Ciudad developed a program called "Good for the Planet, Good for You" giving guests the opportunity to choose dishes made with at least 80% plant-based ingredients. Because 18% of greenhouse gas emissions come from livestock-more than from transportation-and Americans eat about twice as much of the daily protein recommended by the USDA, Ciudad is encouraging guests to get meat out of the center of the plate and build the meal around vegetables, grains, beans, salads, and fruit.
- Ciudad uses organic long-grain rice, black beans, eggs, milk, and coffee, as well as beef, lamb, and uncured pork raised without hormones and antibiotics. The restaurant uses seasonal, locally grown ingredients whenever possible and does not use any products containing artificial trans-fat.



Green Globe International: What has been your experience in implementing sustainability programs here at Ciudad?

Mary Sue: The biggest thing we've learned is to take small steps, don't overwhelm yourself. We want to be green and sustainable all at once, but it's hard to for a business to handle all that much change right away. Here we've discovered that if you overwhelm the team and yourselves with so many new initiatives too fast and too many things all at once, it can become counterproductive

Susan: It is a lot of information to try to absorb. To get the team to get on board, it is better to tackle one thing at a time.

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The “Too Hot Tamales” Talk Sustainability in the Restaurant Business

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MS: We started with sustainable seafood, and we got really inspired and excited. Even with that, we got some pushback and resistance from our staff who were worried about the effect of taking certain dishes off the menu, but we felt really passionate that we were not going to continue to serve fish that our grandkids wouldn't be able to eat.

S: With the seafood, it started with being sustainable according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium program. Then we started working with Oceana, and not serving tuna that are high in mercury, even if it was sustainable, which took another level of fish off the menu. Then we partnered with the Humane Society on Canadian seafood. So it is challenging for the team, and the staff needs to be excited about serving alternatives: Arctic char or black cod...

MS: ...and then you have to sell it to the customers.

GG: What has been the economic impact from your sustainability initiatives, for example, the water filtration system here at Ciudad?



MS: Water is a big part of your bottom line business in the restaurant business. You make a lot of money from bottled water, and when you stop importing it from Italy, storing it, and selling it at a mark-up, you first have to figure out if it's as delicious a product and then factor in how to cover the cost of installing the machines and keeping them up. You want to be careful that you don't have a food critic who comes in and says, "Now they're charging me for tap water." It is really about educating the staff, in a business that is people intensive, both from the staff and customer side. If you prepare talking points for your staff - this is how we have been able to effect the change successfully with our customers.

S: The customer looks to us to get them excited and educated. You get the customers on board by saying, "We don't have salmon, but we have Arctic char - this incredible fish. Try it." It's a new experience, so you can get people there, but it takes the staff being on board, so they can push people to try and explore something new.

MS: It becomes a part of the company culture. I now have people coming to me, making suggestions for more environmentally friendly lighting and toilets. In the beginning you think, how can I ever convince the staff of 300 people to really get on board with this, but if you take it one thing at a time, and let it sink in, and let it become part of the routine, then you can add the next step.

S: The staff gets excited because they feel like they're working for people who care about things that are important to them too. A lot of them are interested in knowing that we are doing these things.

MS: You attract like-minded people. It really does pay off in that way - it defines you as a business. People work for you not only for a paycheck but because they want to feel good about what they are doing. That makes a difference.

S: As long as you can help people to understand, to start to get it. You can see the city changing. We have people walking in now all the time, asking if the fish is sustainable. Ten years ago, no one had any idea what that meant.

GG: You have Ciudad here in downtown and the Border Grill locations in Santa Monica and Las Vegas. Do the sustainability initiatives you have at one restaurant differ from the others?

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Border Grill Santa Monica

Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger Talk Sustainability

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S: They vary a little.

MS: They do. Here (at Ciudad) we have hormone free and antibiotic free meat and all organic dairy, rice and beans.

S: In Santa Monica, we are composting and all of our to-go containers meet the city requirements (In 2007, Santa Monica banned the use of non-recyclable plastic containers), so there are differences in each restaurant. But, each restaurant also learns from what the other is doing. It also depends on when each of the buildings was built. We built this restaurant 10 years ago, Las Vegas 10 years ago and Santa Monica 20 years ago. One of the most important things is to get the message out to anyone opening a new restaurant and can put some of these things in, like LED lighting and water conserving fixtures, from the beginning, rather than having to change over.

GG: You are an active part of the green community here in Los Angeles. What are your feelings about that and the new LA certification program?

S: We are excited to be part of the city certification program as it is put in place. I am speaking at a conference at UCLA, and the hotel that is hosting it has been certified through the city program. I was reading an article about it which said that the hotel has saved over \$200,000 a year through its sustainability program. We haven't seen that kind of savings yet. We are working on it and believe we are getting there. Some businesses can make big changes and see savings right away. We're headed that direction.




GG: What has been your experience on the cost savings side?

MS: We aren't seeing dramatic cost savings yet, but we are convinced. We believe in sustainability, and we believe that we are going to incrementally see more savings as time goes on. If you look at the last 10 years and the different initiatives we have taken on, I think we have seen no difference to our bottom line. There have been costs involved, in changing over to organic rice and beans, the sustainable seafood, the water program, the composting, the to-go containers...

S: I don't think it has affected us negatively, and it had definitely affected us positively in terms of image out there. It might have cost more...

MS: I'm sure we spent more, but I think it was offset. This is why we say, especially for small business people, to start with one thing. It takes some of the fear away. You start with one thing, and it's successful, and you feel how happy it makes your co-workers, your staff, and your customers, and then you think, well, I'll try another thing, and it starts to really snowball. We didn't sit down 6 or 8 years ago and say, let's become the sustainability poster girls. It was just that this was the right thing to do.

S: We were moved when we went to this conference at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. We left there and thought, it's our responsibility to make a statement because we in this industry can effect change in what happens to our oceans.

MS: We have such a responsibility. 70% of the seafood in the world is consumed in restaurants, and we have a responsibility to ensure that our oceans are not negatively impacted by what we choose to serve. That should be everyone's responsibility. 

More information on Mary Sue and Susan can be found at <http://marysueandsusan.com>.

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