

A Big Fish in a Big Pond: Gaylord Opryland Resort is Bringing Sustainable Food & Beverage to the Events' Industry

In January of 2018, the 2,888-room [Gaylord Opryland Resort](#) in Nashville, TN, served as the meeting place for the second phase of the [APEX/ASTM Sustainable Event Standards Relaunch Initiative](#). Having completed the redesign portion of this months-long process, a collection of sustainable event advocates came together for the second phase, the rewrite, of the now six-year old standards. It is in this meeting that a member of our EIC Sustainability Committee, and subcommittee chair for the relaunch, Chance Thompson, met Robert Lopez. Robert, who is the Director of Purchasing at the beautiful Gaylord Opryland Resort, sat down with Chance to explain how they are taking sustainability to a new level within their food & beverage operation.

In years past, the resort utilized onsite greenhouses that grew all of the beautiful greenery that guests see sprawling across Gaylord Opryland's nine acres of indoor gardens. You name it, whether it be their common areas, nearly 20 restaurants and lounges or 750,000 square feet of meeting space, there is an indoor forest standing and hanging proudly. After changes in how the resort acquired the greenery, the greenhouses were no longer being used effectively. That is until Robert and lead horticulturist, Megan McDugald, realized something. Why not use some of the existing infrastructure to grow their own produce? In 2017, the greenlight was given to put the greenhouses back to work. Creatively utilizing resources, they began by building raised garden boxes from leftover shipping crates that had come in for a hotel renovation project. As Robert says simply, "They were perfect." Soon they would build up 40 garden boxes and then soon after that, herbs, lettuce, tomatoes, and more were peeking up through the dirt.



At the time, it felt like something small, no bigger than the size of the seed needed to produce a few herbs and some small produce. But as that seed grew into the food that hits the plate of so many hotel guests, so did the creativity and ambition for sustainability at the resort. "These garden boxes were really just an opportunity to bring the chefs together around farm-to-table concepts and give a little life back to the greenhouses," said Robert.

From there, as Robert explains, a working farm was born. "We started small, growing the blending lettuces we use in our salad making, the tomatoes we use, things like that." From there, a whole new opportunity presented itself. "We began looking at this new vertical gardening project. We realized that we could eventually turn food production into a revenue stream for the hotel. We think we can grow more than we could ever use, of some food items anyway. In theory, we could use what is needed in the culinary areas of the hotel and

convention operation, plus sell food back to our produce vendors. As we do that, it becomes a training platform to help enhance our local agriculture.”



To do this, two things are needed. First, the resort plans to invest in a product called [Tower Gardens by Juice Plus](#). Second, is to get the local community involved. The partners start with a local culinary program at [McGavock High School](#), where Gaylord Opryland sponsors a Hospitality Academy for students. The second partner is an organization called [Cultivate](#). The Nashville-based non-profit provides agricultural and farming-based training and employment opportunities to individuals recovering and rehabbing from past addiction struggles. **The plan is for students and participants from each organization to help tend to the Gaylord Opryland’s onsite farms.**

The goal is to purchase 440 towers in the next 12 months. Each tower is capable of going from seed to harvest in 21 days. That allows for up to 17 harvests per year, per tower. The towers are designed to work from a 20-gallon reservoir and an all-organic nutrient feed. After placing a

brand-new seed in an organic volcanic material, and soaking in water until the seed starts to sprout, you then place them on the outside of the tower. The process then begins by circulating water down through a rain shower head, and as it becomes surrounded by air, the growth process is sped up. Not only that, but without a need for soil, a contamination-free growth environment is created. **Robert explains, “The estimated savings on food purchasing will pay for the project in just the first year of full operation, all while contributing to local agriculture growth and education through partnership with McGavock and Cultivate. If we can later sell the produce to our vendors, even better.”**

With six towers already in place, Gaylord is already producing a variety of foods including: strawberries, Swiss chard, butter lettuce, romaine, Roma tomatoes, celery, arugula, and “every herb you can imagine” as Robert puts it. They estimate about 30% of their overall herb demand is supplied by their onsite operations. In addition, they even have a pepper specialist on staff experimenting with exotic peppers.

The food & beverage department has also built up beehives to provide about 200 gallons of honey each year. “The goal is to settle in around 30 hives and use them to teach our staff and partners the importance of bees in not only agriculture, but our global ecosystem. We put the honey in gift jars to clients and use it in intimate culinary experiences, such as tastings and small group dining events. It’s a lot of fun and a great educational opportunity.”

In a world that is in desperate need of rethinking the way we feed our society, Gaylord Opryland, a big fish in this big global pond of ours, is certainly finding a way to make real impact. The EIC and their sustainability committee will continue to track this story and will be ready to share as Gaylord continues to make headway. In the meantime, try to find your way to Nashville and try some of the already thriving onsite produce and honey.



Written by Chance Thompson

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Chance Thompson is the Senior Manager, Sustainability and Public Relations for SMG at the Salt Palace Convention Center and Mountain Exposition Center. He is the Chairperson of a 35-member Green Team Committee, inclusive of five partnered organizations in Salt Lake. Under Chance's leadership, they pursued five APEX/ASTM Level 1 certifications concurrently. After joint certifications were received in June 2017 for the Salt Palace, Mountain America Expo, Visit Salt Lake, Utah Food Services, and PSAV, word spread throughout the meetings industry and Chance has since led webinars, training, and speaking engagements on how to replicate this strategy. He is also serving a two-year term on the Event Industry Council's Sustainability Committee and is a Committee Chair for the CVB/Destinations component of the APEX/ASTM Relaunch.

In May of 2018, the Salt Palace and Mountain America Expo, with help from the Green Team partners, were the recipients of the globally recognized IMEX-EIC Innovation in Sustainability Award, given to them for their creative and impactful community donation efforts and APEX/ASTM certification strategy. The Green Team Committee and their organizations donated over 200,000 pounds of material to the Salt Lake community.

Originally from Potomac, MT, Chance now lives in Park City, UT, with his fiancé (Ryan), dog (Lucy), and cat (Teddy). He is a self-proclaimed outdoor fanatic, enjoying backpacking, skiing and mountain biking in his spare time.

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