Through Renewable Energy, Local Restaurant Runs Like The Wind

TEXT BY GINGER WADE

Serving up fresh salad-bar and turnip greens is not the only way a local restaurant pleases its customers. In the past five years, the Original Oyster House has been serving its customers by utilizing green energy from ecological sources including cooking oil, sun and wind.

Sometimes referred to as sustainable or renewable energy, green energy relies on natural resources that replenish through the passage of time, either by biological reproduction or other naturally recurring processes. Energy sources like biofuels (cooking oil), sun and wind are in no short supply at the Original Oyster House restaurants. So what better way to make use of its natural surroundings than by renewing them as energy sources and reducing the restaurants' ecological footprint.

Original Oyster House co-owners David Dekle and Joe Roszkowski were introduced to biodiesel fuel about five years ago by Kevin Jones, a friend who recently lost his battle with cancer. "Kevin was a mentor, knowledgeable in chemistry with an understanding of the molecular changes needed to convert vegetable oil into biodiesel. Kevin was the one who promoted the City of Daphne's award-winning oil recycling program," recounted Dekle.

Biodiesel fuel is organic, biodegradable and can be made from renewable resources such as vegetable cooking oil, something the restaurants have in plentiful supply. Dekle converts the waste vegetable oil (WVO) produced at his restaurants into biodiesel to fuel five vehicles used in restaurant transport.

"To convert cooking oil into biodiesel fuel, you must change the structure by separating and removing the glycerine from the WVO. Necessary components include a holding tank for WVO, a pump, a heating mechanism and another tank for the finished product," explained Dekle. The restaurant's initial investment was around $14,000 that they recouped in about a year. Their investment of time and money is paying off. Today it costs roughly 50 cents per gallon to fuel the Original Oyster House trucks.

When asked what motivated the Original Oyster House to pursue biodiesel fuel, Dekle said environmental benefits are at the root. "Biodiesel fuel is clean burning. It produces significantly less air pollutants and carbon dioxide emissions, is biodegradable, non-toxic and safer to handle. We use no petroleum in our biodiesel fuel, making the cost completely invulnerable to fluctuating gas prices," explained Dekle.

In 2012, the Original Oyster House invested in a wind turbine at the Mobile Causeway location. Robert Harris, owner of Gulf Coast Green Power, installed the wind turbine that sits on a 55-foot-high tower and runs 24 hours a day generating power whenever winds reaches even two miles per hour or greater. The power generated offsets energy costs while lighting up the restaurant's playground, holiday lights and outdoor areas. Surplus energy is distributed back on the grid. Harris describes the wind turbine as a power plant that creates electricity. "It is the inverse of a fan which needs electricity and creates wind. A wind turbine needs wind to create electricity. Effective wind turbines require unobstructed wind flow, must have clear land and be taller than any trees around them," claimed Harris. He added that due to lower wind speeds, the Gulf Coast area might not be the best location for wind turbines, but that winter, spring and fall are the best seasons for optimum efficiency.

The Original Oyster House has two locations, Mobile: 3733 Battleship Parkway, on the Causeway and Gulf Shores: 701 Hwy 59 on the Original Oyster House Boardwalk. Both locations offer spectacular waterfront views, private party rooms and have been celebrated as the area's finest family restaurants for the past 30 years. For more information about Original Oyster House, visit www.originaloysterhouse.com or call 251-928-2620.

If you are inspired to make environmental changes, a good place to start is contacting Robert Harris at sales@gulfcoastgreenpower.com. He can perform an energy audit of your home or business, identify areas where energy efficiency can be maximized, and install products that will be environmentally beneficial.

Wind turbines can be costly. Harris said that the costs have varied over the years, but are currently a $15,000 investment. Fortunately, to help offset the cost, the federal government provides a 30% dollar for dollar tax credit rebate. He put their performance into perspective, saying that the Original Oyster House turbine has produced up to 400 kilowatts of electricity in one month. This represents 35% to 50% of the electricity required for a 2,000 square foot home but added that it might take up to 15 years to recoup the initial investment.

Harris has installed wind turbines at several Baldwin County businesses. When asked what motivates business owners to invest money in renewable energy sources, he said, "Those who invest in clean energy do so for a greater reason than just return on investment. They do it to improve our community and the United States. These good Americans look to reduce, reuse and recycle and thus reduce our dependence on foreign oil and coal," explained Harris.

In 2013, Harris installed solar waters heaters at both restaurant locations adding to the company's environmental good practices as well as some monetary savings. "The solar water heater works similarly to a summer garden hose that contains water that is too hot to touch. The hose holds water heated solely through the sun. Solar water heaters, however, are made from much higher quality materials than garden hoses. Installation requires no electrical wires, but is basically a plumbing installation. The return on the investment is pretty good for solar water heaters. Installation costs are about $1500. On average a return can be realized in about three years," stated Harris.

The Original Oyster House co-owners exemplify how change can begin in our own back yards, and while the ripples may start small, there is no telling how far reaching they will become. In March of 2014, the Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce officially honored the Original Oyster House (OOH) as its 2013 environmental award winner by planting a 15-foot Nuttal Oak at Christ the King Catholic School in Daphne, Ala.