nderstand and care about packaging because they leave the [foodservice outlet] with those containers and bring them into their homes. And consumers, particularly millennials, want to dine at restaurants that reflect their values in regard to sustainability.”

“Packaging is an extension of a restaurant’s brand,” adds Lynn Dyer, president of the Foodservice Packaging Institute. “Materials and graphics tell a story about the brand, and it can be a great way to communicate with consumers. We see more and more recyclable and compostable containers being used, and more restaurants telling their customers what they are doing about waste.”

Post-use recovery strategies

The end result is an uptick in foodservice operators using packaging made from post-consumer materials, as well as those using compostable packaging. Most quick service restaurants (QSRs) are now designing their packaging with a recovery strategy in mind, says Nina Goodrich, executive director of GreenBlue, a Charlottesville, Va.-based environmental nonprofit dedicated to sustainable use of materials in society.

“Foodservice packaging can be designed to be recyclable and/or compostable,” says Goodrich, who is also director of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition. “The advantage of compostable packaging is that it can be used to help divert food waste from landfill if both the package and the product can be composted together.”

“People aren’t great at sorting materials,” says Sarah Martinez, director of marketing at Boulder, Colo.-based Eco-Products. “When you use compostable packaging, the half-eaten sandwich and the clamshell can be thrown away in the same bin.”

Eco-Products produces clear, compostable containers made from “corn plastic.”

Eco-friendly developments

Eco-Products has been growing its GreenStripe line of products, which are renewable and largely commercially compostable. The company also makes a BlueStripe product line with post-consumer recycled content.

Double-duty pizza packaging

GreenBox president Jen Wright-Laracy: “Our clients use our [green] stamp of approval.”

At GreenBox, a New York City-based pizza packaging supplier, all pizza boxes are uncoated so they can be composted or recycled. The innovative pizza boxes, which have been used by Whole Foods Market and several convenience store chains, are multifunctional and include perforation so the top of the box can be used as plates, while the bottom can be folded into a smaller to-go container.

“The recent attention to grease-resistant coatings on paper packaging using PFASs [per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances] is a great example of the importance of material health,” explains Nina Goodrich, director of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition. “Fluorochemical-free products have been introduced and now provide alternatives for oil, grease and water resistance.”

PFASs—a diverse group of compounds resistant to heat, water and oil that have been used for decades in food paper wrappings—include chemicals that are persistent, resist degradation in the environment and bioaccumulate, meaning their concentration increases over time in the blood and organs. At high concentrations, certain PFASs have been linked to adverse health effects in laboratory animals.

All GreenBox packaging is also made from recycled material and includes the company’s green logo. “Our clients use our stamp of approval since it identifies our boxes as good for the environment,” says Jen Wright-Laracy, president and co-founder of GreenBox.