



designing waste-free events

A profitable path to sustainability

Chowgirls



Catersource
+ The Special Event
by Informa

more about liz

- Culinary Director, has been with Chowgirls since 2014
- 30+ years in hospitality
- Champion of inclusive, values-driven kitchen culture
- Founder of Kitchen Coalition
 - 2020: 7+ million meals served
 - Hundreds of jobs created
 - \$26 million contributed to the local economy
- Member of the Homegrown City Council and recipient of a Public Health Hero Award
- Advocate for food waste reduction as a powerful connector that sparks creativity, conversation, and change



more about annie

- I grew up on an organic vegetable CSA farm in Osceola, WI
- At Chowgirls, I lead our sustainable event design department, food and beverage styling, full event design, edible entertainment we call Snacktivities™
- Events are extremely wasteful, traditionally created with hundreds of single-use items, plastic, and decor items that create serve a purpose for a few hours and take hundreds or thousands of years to break down.
- Climate change's impact on in the event industry
 - Ingredients going extinct
 - extreme heat warnings
 - smoke safety plan for staff
- As a designer, creativity is the perfect tool for tackling climate-related challenges. Leading the local event industry on more sustainable events.
- Co-planner of Cultivate, a sustainable events showcase in Minneapolis (join us on April 8!)



about chowgirls

- Celebrating 22 years this month!
- Sustainability
 - Local
 - Seasonal
 - Organic
 - Zero-waste
- Triple Bottom Line
 - People
 - Planet
 - Profit



our scale

- \$9 million in sales in 2025
- 1,000 events
- 200 employees
- 4 brands
 - Classic
 - Concepts
 - By-the-Box
 - Cordial
- Run concessions at Guthrie Theater



why reducing waste is important

- The average wedding in the US produces 400 pounds of trash
- Event waste has a big impact on our total carbon footprint. A recent study suggests the annual carbon footprint for the global event industry is the same magnitude as the yearly Green House Gas emissions of the entire United States!
- Good hospitality traditionally prioritizes waste being out of sight
- Just because the waste is concealed doesn't mean it doesn't exist
- Sustainability drives business!



what sustainability means to us

local

organic

seasonal

zero-waste

bio-diverse

fair trade

food rescue

living wage

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sustainability is more than a
commitment. it's our operating system.

— from the Chowgirls mission statement

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PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABILITY



2004
ORGANIC

Launched with a commitment to organic ingredients



2006
LOCAL

Forged meaningful connections with local farmers to source ingredients



2008
COMPOST

Piloted a commercial composting program



2017
PLASTIC FILM RECYCLING

Reduced plastic film waste through Merrick Recycling



2018
FOOD RESCUE

Piloted program to donate excess prepared food



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PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABILITY



2020

COMMUNITY FOOD PRODUCTION

Co-founded Kitchen Coalition to rescue food and prepare meals for the community



2021

GARNISH GARDEN

Restored the land around Chowgirls to grow our own garnish



2022

SUSTAINABILITY CHEF

Hired a dedicated chef to manage food waste and prepare Family Meal



2023

SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING

Implemented a training course so all new hires are aware of our sustainability practices from Day 1



2024

PLASTIC FILM REDUCTION

Invested in more durable containers and expanded recycling to include multi-layer plastics



2025

SUSTAINABLE EVENT DESIGN

Team dedicated to leading the way in creative sustainable event design



Credit: Ayana Johnson
*Author of **What If We Get It Right?***

sustainability team



ANNIE

Event Design & Sustainability Manager
sustainable event design, industry leadership



LIZ

Culinary Director
food waste, food rescue, community engagement



HEIDI

Co-Founder
grant writing, training, waste advocacy



ANDREA

Executive Pastry Chef
vendor relations, seasonal pastry design



MEGAN

Culinary Administrator
seasonality newsletter, sustainable sourcing, farmer relations



VINCENT

Facilities Manager
sustainability logistics, fabrication, and repair



BAILEY

Sustainability Chef
family meal, seasonality newsletter, farmer relations



LIBBY

Event Specialist
new business development and sustainable business partnerships



NATASHA

Event Design & Sustainability Assistant
sustainable decor sourcing



ISABEL

Event Design & Sustainability Assistant
circular design reporting

An outdoor dining table set for a meal, featuring wooden chairs, glassware, plates of food, and floral centerpieces with lit candles. The background is a lush green field with trees in the distance.

event waste logistics

Reduce, reuse, recycle

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reduce

- Food waste
 - Portion sizes
 - Correct ordering
 - Ordering fresh ingredients with a longer shelf life
- Other event waste
 - Avoiding single-use décor
 - Avoiding all single-use plastic
 - Avoiding floral foam
 - Sustainable delivery program - using real platters vs compostable disposables

“Reducing waste starts with the planning.”



