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### STREET TALK

April 30, 2008

## Silverware to Starchware: Local Markets Pitch Biodegradable Utensils

by Amy Biegelsen

Sterling silverware and bone china are nice, but cornstarch cups and cutlery is where it's at now.

A few weeks back, Olivia Patrick started buying biodegradable plates for the Forest Hill Avenue location of her coffee shop, Crossroads Coffee and Ice Cream. The plates are made out of a corn byproduct and break down under ideal conditions, like a well-kept compost heap, in 30 to 90 days. Decomposition would take longer in a landfill, but still beats Styrofoam, which pretty much never decomposes.



"We just wanted to do something for the environment," Patrick says. They started about a year ago with corn-based cups and hope to expand into flatware. Cups and plates cost about \$10 more per case; flatware can run as much as \$35 more.

"A number of our customers have been asking us forever," she says. "Piece by piece, we're just adding more."

Mike Martin, food service director for Virginia Commonwealth University, says the cafeteria there uses china and silverware in the cafeteria, but converted to biodegradable non-plastic straws two months ago. At the April 30 Summer Celebration, an end-of-the-semester barbecue at Shafer Court, Martin says all the dishes and flatware will be biodegradable. Ellwood Thompson's uses biodegradable flatware (pictured), too.

The market's growing quickly, says Sean Kvingedal, sales director for World Centric, a California company that manufactures and distributes biodegradable utensils. He says biodegradable utensil sales have grown 600 percent in the last year. Because the utensils biodegrade better in a compost than a landfill, Kvingedal hopes all those new customers will begin pressuring local authorities to establish municipal compost services.

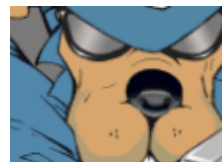
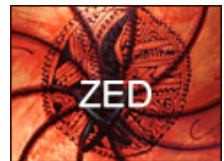
Kvingedal cautions that while the utensils are good to eat with, they are not designed to be eaten themselves.

Russell Cook, head chef at Millie's Diner, is up for the challenge. Ideally, he'd taste the fork before building a menu around it, but if pressed, he guesses something barbecued might complement the fork.

"Something viscous and tangy and spicy could help manipulate the blandness of a straight starch," he says.

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