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Serving sustainable food? Now you can prove it.

Consumers say they want sustainable meals. An independent, third party organization will verify that's what you offer.

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Spending a bundle so your building meets LEED certification standards makes a statement about your restaurant's commitment to sustainability. Now you can back it up by having your food become SPE certified, verifying your commitment to health and sustainability standards for meals that come out of your kitchen. A new study shows both moves can pay off with customers.

The Green Building Certification Institute administers the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification process. It provides independent, third party verification that buildings are designed, constructed, operated and maintained to meet high performance standards on sustainability and related environmental factors.

A number of restaurants nationwide have built or renovated facilities that meet LEED standards. Chipotle Mexican Grill has a platinum-level LEED unit in Gurnee, IL, and an LEED gold store in Minnetonka, MN. Casual dining standout Founding Farmers in Washington, DC, is LEED-certified gold; and QSR chains McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts each feature a LEED-certified unit on their rosters.

These restaurants typically pay more upfront during the design and construction phases of their project, but save a bundle on operations and maintenance over the life of the restaurant. They also enjoy the massive green street cred that LEED certification bestows.

The LEED rating systems are "developed through an open, consensus-based process led by LEED committees," the U.S Green Building Council points out. In contrast, the organization that means to offer independent, third party verification of sustainable and healthful dining is a private venture headed by a restaurateur. The company is called SPE Development and it's the brainchild of Emmanuel Verstraeten, who heads up Michelin-starred Rouge Tomato in New York City.

The general idea is that SPE-certified meals start with sustainable ingredients and are then prepared in a way that maximizes their nutritional benefits without compromising the chef's culinary vision and intent.

"Our goal is to become the most trusted authority in the culinary nutrition space," Verstraeten says. "SPE is not about uninspired diet food or low calories, but rather providing healthy and sustainable dining options without compromising taste. When a restaurant offers an SPE certified dish, it demonstrates that in addition to taste, the chef values health, sustainability and a commitment to the greater good."

Standard are high. "The tenets of SPE include eliminating butter and cream from appetizers and entrees and

limiting their use in desserts, emphasizing seasonal fruits and vegetables throughout the meal and using ‘good’ fats of higher nutritional quality while limiting unhealthy fats and eliminating industrial trans-fats,” a company statement notes. “There’s no frying and no grilling,” adds SPE executive chef Anthony Moraes in a [YouTube video about the company](#).

There’s a consulting angle to the certification process, so interested operators may wish to learn more about the SPE certification process by visiting its website www.specertified.com. And operators who don’t have a location like Rouge Tomate does—just off Central Park in the high-rent district of Manhattan’s Upper East Side—may be wondering if something like SPE certification would really matter anywhere else in the country.

It just might. A new study of customer views on sustainability conducted on behalf of global hygiene product company SCA found that 19 percent of U.S. adults rely on independent third-party certifications of green practices and sustainability efforts.

“With the range of claims vying for consumers’ attention, green certifications have gained an increased importance because they are a transparent and unbiased source and can help guide customers toward efforts that are genuine and authentic,” says sustainability expert Joshua Radoff, a member of the SCA-backed Tork Green Hygiene Council.

SCA also quizzed its survey participants about their restaurant preferences. The results show that 52 percent of U.S. adults would prefer to eat at a restaurant that offers a social and environmental component, and that the best way a restaurant can show an environmental commitment is by promoting greener choices on menus.

That result has to be music to SPE’s ears, as is the finding that nearly half of U.S. adults expect a green restaurant to cost more.

Food worthy of SPE certification will have to meet a high standard. This survey’s results suggest that customers might pay you to meet it. Stay tuned.