

Green Business Focus

# Life in balance, sustainability in practice

*How a local health spa is taking the steps toward sustainable expansion*

By Susan Dawson-Cook

A bottle is placed in the recycling bin instead of the trash; a bicycle is chosen as a mode of transportation over a car; a desert shrub or tree is planted instead of a non-native plant that requires extra water. Each day we all make choices that affect the environment in either a positive or negative way.

On a grander scale, each employer that embraces environmental ethics can make a positive impact, not only by conducting business in a responsible manner, but by educating employees. Take a single individual and multiply it by 440 and you have the number of employees at Miraval, Life in

Balance, in Catalina, Ariz. — a Tucson spa whose majority owner, Steve Case, has made the choice to practice sustainability.

Established in 1996, Miraval, Life in Balance has been consistently rated the number one Destination Spa by *SpaFinder Magazine*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Zagat Survey* and *Conde Nast Traveler*. Such high ratings are the result of Miraval's more than 150 programs and activities that reflect their core philosophy of living life in the moment.

Eric Dhruv, director of sustainability at Miraval, is committed to helping everyone who works there, from the corporate executives to the core staff, become more educated about being more mindful of the earth. Eric describes sustainability as a practice of considering the economic, ecological and social impact of any operation or procedure. Differing from a green philosophy, where a choice is made simply to protect the planet, sustainability considers the economic and social impact as well, he said.

During a time of expansion, when new administration buildings, villas and rooms are being built, finding a way to grow while preserving Miraval's panoramic Catalina Mountain views and the atmosphere of serenity has been the biggest challenge. "The intention early on was to make this project as sustainable and green as possible," said Dhruv. Environmental and landscape architects with expertise in green construction are working together to establish a development plan which will leave behind the smallest possible footprint on the surrounding landscape.

The 26 privately owned villas, will be constructed in an area that has already been impacted by prior development or land use. Old administration buildings will be razed and salvageable material from the demolished buildings will be recycled. The foundations for the villas will be laid in the footprints of the former buildings.

Efforts are being made to ensure views from each villa while orienting them to minimize the heat gain in summer and maximize passive cooling. Each home will be constructed from green materials (including Forest Stewardship Council lumber and rammed earth) and interior materials will be of low volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Miraval also plans to "offer solar energy as part of a packet [homeowners] can buy into,"



photo: courtesy of Miraval Life in Balance  
Miraval Life in Balance, Catalina, Ariz., is paying attention to its carbon footprint while undergoing an expansion and new construction.

Dhruv said.

To make room for the administration buildings and 16 guest rooms, land had to be cleared. Miraval did what it could to minimize the amount of destruction that occurred, said Dhruv. Mature trees that would otherwise have been cleared were transported to the nursery area. Once sewer lines are installed, mature trees will be replanted on site local and horticulturist Cory Martin will continue rehabilitating that area using as many native plants as possible. "The buildings themselves will pleasantly fit in with surroundings," added Dhruv.

The departure of the bulldozers and the return of the trees will likely bring back the javelina, bobcats, and coyotes, and a variety of birds, reptiles and rodents, most of which

have relocated to higher elevations. Construction has caused a serious disturbance to their native habitat, but "much of that will be reversed once the area is rehabilitated," said Dhruv.

Company management has been especially supportive of the money-saving operational changes recommended by Dhruv. These include buying more locally grown food products, converting to compact fluorescent lighting (CFL) and even getting guests involved in conservation. As it stands, Miraval's "I rock" program requests each guest to place a stone on their bed to indicate they don't need bedding and towels changed. Otherwise, linens are changed daily. "What we want to do is turn the system around," said Dhruv. This would change the default toward conservation, rather than waste, while saving labor, water, and wear and tear on linens.

Miraval's Sustainability Team educates their employees about sustainability. A spin-off from the former Green Team, the Sustainability Team is comprised of a representative from each department as well as other interested employees. Team members educate other staff on ways they can help, by picking up roadside trash, placing recyclables in recycling bins, bringing their own water bottles to work instead of using disposable ones, and turning off lights and temperature control in unoccupied facilities. The team's aim is for people to become more mindful of their every action and its potential results.

Recycling is the most basic way each employee can help, said Dhruv. Despite rumors to the contrary, Dhruv said that Pima County Waste Management recycles every possible product from each recycling bin. During a recent tour of the Recycle America facility, Don Gibson, recycling coordinator for the City of Tucson, told Dhruv and his group that in the last several years, only one load of recycling was discarded due to contamination. "It's kind of a myth that gets started [that the contents of your recycling bin end up in the dump]," said Dhruv.

Dhruv believes future guests will choose to come to the resort because of Miraval's sustainability practices. Even now, return guests who learn about the construction often ask to speak with him for reassurance that Miraval will remain the place of beauty that has come to have meaning in their lives. And Dhruv's careful planning is expected to enable even more guests to appreciate the incredible views and traverse the myriad trails which weave up into the Catalina Mountains.

**About the author:** Susan Dawson-Cook is a freelance writer living in Tucson.

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## Goodies

Continued from page 15

### Bizchochitos

Yes, Virginia, you can use vegetable shortening in place of the lard called for in this recipe, just as you can use margarine instead of butter in your butter cookies. But in the mysterious interactions of food chemistry, you will attain slightly different results—in this case, thinner and slightly less flavorful cookies than Mamacita used to make.

- 3 cups all purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 cup lard (or shortening)
- 2/3 cup plus 2 TBSP sugar
- 1 tsp anise seed
- 1 large egg
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 1 Tablespoon cinnamon

In a bowl, with mixer on high speed, beat lard, 2/3 cup sugar and anise seed until fluffy Beat in the egg until blended and add the orange juice. Add the dry ingredients and mix well until completely blended. In a shallow bowl or plate, mix the remaining sugar and the cinnamon. Divide dough in half. On a well floured board, roll dough, a portion at a time, 1/4" thick. With floured cookie cutter, cut the dough into shapes. One at a time, dip the surface of each cookie in spiced sugar, pressing lightly. Set cookies, sugar side up, about 1/2" apart on ungreased baking sheets. Gather scraps into a ball, roll out and cut more cookies Bake cookies at 325°F degrees until just golden, about 10 minutes Transfer to wire racks to cool.

**About the author:** Teresa Kennedy is the author of five cookbooks and a variety of books in other areas of interest. A former newspaper editor and columnist, she lives with her husband and daughter in Tucson.