

Creating a Sustainable Food System at McMaster's Department of Family Medicine

Student Authors

Ameena Shakeel, Social Sciences | **Cherish Zhang**, Science

Ravi Verma, Science | **Shruti Cheetu**, Science

Community Project Champions

Tracey Carr, Executive Director, Department of Family Medicine

Cathy Risdon, Professor and Chair, Department of Family Medicine

Joanne Cordell, Executive Office Lead, Department of Family Medicine



An example of a sustainably catered event.
Photo credit: Jill Sauve, Unsplash



Overview

One-third of all food produced for human consumption goes to waste, which is equivalent to approximately 1.3 billion tons yearly.¹ The implications of food waste have economic and ethical ramifications. Besides the evident monetary loss from food waste, it poses an ethical issue locally as the city of Hamilton is greatly affected by food insecurity. Approximately 12% of Hamilton households struggle to afford food.² The catering industry contributes significantly to this food waste,³ which is why the Family Medicine Department at McMaster aims to create a sustainable food system for catering. The goal of our project was to create a sustainable food guide that focuses on reducing food waste, while considering the broader social and environmental ramifications in the catering process.

Objectives

1. Identify social, environmental, and dietary considerations for sustainable catering
2. Create a sustainable catering score card to generate a database of caterers
3. Develop a guide of best practices for sustainable catering

Reporting

To achieve our first objective, we worked with our Community Project Champions (CPCs) to identify the social, environmental, and dietary considerations that were important to them. We consulted relevant literature and existing resources for sustainable catering. Aligning the goals of our CPCs and existing best practices, we identified 13 key considerations including companies that are owned by or supporting equity-deserving groups, that provide compostable and/or low waste packaging, and/or that offer common allergen-free food options.

To achieve our second objective, we used our 13 considerations to create a scorecard whereby each consideration was used as a criterion assessed on a 3-point scale. To generate our database of sustainable caterers, we used our score card criteria as keywords to search local caterers that would satisfy the scorecard criteria. We created a database of 16 local catering companies containing our evaluations based on information from their websites and follow-up phone interviews. To make the database user friendly, we added additional details including contact information, pricing, and ordering options.

To achieve our third objective, we developed a guide to support those responsible for choosing who to order from and what to order. The guide includes practices to consider before, during, and after ordering. Examples from our guide include ordering beverages in bulk and requesting guests to bring their reusable mug, making a compost bin available to capture organic waste, and donating leftover food. We have made this guide a living document, so others can contribute, grow the database and support sustainable catering at McMaster University and in our local communities.

Collaborators

We would like to thank our Community Project Champions, Tracey Carr, Cathy Risdon, and Joanne Cordell for their guidance and support throughout the project. We are also grateful to other members in the Department of Family Medicine for the feedback provided on the scorecard. We extend a special thank you to Abbie Little and Dr. Kate Whalen from the Academic Sustainability Programs Office. We thank the businesses who contributed to the creation of our guide.

See a full list of references [here](#).