

# Albany Café & Garden

## Introduction

The Albany is a performing arts centre that exists to inspire, develop and support creativity in South East London. With year-round activities and events including award-winning programmes for young creatives and adults over 60, music, theatre, and family performances, their work is led by the talent and imagination of their local communities.



The Albany is an incubator for new ideas and initiatives. They are home to an incredible 22 resident organisations and are a hub for the next generation of talent – from their weekly takeovers for 12-24 year olds to their youth record label, REZON8. They aim to foster a welcoming and inclusive space where everyone is inspired to get creative, and where artists are supported and developed, in part through programmes such as their Associate Artists, Artist of Change and Creative Communities Membership schemes. Their Community Council places local people at the heart of their programming and decision making.

After the momentous delivery of We Are Lewisham, London Borough of Culture 2022 – for which the Albany was lead producer – they were appointed as Lewisham’s first Anchor Cultural Organisation. Whilst their work is centred in Deptford and Lewisham, their influence is also felt nationally and internationally. They are lead partner of [Fun Palaces](#) and a founding member of the [Future Arts Centres](#) network. Their co-creation work has been nominated for major international awards and their Artist of Change project – where artists are embedded in local communities – has been replicated in arts centres across Europe.

In the heart of the main Albany building sits our community Cafe and Albany Garden. These spaces are open to the public six days a week and are a valuable community gathering place.



**What were/are the triggers and motivations behind trying to make the Albany café & garden more sustainable?**

We’re committed to growing our sustainability measures in line with the Theatre Green Book and are an active member of the [Good Food Lewisham](#) network, which explores ways we can work within our community to promote healthy, affordable, and sustainable food growing and production in our borough.

Our Come 'n' Grow community gardening programme offers our audiences a chance to 'get their hands dirty' and engage with the growing process. We're interested in giving people the opportunity to taste things that they have grown – from seed to plate – whether that is sharing our garden produce with our growers or by creating seasonal offers with our garden produce in our cafe. Through this we're trying to develop a greater understanding of the joys and difficulties of growing food, as well as putting greater value on the food we eat.

**What were some of the practical changes you made to make the operations (and maybe building) greener?**

While the garden and cafe have always had a natural connection, we've taken this further in recent years to ensure we're making the best use of our garden produce. This includes making bespoke dishes in our cafe with seasonal produce – from salads to stews – as well as offering plants, jams, and chutneys by donation. This allows us to create a conversation with our audiences about circular food growing practices, as well as create pathways into further development and sustainable income generation.

And of course in October we love to decorate our cafe counter with the wide variety of squash that's grown in the garden!

Our Albany Cafe has also prioritised using Lewisham-based or London-based suppliers wherever possible. Our goal is to have a hyper-local offer, which celebrates the food creativity of our borough. At the moment about 50% of our suppliers are based in the borough of Lewisham and include brilliant companies such as [Mont58](#) who are committed to sustainable coffee production and who deliver our coffee by bike in reusable packaging.



**What do your audiences think of the changes and how do you communicate with them?**

Our Albany Cafe has always been a key place for our audiences to find out more about our work, and for many of our audiences the Cafe is their first point of contact with our organisation. Ensuring our cafe team have the language to be able to talk about our cafe and garden remains important in the day to day, and we're exploring ways we can better signpost our local and sustainable measures within the cafe itself.



Our garden programme has also developed a presence on TikTok by posting educational videos exploring different ways of growing, allowing our audiences to connect with us online as well as in person. We've also worked with our engagement programmes such as Meet Me at the Albany to provide plants that people can take home and grow on their windowsills.

**What tools and resources (if any!) have you found useful?**

We're active members of the Good Food Lewisham network, which offers support and connections across all levels of food production and consumption in the borough. It's where we've been able to connect with other likeminded small businesses, charities, and community gardens.

**What are some of the hardest challenges you've faced in going green?**

The financial impact of sustainable practice is one of the most difficult challenges, especially in the hospitality sector. Rising operational costs across the board combined with our desire to keep our cafe food and drink offer affordable and accessible to our local communities mean we need to be very strategic about how we can continue to deliver this in a sustainable way – both in financial and environmental ways.

Communication of the value of our offer seems to be the key to addressing this; by telling the story of how our food is grown and cooked in house we're able to create more appreciation for our offer.

**What would be your advice to other venues looking to make similar changes?**

Look locally, and start small. A garden can start with one or two raised beds, and provide an invaluable opportunity for people to get their hands in the dirt and start growing. Similarly, we started integrating our garden produce in the cafe by taking baby steps; harvesting rocket to add to a side salad, and planting a pot of mint so we could offer fresh mint tea. This allows for an exploration into new ways of collaborating without creating too much additional work, as well as to test run new ideas with audiences.

**What's next on the horizon for the Albany cafe & garden team?**

Now that spring is here we're slowly coming back into the garden and planning what we're growing this year. We're looking to plant some additional fruit bushes so that we can build on the success of the preserves we make, sell, and serve in the cafe.

We've also been working with some local food businesses to develop bespoke products in collaboration with our cafe and garden. For example, we've worked with BonBon Cafe in Lewisham to create jams and chutneys themed around our Christmas shows, and using produce from our garden. By working with other local businesses we're looking to expand the work we're doing and be able to engage with our audiences in different ways.

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