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Larry Kolvoord / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Asa Christensen, left, and Josh Stern put together pitas at the Pita Pit on Congress Avenue. The Pita Pit is one of four Austin restaurants certified by the nonprofit Green Restaurant Association.

## GREEN: Certification costs money but gives validity to environmental claims

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including four in Austin: La Condesa, Snap Kitchen, Barr Mansion and the Pita Pit.

But just what equals green? All of the Austin restaurants, for instance, serve meat — vegetarians argue that raising cattle for consumption is an inefficient use of land. And plenty of restaurants that use compact fluorescent lights, serve local foods and encourage customers to recycle haven't bothered coughing up hundreds of dollars for certification.

The Boston-based association has operated since 1990 and now certifies about 700 restaurants in North America. Restaurants pay, on average, about \$800 a year to go through certification, according to Colleen Oteri, a spokeswoman for the association. Fees depend on the size of the restaurant, the number of locations and the length of its certification contract.

She said the certification is meant to bring some transparency and rigor to environmental claims.

"When a restaurant says it 'serves local food whenever possible,' does that mean every three months it serves some local lettuce?" Oteri asked. "We work with every different type of restaurant to help them reduce their environmental impact."

The restaurants score points and improve their rating — the Pita Pit, Snap Kitchen and La Condesa won two stars out of a possible four for their greenness, and Barr Mansion won three stars — based on their environmental practices. A restaurant wins points, for example, if its menu is vegetarian or vegan or if its eggs are from cage-free animals.

"We can't tell every restaurant on the planet to be a vegetarian restaurant," Oteri said, but the ratings can nudge them toward sustainable prac-

### How ratings are assigned

The restaurants have to score a minimum number of points in each category to win the lowest rating of two stars. One hundred points overall garner the two-star rating; 175 points gets the three-star rating; and 300 points wins the four-star rating. In the sustainable food category, the point breakdown works this way:

**Food and beverages certified organic and seafood sustainably fished:** 40 points  
**Grass-fed beef:** 5 points  
**Hormone- and antibiotic-free meat:** 5 points  
**Cage-free eggs and free-range livestock:** 5 points  
**Vegetarian menu:** 30 points  
**Vegan menu:** 45 points  
**Thirty percent of main dishes are vegetarian:** 5 points  
A restaurant can also win points if food comes from within 100 miles.

### The categories

The Green Restaurant Association scores restaurants on seven major categories:

1. Water efficiency
2. Waste reduction and recycling
3. Sustainable furnishings and building materials
4. Sustainable food
5. Energy
6. Disposables
7. Chemical and pollution reduction

tices.

The ratings, advertised by restaurants with a sticker on their doors, can appeal to certain consumers, says Dave Junker, a lecturer in the department of advertising at the University of Texas.

"As long as the certifying body has real and perceived legitimacy, restaurants have a market-based incentive to really change their practices," Junker said. "When restaurants see that they can please their customers and gain new ones, and that they can also save money on energy and waste disposal costs, the changes they make will become part of their business model."

He continued: "The process is a great example of how sustainable values and economics can work together for the benefit of everyone."

The owners at La Condesa, a Mexican restaurant on West Second Street, worked with the Green Restaurant Association even before opening just over a year ago. They chose sustainable building materials and local vendors to supply their restaurant, sending rafts of invoices to the nonprofit, said Jesse Herman, an owner.

The restaurant uses low-flow sinks and toilets, chooses local plants for its landscaping, pays for private recycling, uses environmentally friendly cleaning products and dishes out biodegradable take-away boxes.

The restaurant pays \$1,200 annually for the certification process.

To get more stars, the restaurants would have to improve some of their practices or make changes to the menu.

"A lot of businesses say they operate green," Herman said, "but it takes being a member of an association, where they apply scrutiny to you, to make sure you're comprehensive."

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