

# CLOSING THE LOOP: CUSTOMER FOOD SCRAP COLLECTION IN PRACTICE

## BACKGROUND

In 2012, Act 148, the Universal Recycling Law, was unanimously passed, making Vermont the first state in the country to ban food waste from landfill disposal. The law was adopted to reduce methane emissions, conserve limited space at Vermont's only active landfill and redirect food scraps to a more sustainable end. Since full implementation in 2020, participation and collection infrastructure have expanded, contributing to a 13% reduction in food waste sent to landfill by tonnage. However, barriers remain. Restaurants which require self-bussing, in particular, struggle to capture post-consumer food scraps efficiently. As a result, some counter-service restaurants have discontinued customer-facing food scrap collection, despite successfully diverting food waste in their kitchens.

## PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES

### **The Café HOT.**

Main Street, Burlington

### **Bliss Bee**

Locations on Hawthorne Street in Williston, as well as Market Street and Shelburne Road in South Burlington

### **Boxcar Bakery**

Park Street, Essex Junction

### **Great Harvest Bakery and Café**

Pine Street, Burlington

### **Haymaker Bun Company**

Locations on Pine Street in Burlington and Main Street in Middlebury

## PILOT OVERVIEW

To better understand the challenges of food scrap collection at restaurants, CSWD evaluated post-consumer food waste from five businesses with self-bussed waste areas. Among the participants, one business had consistently collected food scraps in their dining area for several years and remained committed to diverting. Two businesses had previously collected customer food scraps but later discontinued the practice due to operational concerns, while the remaining two implemented customer facing bins for the first time. All participating businesses shared a strong commitment to sustainability and were already composting in their kitchens.

For this pilot, CSWD provided public facing food scrap collection bins and custom signage highlighting the separate food waste bins. Each business allowed CSWD to monitor and measure the customer's food scrap bins over several weeks. Weekly samples were collected to evaluate customer participation and contamination levels. At the conclusion of the pilot, a business survey assessed operational impacts.



## CHALLENGE

Many food service businesses are interested in diverting food waste but have concerns related to aesthetics, customer behavior, contamination, and drains on staff time.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Participating businesses added food scrap collection bins to their customer waste areas, or maintained existing bins, and continued daily operations as normal. All were given the option to place food scrap bins in their waste areas next to trash and recycling containers or post signage directing customers to ask for staff assistance.

CSWD staff conducted weekly site visits to sample and weigh collected food waste and document contamination.

## PURPOSE

Findings from this pilot will provide guidance and support for additional food service businesses that are considering offering customer facing food scrap collection.

### THE CAFÉ HOT.

#### Background

The owners of the Café HOT, near Burlington's Church Street Marketplace, have a history of diverting food waste going back to their first restaurant in New York City. The vegan breakfast spot, known for its "Coffee and Killer Food," is one of the few in Chittenden County to become a member of the Green Restaurant Association. From day one, composting in both the dining area and kitchen has been standard practice, but the café continues to look for ways to maximize the amount of food waste diverted.

#### Food Scrap Collection

The Café HOT uses three individual bins for trash, recycling, and food scraps. These bins were located in clear view by the entrance and were labeled with the café's own signs.

#### Key Insight

Customers tended to finish or take home the majority of their food, leading to very little waste. Based on years of experience, the Café HOT has observed that customers pause to check waste bin signs before disposing of trash, likely due to their visually distinct waste containers and sustainable messaging.



## EARLY OUTCOMES AND OBSERVATIONS

- The amount of food waste generated in customer areas was often minimal, with collection containers never reaching full capacity. Daily post-consumer food waste varied by location, but ranged from 0.0 to 3.4 pounds.
- No businesses that added food scrap collection to their customer facing waste systems needed to increase the size or frequency of compost collection service.
- Despite initial concerns about visual impact, all businesses placed at least one food scrap bucket within customer view, next to the trash and recycling bins, and all reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their appearance.
- Customer participation was highest when food scrap collection was made easy. Bins that were clearly visible and convenient to access were used more consistently.
- At most locations, food scrap collection started at low levels and increased gradually over time. This observed pattern, combined with the experience of long-term composters, like the Café HOT, indicates that customers need time to adapt to a new system.
- Even in locations where customers had adjusted to diverting food waste occasional contamination was noted.
- The most common contaminants in food waste samples were food packaging and single-use serveware, with coated paper products being especially confusing for customers to sort correctly.
- Napkins and wooden coffee stirrers, though not food, are accepted by most local compost haulers and are not classified as contaminants. These items were also frequently noted in food waste samples.

### HAYMAKER BUN CO.

#### Background

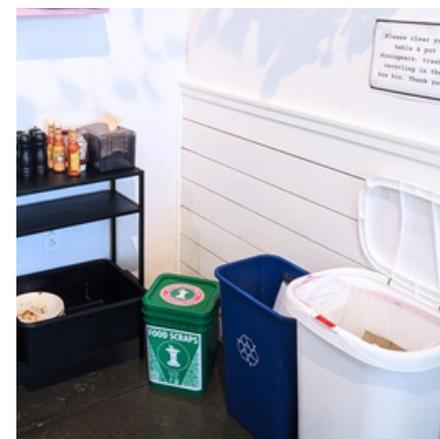
Haymaker Bun Co. operates two locations in Burlington and Middlebury, Vermont, serving indulgent brioche buns alongside a rotating menu of sweet and savory treats. Haymaker's newest location opened inside the Soda Plant on Pine Street in 2025. In addition to dine in and take out service, the café hosts pop up dinners and sells frozen take home-packs of their classic cinnamon rolls, bringing Haymaker's baked goods well beyond its storefront.

