The University of Connecticut (UConn) in Storrs is installing a new green dish room in its South Dining facility. “It is one of our larger facilities as far as the amount of people they feed in a given day,” said C. Dennis Pierce, director of dining services, of the facility, which serves in excess of 3,500 a day. “It is really a workhorse. In the summertime it is used for conferences and when we started renovating and building new buildings 10 years ago, this was one of the first ones that we did.”

“When it was built, the dish room floor that was value engineered in order to meet budget didn’t work. We went down and basically did it right this time. Walls got painted, the new floor got put in, there is better drainage, better exhaust and we replaced the ceiling.”

The equipment is also more environment-friendly. “We chose a Meiko dish machine,” he said. “I had seen it at the National Restaurant Association Show. We were following this one because it appeared to be the most environment-friendly one that is out there.”

For Pierce, one of the benefits of the machine is the insulation. “It is probably the most insulated machine that’s out there,” he said. “One of the issues that you will see in dish rooms based on the fact that you’ve got a smaller area typically, you have a lot of equipment that’s running, so that raises a lot of noise levels.

“On our campus, Environmental Health and Safety did noise testing and required individuals working specifically in this facility to have hearing tests annually — one before they start as a benchmark and from that point on, to see if there is any loss of hearing. We also had individuals requiring ear protectors because of the noise level. With the new installation, that is not going to be necessary.”

An accumulator was also installed to allow for dishes to go to the dishroom. “When you have slow times, when you’ve got a dribbling of trays coming in, you don’t need the manpower to immediately take that tray and/or dishes off because at the end it’s going to fall off the table,” he said. “It keeps going around and you can take it off whenever someone is available.”

After the dishes are taken off the accumulator, the food waste is scraped into a trough and instead of going to a garbage disposal, it goes into a machine from Somat. “We put it in a Somat, which is like a garbage disposal, but it is much larger, like a big drum that grinds up the food; then it will move that slurry to the other side of the kitchen,” said Pierce. “In other words, it goes up a pipe, in the ceiling, across the ceiling, down into the pulper. A pulper is basically a machine that extracts water.”

He continued, “The process is that it is taking this slurry
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and it is pushing it up, almost like a projectile and just by sheer gravity, the water extracts down as it goes through. It removes 80 percent of the water. Then what you get is another product, which is basically wet, but it is a lot less wet than it was before.

“The next step, what it will do in our process is it will go into an eCorrect Compostable Waste Decomposer. Basically it is a big silver box that has the ability to dry out this matter and then after 12-plus hours, it turns it into a pulped eCorrect processed soil amendment.”

The soil amendment is high in nutrients because of the matter it is made of. “Our desire is to work and collaborate with our landscaping here on campus and have them utilize this lieu of going out and buying product,” Pierce noted.

If everything works out with this new dishroom, Pierce hopes to begin converting other dishrooms on campus using this model. “My hope is that at some point in time landscaping is going to go, ‘too much, we’ve got enough.’ I would then turn around and retail this, in order to offset any costs that went into the project. It is an interesting project long term.”

The cost of this dishroom changeover, which Pierce estimates to be in $280,000, was worth it. “I am looking from a perspective that it is a greener thing. It is creating a better environment for the workforce. They don’t have to go through the preventive mechanisms, to wear ear protectors. It is going to be a lot cooler environment. It is going to generate a product that is potentially going to bring in revenue. If you look at a renovation for a dish room and you look at the going price for a dish machine, most institutions now look at some form of a pulper process because their constraints are either municipal or otherwise as far as what they can put down the drain nowadays.”

He continued, “In our situation, some of the infrastructure within the plumbing system and the sewage is that the pipes are not that big. When you start grinding things up and you are trying to push it down a pipe, there is somewhat of a frequency of plumbing problems. When you don’t do that any longer, then you save there because you don’t have the facility bills that you had before. I am speculating that it is going to bring us a cost savings, but you can’t really put a number on it.”

Pierce is excited about the prospects for the new dish machine. “We are eager to see how this is going to work. It is a relatively clean process. I think it is kind of cool.”