

The Villager Since 1933

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West and East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Noho, Little Italy, Chinatown and Lower East Side, Since 1933



Photo by Greg Kirschenbaum

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, fourth from left, and Borough President Scott Stringer, to the right of him, joined members of Russ & Daughters Appetizers and the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing and Able in kicking off a new program for recovering used cooking oil. The used oil will be converted into clean-burning biodiesel fuel for vehicles.

New cooking-oil pickup program getting cooking

By John Bayles

Last Friday, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver were at Russ & Daughters Appetizers on East Houston St. to put their political will, and a little elbow grease, behind a new program making it easier for restaurants to recycle their used cooking oil. The two pols got their hands dirty and performed the first

pickup of oil at the legendary catering spot to kick off the Go Green! Cooking Oil Recycling Program.

The program is being run by the Lower East Side Ecology Center, in partnership with the Doe Fund, a nonprofit organization that finds work for formerly homeless individuals and ex-prisoners. Businesses are provided with containers to store the used oil, and the Doe Fund's RWA (Ready, Willing and Able) Resource Recovery Team picks the oil up free of charge and sells it to producers. The producers convert the oil into clean-burning biodiesel that can run in any diesel engine while emitting far fewer emissions than standard fuel.

Tara DePorte, the Lower East Side Ecology Center's program director, said she approached the borough president, who has slowly been rolling out Go Green! initiatives in Manhattan neighborhoods over the past year, with the idea of the oil-recycling program. The Ecology Center's hopes were that businesses would take advantage of the hassle-free pickup service as an introduction to another program they operate, Eco Biz, which is designed to make local businesses sustainable and more environmentally conscious. DePorte said the oil recycling is a "no-brainer" since restaurants have to dispose of the waste somehow. Also the pickup is free, and there is an opportunity for tax credits at the end of the year to "sweeten the deal."

"Then we can come back to the businesses and say, 'This worked well for you, are you willing to try another initiative?' " said DePorte.

The Ecology Center started Eco Biz last year, which among other things, offers businesses a free energy audit, followed by resources to help them take steps to make their business as green as possible. The program trains young people, a mix of high school students and college interns, to pitch the program to businesses in the community. And it was the fresh-faced youngsters that sold Nikki Russ, co-owner of the legendary Russ & Daughters, on the program and its myriad benefits.

"I thought it was great that students, young people, were involved," said Russ.

On the same day Russ & Daughters signed up, so did 14 other businesses. A team of students, DePorte and members of the Lower East Side Business Improvement District spent one afternoon canvassing the entire neighborhood, reaching out to more than 100 businesses, dropping off information, in English as well as Spanish and simple Chinese. In addition to the 15 businesses that signed up, another 40 or 50 showed "definite interest," according to DePorte.

Russ said she was a bit surprised at first when she was informed Russ & Daughters would be the ones to kick off the program.

"We're not a restaurant," she said. "We're known for our smoked fish and caviar, not frying foods."

She said Russ & Daughters' cooking oil use was "insignificant" compared to average restaurants; the only dish Russ & Daughters fries is a potato latke, which is done so "by definition," she noted.

But Speaker Silver said he wanted the nearly 100-year-old "institution" of the Lower East Side to set an example for other food purveyors in the neighborhood.

In a joint release issued last week with Silver, Stringer said, "We are thrilled to add this free recycling service to our Go Green! initiatives on the Lower East Side, East Harlem and Washington Heights/Inwood. Recycling keeps cooking oil out of the waste stream and — after it has been converted to biodiesel — helps reduce air pollution."

The choice of Russ & Daughters also highlighted the program's versatility in terms of servicing businesses both large and small, ones that might not use large amounts of cooking oil, as well as ones that might use too much. In the case of Russ & Daughters, they can simply store the used oil in the same containers in which it originally arrived.

"That's reuse, which we of course love," said DePorte.

But the program also allows for maximum flexibility in terms of scheduled pickups. DePorte said during "latke season," for example, Russ & Daughters might need a 55-gallon container, which RWA would provide at a moment's notice, free of charge.

The choice to go with RWA for pickup service stemmed from the fact that they're a nonprofit and they will never charge a pickup fee. DePorte looked at other used cooking-oil pickup programs, but said that when oil prices fell, some started charging small fees for pickup.

DePorte also chose RWA because they guarantee that the used oil will be turned into biodiesel. She said some pickup companies actually sell the used oil to chicken farms, which inject the waste oil into the feed, essentially injecting carcinogens and additional fat into the poultry that people will ultimately eat. Used frying oil is carcinogenic.

Both Russ and DePorte remarked on the new program's backing from Silver and Stringer.

"The more the city and its citizens are promoting these programs, and getting behind them," Russ said, "the programs will become more user-friendly to everybody."

Russ also brought up Silver's busy schedule in Albany and the current budget season and said, "The fact that he took time to [come to the Lower East Side] and promote this program, says a lot."

DePorte agreed, sort of. She said it certainly showed a commitment on the speaker's part. But in true advocate form, DePorte is looking for more in terms of political will and the need to address climate change in a hurry. Next up, she said, she hopes to reach out to

Stringer and Silver over the next year, and get them to make a commitment to providing biodiesel at filling stations in the city.

“The political will is very important,” DePorte said, “because they can really help us get that grassroots message to a broader audience; and, certainly, we hope there is more than just press conferences.”

For more information, or to sign up for the Go Green! Cooking Oil Recycling Program, contact the Lower East Side Ecology Center by visiting their Web site, www.lesecologycenter.org, or by calling 212-477-4022.