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## **Biobased food ware, not football, is a winner at university**

Unlike the Green Bay Packers football team, which barely lost its bid to play in the 2008 Super Bowl in a dramatic championship game, biobased food ware has been a surefire winner this year at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay (UW-Green Bay).

This waterfront university doesn't have a single gridiron because the city agreed long ago on advice from coach Vince Lombardi to field only a major league football team. However, biodegradable and biobased food ware is a natural fit at an institution originally known as Environmental U for its strong academic program in environmental studies.

“Going green is a big priority here,” said Kevin Gillian, dining services general manager. “Wisconsin is, in general, very outdoorsy and nature-oriented. This food ware fits in great up here.”

Since the start of the 2007-2008 academic year, UW-Green Bay uses all biobased food ware in take-out dining operations and at its convenience market—including cups, bowls, salad containers, cutlery and cellophane-type wrap. The supplier, Biosphere Industries ([www.biosphereindustries.com](http://www.biosphereindustries.com)), manufactures the products from tapioca and potato starches plus a small percentage of grass fibers.



***UW-Green Bay offers an entire array of biobased food ware containing tapioca, potato starch and grass fibers.***

UW-Green Bay's main dining hall has regular ceramic plates and silverware, but features the biobased cups at its beverage stations. The university goes through 18,000 biobased plastic cups and 50,000 salad containers each month, Gillian said.

“We've gone full tilt as much as we can. Our next stop is the catering department,” he said, explaining he is working with the manufacturer to

find an attractive disposable tray for fruits and vegetables because the biobased products can sometimes have a cloudy appearance. “We want a nice-looking one that doesn't hide the beauty of the food.”

The disposals end up in the landfill because the university doesn't have a composting operation yet. If they were composted, the cafeteria trash would deteriorate 98 percent in 28 days and 100 percent in less than 60 days, according to information posted on Biosphere's website.

Even without composting at UW-Green Bay, the biobased food ware has a current advantage compared to the old polystyrene (sometimes referred to as styrofoam): it's a lot less mess. In the past, the university had the polystyrene sent to a recycling center where it was turned into scissor handles and plastic rulers.

"It was a great idea, but fairly messy because there was a lot of a waste," said Rick Warpinski, director of the university's Union. "A lot of liquid like soda was squeezed out and usually ended up on the floor."

Food service managers have encountered a few minor problems in the process of adopting biobased food ware. The first disposable silverware, also manufactured from potatoes, couldn't withstand heat and melted.

Another ongoing problem is UW-Green Bay staff must submit orders to the California-based supplier two weeks in advance and sometimes the manufacturer can't always meet the demand, requiring that the polystyrene containers still serve as a back up. Gillian would like to be able to receive orders on a more frequent basis because storage is a problem at the university.

But these are hardly a deterrent to a place with such a solid commitment to the environment that it has been on "autopilot for the last seven to nine years with recycling," Warpinski said. "It seems very natural to us." The university recycles a whole host of materials, including glass, paper and plastic.

Gillian believes college campuses are on the forefront of the sustainability movement in the food industry and he thinks biodegradable food ware is here to stay. He noted that Sodexo, which holds the contract for UW-Green Bay, has a sustainability website to teach food managers and chefs about the trend. He hopes other major food companies will soon follow suit and offer non-petroleum options for disposable products.

"As it grows, I think many food service providers will say, 'Hey, we're missing out on all these sales,' and will look at bringing them in," he said.

In the meantime, UW-Green Bay is so gung ho on being green that Sodexo is willing to absorb the additional costs of having biobased food ware. Gillian estimated it spends an additional 4 to 5 cents per unit.

The only complaint from the university's 6,200 students is about the two sizes of cups, indistinguishable except for the ¼-inch difference in height. Gillian receives 10 to 20 negative comment cards per month and has had to post a diagram and signs near the soda fountain to allay that gripe.

“It’s getting to the point where we will have to teach a class on the difference between 16-ounce and 20-ounce cups,” he joked.

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