#### Food Scrap Collection

A food waste was provided to both locations and placed on the floor next to trash, recycling, and dish bins. Haymaker worked with CSWD to develop custom signage for food scraps in the café's brand colors.

#### Key Insight

Haymaker customers at the Burlington location generated little food waste for the scrap bins, while the larger Middlebury location saw the highest participation rates of any business. It was noted during sample collection days that customers often left food on their plates in the bus bin, even when a food scrap bucket was available. Manager observations emphasized that clearer signage might be key to reducing contamination and guiding customer behavior.



## AESTHETICS AND PLACEMENT

For self-bussing areas without a food scrap bin or dish collection, customers seemed more likely to throw food waste in the trash, rather than walk to the nearest bucket or ask for assistance. After the pilot, all businesses reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their new front of house waste system.

Suggestions for improving waste areas include installing taller bins to enhance visibility and reduce bending, adding easier to use lids, and providing clearer, more specific signage.

## STAFF TIME AND OPERATIONS

All businesses reported that integrating customer-facing food waste bins into their existing waste systems was an easy process, and few experienced any staff-related challenges during the pilot. Three participating restaurants provided formal training to employees, while two opted not to, due to their prior experience managing food waste.



## BLISS BEE

### Background

Bliss Bee is a local fast-casual chain serving fresh meals in a relaxed dining environment. Its third and newest location opened on Market Street in South Burlington in 2025. While the restaurants have consistently diverted food waste in kitchen and staff areas, customer-facing collection has been more challenging. This pilot allowed composting to extend into dining areas.

### Food Scrap Collection

Food scrap buckets with lids and CSWD signage were placed at eye level on existing trash and recycling stations. At one smaller location, a single bucket was placed near the entrance waste area, while signage directed customers to ask for assistance in the back. An additional sign at the register reinforced participation.

### Key Insight

Participation in the food scrap program was high across all Bliss Bee locations, likely due to clear bin placement and a high volume of dine-in customers. Waste areas without a food scrap bucket showed more food waste in the trash. Minimal contamination indicates that post-consumer food scrap collection can work well in busy, fast-casual restaurants when bins are placed at eye level and use lids.

## CONTAMINATION

For the purposes of this pilot, “contamination” is defined as any non-food waste that is deemed non-compostable or otherwise unacceptable by local composting facilities. Most Vermont compost sites accepting food waste, including CSWD’s Organics Recycling Facility, do not currently accept food packaging, containers, or utensils, even when labeled as certified compostable. The most common contaminants in food waste samples were single-use food service items. These included coated paper wrappers, paper cupcake liners, paper coffee cups with bioplastic lids, tea bags made from plastic, and straws. Napkins and wooden coffee stirrers were not considered contaminants, as they are accepted by CSWD and most other local facilities.

Two of the five participating businesses reported ongoing concerns regarding contamination throughout the pilot. However, only one sample collected exceeded acceptable contamination levels.



! Food packaging not currently accepted in compost. Check locally.



## BOXCAR BAKERY

### Background

Boxcar Bakery is a popular café in Essex Junction, Vermont, offering a variety of pastries, beverages, and sandwiches. The business has a long-standing commitment to sustainability and has previously invested time in educating customers about waste reduction. Boxcar has composted back-of-house food waste since its opening and joined the pilot to share its sustainability story with the community, showing that great food and good environmental practices can go hand in hand.

### Food Scrap Collection

Boxcar Bakery has self-bussing areas for customers at the coffee station and entrance. Due to space constraints, only one food scrap collection bucket was placed near the entrance. At the coffee station, next to the trash and recycling bins, CSWD signage directed customers to the appropriate location for food scrap disposal.

### Key Insight

Customer education and clear direction supported successful participation, though accessibility improvements such as easier-to-open lids were identified to better serve older customers.

*“I assumed that it would be harder on my staff but it wasn’t at all. Customers took to the idea, and we found that they did start using the compost bin for food waste.”*

## GREAT HARVEST BREAD CO.

### Background

Great Harvest Bread Co. offers delicious, whole-grain breads, sandwiches, and baked treats, sourcing ingredients from local farms and businesses. Great Harvest bakes fresh daily and donates several thousand loaves of bread each year to food programs and distribution services in Chittenden County. Prior to the pilot, the business had an established back-of-house composting system for non-donatable food and wanted to restart customer food scrap collection.

### Food Scrap Collection

The café already had their own color-coded system for trash, recycling, and food scraps, though the food waste section had been temporarily closed until the pilot. New CSWD signage was installed at eye level above each bin to draw attention to the change and provide additional guidance.

### Key Insight

Reintroducing post-consumer food scrap collection allowed the business to evaluate both contamination levels and the volume of food waste generated by customers. While signage indicated what could be composted, highlighting common contaminants can further guide diners and reduce errors. The café suggested that more in-person customer support would be helpful but would require additional staff time.



## LESSONS LEARNED

- Visibility and consistent co-location with trash and recycling are critical to increase customer participation.
- Using a lid, positioning containers on an elevated surface, and using a style of food scrap container that is clearly distinct from trash and recycling created more intentionality in the disposal of food waste and reduces contamination. Open containers that closely matched the appearance and height of adjacent trash or recycling bins experienced higher levels of contamination.
- The quantity of consumer food waste can vary based on the style of restaurant and number of dine-in customers, but at no point did the volume exceed capacity.
- Some level of contamination should be expected, even in well-established customer waste bins. However, that does not necessarily mean food waste will be unusable.
- Design details such as height, lid type, and signage can be improved to ensure that all customers and staff can easily access, and correctly use, containers.

*Special thanks to the participating businesses for sharing their time, insights, and commitment to sustainability with the community, and to the **Addison County Solid Waste Management District** for their support throughout this pilot.*