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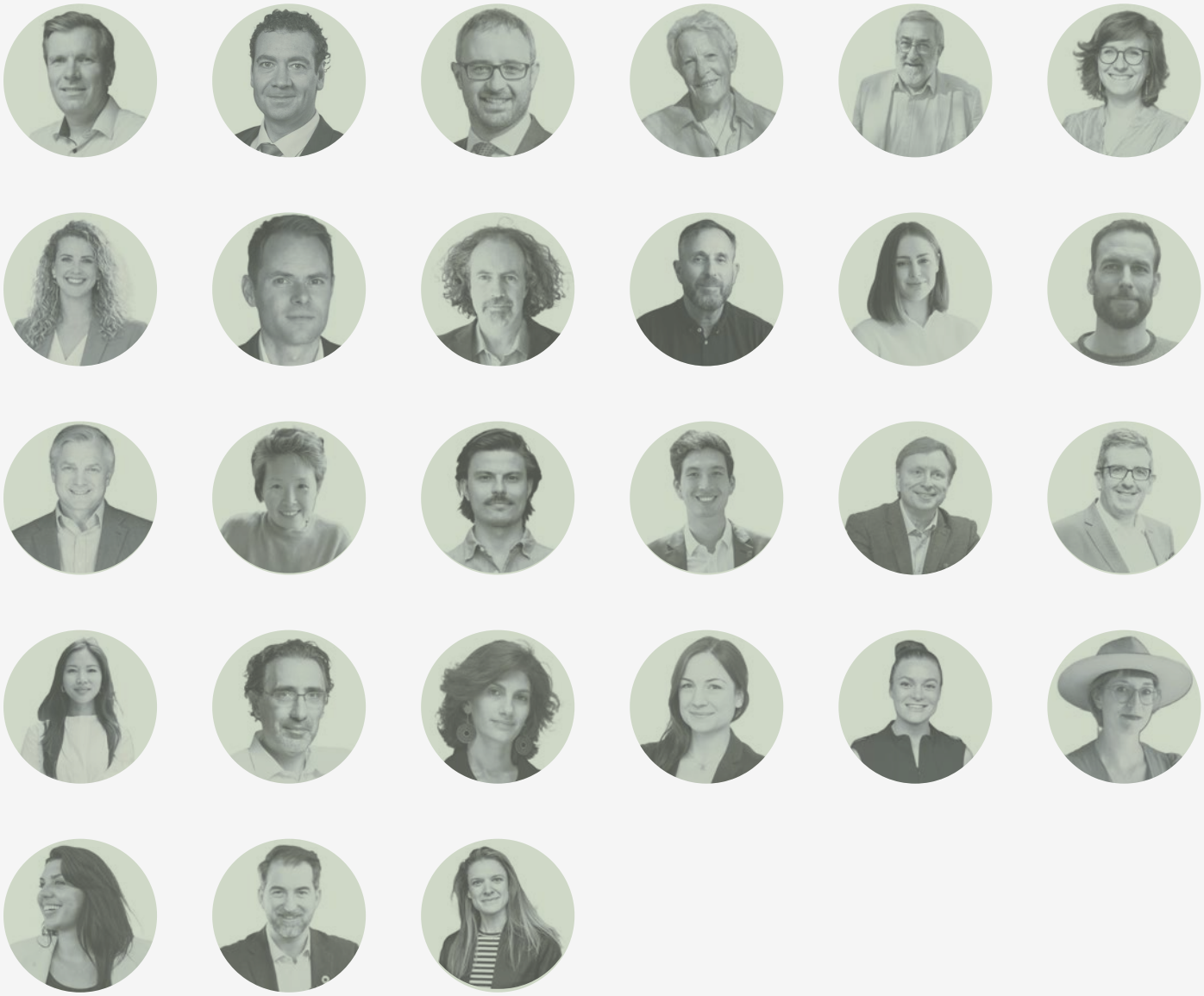
Sustainability Edition

The Regenerative Question - What Hospitality Must Become



The Hotel Yearbook

Foresight and innovation in the global hotel industry

HYB

Regenerative foodservice: from soil health to menu design

Regenerative foodservice

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Carlos Martin-Rios reframes foodservice as a powerful lever for regeneration, shifting the focus from "less harm" to actively improving soil health, water cycles, biodiversity, and community resilience. He shows how procurement, menu design, pricing, and kitchen operations can be redesigned around regenerative agriculture and outcome-based measurement, turning restaurants and hotels into stewards of living food systems rather than endpoints of an extractive chain.

