

# The Last Plastic Straw

## New Life for Leftovers

### Community Partnerships Help Cafés Reduce Landfill Waste

BY ROBIN ROENKER

**H**oping to reduce their shops' landfill waste, many cafés are forging innovative partnerships to ensure that organic materials, like coffee grounds and food scraps, find their way into compost bins rather than dumpsters, and that items with reuse potential, such as empty jute bean bags and wood pallets, find new purpose.

#### Alakef Coffee Roasters

In Duluth, Minnesota, Alakef Coffee Roasters goes through perhaps 80 to 100 bags of beans a week. That means the shop's stack of discarded jute bags can pile up quickly. But rather than pitch them into the landfill, Alakef makes them available to anyone who wants them.

"We have had a long-term open-door policy with regard to local farmers and landscapers coming in and repurposing our jute bags," explains Alakef head roaster Ezra Bennett, who notes that a good portion of the bags are picked up by a local organic composter, along with the shop's food waste and coffee grounds. "The bags generally last about 18 months or so until you can't recognize them anymore, and you just till them right into your soil as compost."

Alakef's jute bags are also often used by landscapers as biodegradable grass-killing material to prep areas for reseeding or sodding, or to insulate around trees. School groups use them for sack races. Crafters sometimes repurpose them as tote bags or belts. Hunters use them to carry their duck decoys. The uses vary widely—but everyone in town knows the bags are freely available and up for grabs.

The same come-and-get-it attitude prevails around the café's wood pallets, which are picked up by a citizen who grinds them into chips as a biomass fuel source.

"We start with [posts on] Craigslist, but this is a small town, so it's really easy to become connected with a network of people who would actually use the stuff," says Bennett.

#### Achilles Coffee Roasters

In San Diego, Achilles Coffee Roasters founder Chad Bell has been partnering with a local initiative called Food2Soil to turn his organic waste into compost fertilizer for more than two years.



"We had all of these coffee grounds that were going out to the garbage. I had just moved to San Diego from San Francisco and was used to composting there," says Bell. "I searched for local composters and came across Food2Soil, which was just getting off the ground."

Both San Diego Achilles locations compost their coffee grounds and food scraps with Food2Soil, which provides plant-based compost to local community gardens and backyard growers, and also serve as community drop-off points for area residents who also wish to compost their food scraps.

"Food2Soil was designed to promote a decentralized network of community

compost hubs in San Diego," says Sarah Boltwala-Mesina, executive director of Inika Small Earth Inc., which oversees the composting program. "Our vision is to have a compost hub in every neighborhood, so that people who don't have the space or time to compost in their backyards can take their scraps and know they will be composted for them."

Individual residents can purchase monthly or single-use access to drop off their scraps through Food2Soil, and partners like Achilles serve as the custodians of the compost receptacles.

Between the start of its partnership with Food2Soil in June 2017 and the beginning of October 2019, Achilles had diverted 18.7 tons of organic scraps from the landfill, Boltwala-Mesina estimates. During that time, their efforts reduced CO2 emissions by 12.9 metric tons—the same effect as reducing emissions from



31,625 passenger vehicle miles, according to Food2Soil's estimates.

"Nearly every day, a customer will see our compost bin outside, and it leads to the conversation that, 'Oh, yeah, we do composting, and there's community composting here as well where you can drop off your own scraps,'" says Bell. "And that often encourages others to come online [with the initiative]." ☑