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reuse

- Food waste
 - Donating leftovers
 - Family meal
 - Repurpose herbs into sauces, etc.
 - Food preservation - pickling, freezing, etc.
- Other event waste
 - Re-using floral for our HQ
 - Wares from our warehouse
 - Thrifted or vintage items
 - Edible styling garnish
 - Styling piece materials - disco balls, shells, etc.

**“Creativity is the perfect tool
for climate solutions.”**



circular economy of a pear



1. edible styling garnish on a tablescape



2. pear jam for a pear & brie canape



3. pear cardamom hand pie



Charged 3 different clients for the same pear
(AND we didn't pay to haul waste away)

recycle

- Food waste
 - Compost = organics recycling
 - Training for proper sorting is key!
- Composting solutions if your city doesn't have compost:
 - Connect with a farm that can take food scraps
"Piggy Bucket program"
 - Backyard composting
 - Innovative technology
- Other event waste
 - If it's disposable, make sure it's compostable
 - Using food as décor
 - Using organic materials in event design
 - Plastic linen bags - recycle
 - Ridwell

"It's an extra bin, not an extra step!"





COMPOST

all food scraps
hot & cold cups
straws
wood stir sticks
bamboo cutlery
paper plates
"plastic" utensils
paper napkins
paper towels
skewers & picks
natural corks
wood demi spoons



RECYCLE

soda cans
non-waxed cardboard
milk cartons with lids
plastic bottles with lids
glass bottles without lids
clean, dry foil

*Foil should be collected
together in a ball.*



TRASH

gloves
masking tape
dirty foil
dirty plastic wrap
dirty food tags
synthetic corks



MERRICK

plastic bags
clean plastic wrap
bubble wrap
ziplock bags
bread bags

*All items must
be clean, dry,
clear, and
stretchy.*



REUSE

quart containers
bamboo demi spoons
clean food tags



WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE IN REAL LIFE



Back

Sustainability 101

+ Add



🗨️ Welcome!

📄 Sustainability at Chowgirls

📄 Training Compact Acknowledgment

🗨️ Tips to Navigating This Course

Content

🗨️ Pathway to Sustainability

📄 Sustainability Website

🗨️ Sustainability at Chowgirls

All Staff

Sustainability 101

🔒 Explore prerequisite courses



Turning Food Scraps into Compost

Watch later | Share

Watch on YouTube

All units must be completed



business impact

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clients

- We put our values out there!
- Storytelling on social
- Clients want to work with us for our values
- Exposure opportunities
- Non-profit events are a good way to support the community and bring in business in slow times of the year



staff

- Employee retention
 - Industry standard: 20-30%
 - Chowgirls employee retention rate: 70%
- Training cost savings
- More knowledgeable staff leads to better customer experience
- Creating a values-based work environment
- Attracting like-minded staff helps us improve our sustainability because more people are invested
 - We see innovative sustainability ideas coming from all staff levels
 - Staff pushing to create new positions within our company to boost our sustainability



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cost savings

- Hennepin County Slim Jims Grant
 - Applied in 2017
 - 60 bins
 - recycling
 - trash
 - compost
 - wheels
 - \$6,803 in savings
 - \$0 cost to Chowgirls
- MNimize Plastic Container Grant
 - \$1,000 MNimize rebate
 - Support researching alternative containers that help us reduce plastic wrap usage
 - Average savings
 - 8-12,000 feet per month
 - 96-144,000 feet per year
 - savings of \$1,500-\$2,000 per year
- Check with your city. In Minneapolis, compost and recycling are not taxed, while trash is taxed at 17%.



sustainability = efficiency

- An organized walk in keeps the kitchen team aware of how fresh the product is, which reduces staff's time looking for items. Our returns shelf is a great example of this.
- Sourcing seasonal ingredients ensures freshness and longevity of the product
- Planning seasonally allows you to cross-utilize ingredients
- Reusing items saves money
 - Décor
 - Edible styling
 - Ingredients





community-powered progress

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advocate for what you want

- We're lucky to live in a city that really prioritizes waste-reductions
- But don't let it stop you if your city doesn't!
 - Many of the programs we have access to today are programs we advocated for
- Sign up for pilot programs
 - Plastic recycling
 - Ridwell
 - Glove recycling
- connect with like-minded organizations
 - City council
 - Health department
 - Event industry vendors





waste-free designs

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designing waste out of the events

- Make it fun!
- Make waste part of the party
- Snacktivites!
- People love experiencing something new



PEELING BACK THE CURTAIN ON EVENT WASTE

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REVERSE BUFFET



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USING FOOD WASTE AS FOOD DYE



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EARTH DAY OUTREACH

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STYLING FOOD WASTE



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FOOD WASTE VESSELS



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LIVE BAR GRAPH

The average wedding in the US produces about 400 lbs of trash.

But it doesn't have to!

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thank you!



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