REGENERATION CHANGES THE STARTING POINT

Regeneration is not a rebranding of sustainability. It shifts the starting point. Instead of asking how to reduce harm, it asks whether our actions improve the vitality of the living systems on which we depend. In food systems, this means restoring soil health, strengthening water cycles and supporting biodiversity while reinforcing community resilience. For foodservice, the implications are equally concrete: procurement, menus, pricing and operations must be redesigned so that value creation supports ecological and social renewal rather than contributing to gradual depletion.

FROM ECOLOGICAL THEORY TO AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE

The intellectual roots of regenerative thinking lie in systems ecology, ecological economics and regenerative design. Systems ecology reframed nature as dynamic flows of energy and materials rather than static stocks. Ecological economics highlighted how markets fail to account for soil degradation, water depletion and biodiversity loss, treating them as externalities instead of real costs. Regenerative design translated these insights into practice by asking how systems can be configured so that each use contributes to the integrity of the larger system that sustains it.

Regenerative agriculture provides tangible expression of these ideas. It focuses on measurable outcomes such as increases in soil organic matter, improved water infiltration and recovery of biodiversity. Practices including reduced tillage, cover cropping, agroforestry and managed grazing rebuild soil carbon and strengthen resilience over time. Regenerative agriculture is defined by outcomes. Unlike organic certification, which centers on approved inputs, regeneration asks what has changed in the soil and whether those changes can be verified.

WHY FOODSERVICE MATTERS

Foodservice operators do not manage soil carbon or aquifers directly. Their influence operates through purchasing decisions. Restaurants, hotels and caterers sit at the visible end of the value chain, translating agricultural production into meals and guest experiences. Through this position, they either reinforce extractive models or create demand for restorative ones.

Regenerative foodservice therefore begins with procurement. When purchasing contracts are linked to verified ecological outcomes such as soil carbon gains or biodiversity indicators, incentives for restoration are created upstream.

Outcome-based procurement and true-cost approaches make environmental and social impacts visible within pricing structures (Martin-Rios et al., 2022; 2024). Sustainability is integrated into financial decision-making. A menu built around verified regenerative grains or diversified crops redirects capital toward practices that rebuild landscapes.

CIRCULAR FLOWS IN THE KITCHEN

Regeneration within foodservice also operates through circular flows. Kitchens can redesign nutrient cycles by composting food waste and returning it to partner farms. Whole-crop use and seasonal sourcing reduce embodied carbon. Durable procurement choices and energy recovery systems address material throughput. These actions alter how energy, water and materials move through operations. The restaurant becomes part of a wider ecological and social system rather than an isolated consumption site.

THE LIMITS OF THE LABEL

A farm demonstrates regeneration through measurable biophysical change. A restaurant produces relational value in the form of hospitality and cultural exchange. This difference clarifies that claims of regeneration require reference to ecological outcomes that are enabled or financed. When the term is adopted without measurable links to restoration, its meaning weakens.

Measurement therefore plays a central role. Indicators such as soil carbon, water retention or biodiversity provide accountability. Yet quantitative metrics alone are insufficient. Regeneration also depends on trust, local knowledge and cultural continuity. The task is to design systems in which measurement supports learning and responsibility. When procurement agreements, pricing mechanisms and reporting systems align with ecological thresholds, regeneration gains credibility.

FROM HOSPITALITY TO STEWARDSHIP

The future of regenerative foodservice depends on integration. The focus is the redesign of flows of capital, nutrients, energy and knowledge so that hospitality contributes to ecological repair. Service organizations act as intermediaries. They translate ecological improvement into market signals and shape consumption patterns. Their legitimacy rests on alignment between language and demonstrable repair.

Regeneration reframes hospitality as stewardship. Success extends beyond margin or occupancy to include whether operations strengthen the ecosystems and communities on which they depend. When menus support biodiversity, contracts reward soil health and waste returns as nutrients rather than landfill, foodservice moves toward reciprocity. The work is practical and systemic. It requires redesigning how value is created and circulated.

ADDITIONAL READING

- Martin-Rios, C., et al. (2026). *Reimagining Tourism Futures: Pathways for Transition in Turbulent Times*. Access to white paper.

- Martin-Rios, C., & Rogenhofer, J., (2025). *Serving the Future: The 2025 Global Foodservice Outlook* Access to white paper.
- Martin-Rios, C., Rogenhofer, J., & Alvarado, M. S. (2022). The true cost of food waste: Tackling the managerial challenges of the food supply chain. *Trends in Food Science & Technology*, 131, 190-195 Access to article
- Martin-Rios, C., Demen-Meier, C., Gössling, S., & Cornuz, C. (2018). Food waste management innovations in the foodservice industry. Waste management, 79, 196-206. Access to article

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