



To hell with pineapples and stars. Palmettos are the newest status symbol in the gradually greening tourism economy of the Lowcountry.

Thanks to a statewide green hospitality certification initiative, travelers can now evaluate their food and lodging choices in a more considered way.

The rating system is simple: One palmetto is good. Two palmettos are better. Three palmettos are best.

You may ask, what's wrong with stars?

That's a good question, because we are all familiar with the rating of hotels and restaurants using stars.

Stars are symbols that mean "you will have a good experience at this place." You know how it works; one star means it's a dump, four stars mean it's fabulous. It's a convention that we have adopted over the years, and we have become so comfortable with this convention that it now feels natural.

The problem with stars, though, is that they rate only one outcome: consumer experience.

Stars do not measure the social, economic and environmental shenanigans involved in creating the kind of faux fabulousness that merits four stars. What's worse, stars do not measure the level of systemic fabulousness that it takes to create a solid hospitality operation that, at first glance, might seem like a dump.

The number of stars in a hospitality rating has no relationship to more subtle indicators of quality, such as an establishment's treatment of employees, its conscientiousness as a corporate citizen, or its acumen regarding energy management.

Thus the palmettos, South Carolina's favorite symbol of strength and resilience. The idea is that using sound principles we can build a hospitality industry that, like Fort Moultrie during Revolutionary War, can brave any battle and weather any storm (excepting, of course, a Cat 2 or higher hurricane).

Who awards the coveted Palmettos? That would be the South Carolina Hospitality Association and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. Working in partnership, they have codified best management practices and developed a voluntary system of evaluation that leads to certification.

The big orange carrot for going green: Upon certification, the establishment becomes a member of the SC Green Hospitality Alliance. (Kudos to Crowne Plaza Resort on Hilton Head Island for being the only current Lowcountry alliance member.)

Membership in the alliance is a feather in the cap of any hotel or restaurant. It means you can use the logo on your website and brochures, and best of all, your marketing people can go way over the top without being accused of greenwashing.

It also establishes credibility with a certain coveted target market, the 3Rs. These are Real Simple-reading, right-sized car-driving, righteously anticonsumeristic consumers.

For the 3Rs, the typical four-star experience has lost its cachet. 3Rs still want a great experience, of course, but they are starting to read labels. They want to know the quality of the

ingredients that go into formulating their experience. They want to know if there is an EnergyStar cooler in the kitchen and if, over in the grounds department, OSHA guidelines are being followed to the letter. They want assurances that at least 30% of the garbage they generate will be diverted from the solid waste stream. They want to know that the oil the massage therapist is using is fair-trade, or organic, or both.

It's not that pampering is passe -- it simply must be principled. Amenities are fine if they are environmentally-friendly. Great guest experiences are expected, but not at the cost of an employee's health or a community's well being.

So how does one get ones Palmettos?

Visit www.greenhospitalityalliance.com for details.

A DHEC web page, www.scdhec.gov/greenhospitality , also has information on the program, or a proprietor can call the DHEC Solid Waste Office at 1-800-768-7348.

You'll get an application to fill out, and you'll find out how to calculate points in eight areas of operations:

the environmental team (aka The Green Team)

environmentally preferred purchasing

waste reduction and recycling

energy efficiency

water efficiency

air quality

sustainable food

green lodging

In order to be officially certified you'll need to be a member of the SC Hospitality Association. I won't go into the details of the benefits of membership for this group; they are myriad, and the cost is based on the size of your operation.

I will emphasize, however, that one of the other benefits of involvement with the Green Hospitality Alliance is knowledge-sharing. A recent Alliance meeting at the Weston on Hilton Head Island included employees of the Weston, the EconoLodge in Beaufort, and Bray's Island (yes, they have guests with hospitality needs.)

Here's a sampling of what they got, in addition to a very nice lunch:

- Information on how to apply for the SC Budget and Control Board's Energy Technical Assistance Program (SC has over \$15 million in federal recovery funds available to help businesses with free energy assessments, low-cost energy audits, and consulting on energy conservation measures)
- A presentation on green cleaning procedures and products by two employees of Procter & Gamble, an industry giant that is in the vanguard when it comes to corporate sustainability initiatives

- One-sheet handouts with the latest information on best management practices in green hospitality
- Great conversation and dialog with like-minded hospitality colleagues

A sense of hope that changing our hospitality practices can make a difference in the quality of life of all South Carolinians. Hospitality is a big industry, so on a statewide scale even small changes produce noticeable results -- including keeping our taxes down. (Do you know how much it costs to build a landfill?!)

About what I wrote earlier about pineapples -- I take it back. Pineapples will always remain a symbol of hospitality.

Stars are a different matter, though. From now on, in the game of southern hospitality, one Palmetto trumps four stars.

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