

Compost This!



**THE COMPOST NINJA
BATTLES KITCHEN SCRAPS
WITH A CREATIVE NEW
SERVICE**

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BY RENEE BRINCKS

A few months ago, Chef Jim Vido of the Ladora Bank Bistro was working in the restaurant when a local resident came in to chat. Over a conversation about gardening and fresh ingredients, the customer proposed an idea.

"He said, 'What if I could take your food scraps and turn them into compost that you could use in your garden? Or, what if we just used it to grow vegetables for the restaurant?' I thought these were great ideas, and things took off from there," Vido says.

That customer was Aaron Hanson, who launched The Compost Ninja in Linn, Johnson and Iowa counties last November. The 25-year-old Ladora entrepreneur has created a simple, seamless solution for residential, retail and business clients interested in turning their trash into natural treasure. Compost, a nutrient-rich material made from decomposed food waste, leaves, paper and other organic matter, revives depleted soil and helps it retain moisture.

Vido signed on as a Compost Ninja client, and each week he receives several four-gallon, lime-green buckets outfitted with biodegradable liners. He fills those buckets with vegetable peelings, fruit scraps, eggshells, unused salad greens and other waste from the day's meal preparations. Restaurant staff members also separate bits of food from unfinished entrées, and they can toss in paper napkins, tea leaves, coffee grinds and other compostable materials clearly outlined on a sticker affixed to the lid of each bin.

Once a week, Vido sets the full buckets outside (he typically fills a few each week, especially when the bistro is busy) and then sends Hanson a text message. The next day, when the chef returns to work, his scrap-laden containers have been replaced with empty, freshly sanitized buckets. From there, the process begins anew.

Vido calls his partnership with The Compost Ninja simple, convenient and cost effective.

"I couldn't ask for an easier deal. Almost everything we use is compostable," says Vido, who now schedules home pickups, as well. "It makes a big difference. The amount of compostable items that otherwise get thrown in the trash is amazing. A lot of it is about retraining your brain – we're brought

up to just throw things away, but now these scraps are going to something positive and beneficial."

Aaron Hanson doesn't bring an environmental degree or culinary background to his business venture, but he developed an awareness of waste management practices as a youngster. The Cedar Rapids native grew up near "Mt. Trashmore," a former Cedar Rapids/Linn County Solid Waste Agency landfill site along the Cedar River. He later lived in Las Vegas and Southern California, where he frequently encountered smoggy skies and saw plenty of unsightly offshore trash barges.

Through his travels, Hanson also saw cities experimenting with food waste and composting initiatives. He kept those efforts in mind after landing back in Iowa, where he now works with a company that sells buckets and storage containers. When Hanson realized that some of his customers were ordering bins for home composting efforts, it sparked his idea for a side business.

"I thought about my own experiences and how much I've contributed to the waste problem, and something just clicked," says the Compost Ninja founder. "Composting seems like such common sense. This is something we can fix, and now is the time."

The issues that Hanson aims to address are significant. In the United States, approximately 40 percent of all edible food goes to waste, says the Natural Resources Defense Council. An average American throws away between \$28 and \$43 worth of food each month, or approximately 20 pounds per person. That means more than \$165 billion dollars a year are dedicated to producing ingredients that no one even eats. And, if consumers cut food waste by just 15 percent, that would feed 25 million individuals annually.

Hanson, an avid Iowa Hawkeye football fan, describes the impact in gridiron-inspired terms.

"The United States generates enough food waste every day to completely fill the Rose Bowl. That's every single day," he says. "That waste is going to the landfill and becoming an issue, instead of being used as a resource."

By providing his clients with clean containers each week, and handling all aspects of the pickup and

disposal process, Hanson helps households make a difference without much of an effort on their part. The biggest obstacle for most clients, he explains, is simply changing longtime habits.

"You don't set a compost bin next to the trash can and then wake up the next day and divert 100 percent of your organic material. You're still going to throw stuff away, at first. It's one of those subconscious things that we just do," he says.

To help potential customers get acquainted with the process, Hanson offers a free 30-day Compost Ninja challenge. After the four-week trial, clients who sign up for the service (it's \$25 a month for residential pickup; prices vary for retail and business accounts) begin earning points based on how much compostable waste Hanson picks up each week. Later this year, customers will start redeeming those points for compost that they can use in their own gardens. Or, if they prefer, they can exchange credits for produce that Hanson's company will raise during the summer growing season.

Hanson, who currently manages the weekly bucket exchanges by himself, is composting collected materials at sites near Ladora, North English and Newhall. He'll grow vegetables for the seasonal points redemptions at those spots, as well, and he's enlisted the help of a friend and experienced gardener to tackle planting, growing and harvesting.

Hanson has already heard from local schools and universities interested in his services, and he hopes to expand to other regions in Iowa as his business takes root.

"The trends show that people want to eat healthy and organic. They want to stay away from GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and pesticides. People also want to know where their food comes from. But," he adds, "knowing where your food goes is just as important."

That knowledge is part of the appeal for Tom Bowersox of Cedar Rapids, who signed up for The Compost Ninja's residential services in January. Though he and his wife had tried home composting in the past, they struggled to stick with the process.

"Doing a good compost pile takes a lot more work

than I'm able to devote to it right now," says Bowersox. "I'm just happy the food waste is not going to the landfill. This is a very environmentally sound way to get rid of food scraps that would otherwise just mold away, not being useful," he says.

Each week, Bowersox and wife fill the better part of a green bucket with food scraps and other organic matter. Based on measurements from his first three months of business, Hanson estimates that he picks up an average of nine pounds of compostable waste per client, per week.

At that rate, each household served by The Compost Ninja will divert nearly 500 pounds of food waste from landfills in a year.

"It's kind of a cliché to say that one person can make a difference, that one person can make a change," Hanson says. "But, this is a situation where even one person is genuinely making a big difference."

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