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The Unpalatable Truth about Food Waste in America

Each year, Americans waste nearly forty percent of food. Each day, we waste 1,400 calories per person (Hall, et al. 1). We turn up our noses at a bruised apple. At milk that's a few days past its "sell by" date. At unappetizing overcooked broccoli. We dump out slightly wilted kale. Anything past its expiration date. We're secure in our privilege, so we destroy food without a second thought. But with one in six Americans lacking a secure supply of food (Coleman-Jensen, et al. 12), this is clearly not a harmless habit. Food waste in America is detrimental to us all, and it's critical that we resolve this problem.

This is an issue that starts at the source. Especially for fruits and vegetables, it's hard to estimate the amount needed. Things like diseases and parasites can decimate crops. A farmer may overcompensate, and end up with far more food than the market requires (Gunders 7).

Waste continues as the food makes its way into retail. For supermarkets, the appearance of the store and its products is critical. They maintain fully stocked shelves. Towering heaps of apples. Stacks of premade wraps. To keep up this façade of perfection, stores only allow blemish-free products on their shelves. Overstocked shelves lead to more food being thrown away. The store may have overestimated the amount of a product that customers want so that food will also be thrown out (Gunders 10). It would be easy to chalk up the problem of food waste to grocery stores. Unfortunately, they only make up about two percent of the total wasted food in America (BSR 15).

Food waste is also prevalent in restaurants. Stringent rules from both the government and the restaurant's owners are in place to ensure that customers only receive the freshest foods. For instance, McDonald's requires that fries must be thrown out after sitting for longer than four minutes. Because of health codes, any food a buffet style restaurant puts out must be thrown away at the end of the day. As a result, discarded food is often perfectly edible. Waste also falls on the consumers, though. A careless attitude towards food results in half-eaten meals left on restaurant tables. Buffet style restaurants are particularly severe culprits. Customers' eyes are often bigger than their stomachs, and they take far more food than they are actually able to eat (Gunders 11). The amount of waste caused by restaurants is a staggering thirty-seven percent of total food waste (BSR 15).

If the food has managed to make it into a home, the store that it came from may still have a negative influence. When stores offer sales like "buy one, get one free" and other deals that encourage buying in bulk, customers may buy more than they need. Much of at home food waste is a result of poor planning. Those preparing the food may create far too many leftovers, which rot uneaten in the fridge. Confusion over expiration dates heightens the amount of waste. "Sell by" dates indicate when the store needs to have sold the item, but not when the item is no longer edible. "Best before" dates indicate the time that the food is at optimal freshness. Many foods, especially canned ones, can last long after their "best before" date has passed.

Perhaps the most harmful aspect of at-home waste is the casual attitude that many people have towards food. The majority of Americans live a privileged life where access to food is a given. They think nothing of throwing out food (Gunders 12). Homes create an overwhelming forty-seven percent of food waste (BSR 15). This is clearly unacceptable.

But even in such bleak circumstances, there is hope. It's possible to reduce food waste everywhere. Extra food from the farming and harvesting stage can be donated to local food pantries. Malformed produce deemed unsuitable for grocery stores can also be donated. Bills in California, Arizona, Oregon, and Colorado give tax credits to farmers who donate their excess produce (Gunders 8).

Donating food is still an option once the food has made its way to grocery stores. France has become the first country to ban supermarkets from throwing out food. Instead, food nearing its expiration date or deemed otherwise unsuitable must be donated (Chrisafis 2016). Unfortunately, this is only a partial fix, due to the small percentage of waste created by grocery stores.

It's understandable that restaurants would create some waste since the government enforces strict regulations to ensure that the food has no chance of harming customers. However, the restaurant managers can make an effort to decrease waste. They can find a pattern in the types of food most often wasted. They can purchase smaller amounts of those foods. They can make sure the fridge and freezer are kept clean and organized, so older food can be used before it spoils. It's important for managers to be conscientious of what goes in and out of their kitchen (Gale et al. 9).

Once the food has made it out to the customer, it becomes the customer's responsibility. If you don't finish your food, ask for a box. If you don't like your food, ask if someone else at your table wants it to take home. Try to find alternatives that don't involve throwing the food out.

And yet, the amount restaurants waste pales in comparison to the sheer quantity of waste that leaves homes. It's important to remember how much of this is a problem at home. This is a fixable issue. This is not a problem of huge corporations carelessly wasting resources. This problem happens in every house. This is a problem anyone can work to reduce.

You can implement strategies in your own home to limit waste. Buy only what you need. Have a backup plan in case your original plan for that food falls through. Monitor what comes into and out of your house. Take note of anything that seems to regularly end up in the trash. It's possible to freeze nearly all food if it's nearing the end of its lifespan. Keep a close eye on leftovers. Eat them for breakfast, lunch, or when you don't feel like cooking an elaborate dinner. Remember that you should eat the food that you purchased or first. Remember that even if the expiration date is past, the food is often fine.

Most of all, remember that a single individual can help. This is a problem that's been escalating for far too long. It's time for America to become aware of the copious amounts of food it wastes. Start caring more about the food being wasted in your own house. Tell your friends. Let them tell their friends. Make the United States a place where people are deliberately reducing food waste. Because they care. About the environment. About the economy. About people who are starving. Food waste in America is a huge problem, but the capacity to fix it is within all of us. So next time you're at the grocery store, spare a thought for that forty-seven percent of food that's headed for your garbage can.

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