

waste not, want not

*The food we throw away could
be saving lives.* / BY ALAN RICHMAN

Food waste—in the fields, at factories, and in restaurants and home kitchens—is a problem of massive proportions. For all sorts of reasons—economic, environmental and humanitarian—we should do more to prevent it.

In a March 2016 article for *National Geographic*, Elizabeth Royte, citing data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, wrote that nearly 800 million people worldwide suffer from hunger, while globally, we waste 2.9 trillion pounds of food a year. This is about a third of the planet's production, and it never reaches consumers through the food supply chain. In fact, large amounts never even enter the food supply chain. Royte and her sources contend that much of this food is tossed simply because it doesn't look good enough to go to market. In other words, conjoined carrots, undersized apples and misshapen bell peppers wind up in landfills.

New York-based Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), a not-for-profit, tax-exempt membership organization dedicated to clean air, clean water and healthy communities, estimates that 40% of all food in America is wasted. "It's a problem that costs the average family of four \$1,500 a year," says Dana Gunders, a senior scientist working for NRDC's food and agriculture program. "All told, Americans are throwing out the equivalent of \$218 billion each year."

She compares it to buying four bags of groceries, dropping one in the parking lot, and not bothering to pick it up. "When good food goes to waste, so does everything it takes to get it to our plates," Gunders says. "A whopping 25% of our nation's fresh water is used to grow food that is never eaten. If global food waste were a country, it would have the largest carbon footprint after the U.S. and China."

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) City Harvest trucks are a welcome sight to many in need. 2) & 3) One more package for an almost fully laden Food Recovery Network SUV; and doing paperwork on the job. 4) & 5) At Daily Table, Ismail Samad, executive chef, oversees a busy kitchen; and staff sort produce.



Food donors

“The idea of food waste can’t help but leave you feeling a little sick to your stomach,” says Andrew Harig, senior director of sustainability, tax and trade for Arlington, Virginia-based Food Marketing Institute (FMI). Noting that FMI is a partner in the Food Waste Reduction Alliance, Washington, D.C.—along with the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the National Restaurant Association (NRA)—Harig says that in 2015, grocers, FMI’s constituency, donated more than 1.4 billion pounds of food to food banks. He calls this a dramatic improvement over the 140 million pounds donated in 2006, but acknowledges that there is still room for growth.

Restaurants also are doing their part. Dave Koenig, the NRA’s former director of tax and profitability and now an executive with the Retail Industry Leaders Association, praises the NRA for strongly encouraging members to donate as much food as they can. He calls specific attention to a recent partnership NRA formed with the Food Donation Connection (FDC), a Knoxville, Tennessee-based organization that manages food donation programs, helping to put donors together with groups in need.

Groceries and restaurants aren’t the only donors in the movement to help the food-insecure. Institutional feeders also are major contributors of unused comestibles—both cooked and uncooked.

Morrison Healthcare, Atlanta, a unit of Compass One, started out six decades ago as a small restaurant in Mobile, Alabama. Shortly after, it moved on to contract foodservice, and today it employs more than 400 executive chefs and 1,200 registered dietitians providing meals for approximately 630 U.S. hospitals.

At Mission Health System, in Asheville, North Carolina, Morrison currently earmarks overages for the Asheville Poverty Initiative (API), among others.

Jason Channell, Morrison’s senior director at the site, says the goal is to limit waste, but, he adds, “Because we produce such high volume, there is always something left over.” He says the

WHY SOME RESTAURANTS DON'T DONATE

Despite the high principles and eminent good sense that support donations of surplus food, some stores and restaurants refuse to do it. “The most serious obstacles stopping many restaurants and businesses from participating seem to be a lack of knowledge about liability protection (the Good Samaritan Act) and concerns about how to get involved in a manner that doesn’t raise costs,” says Doug Rauch, founder/president of Daily Table, Dorchester, Massachusetts.

He calls for programs to better educate businesses on the powerful protections in place, and to make it easy for them to donate. But, he adds, there is also the issue of unawareness—just not knowing enough about the broad impact that hunger and/or obesity have on health and our economic vitality, and the fact that this will impact all of us significantly if something isn’t done about it now.

Rauch would like chefs and restaurateurs to become better informed about the federal law known as the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act. This statute, passed in 1996, protects good faith food donors from civil and criminal liability, should the product later cause harm to its recipient.



CONSUMERS AREN'T BLAMELESS

As Celia Lam, an instructor at Matthew Kenney Culinary, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, points out, “Food waste occurs at all stages of the food supply chain.” Evidence can be seen on the farm in the carcasses of crops left behind by harvesters. At food processing facilities, it may occur as a result of inefficiency, or deliberately when “substandard” items are consigned to the trash. At retail groceries and restaurants, it may be the result of overzealous buying and/or unexpectedly low customer traffic.

But consumers also contribute to food waste, and Lam blames a lack of awareness. There are misconceptions that organic waste will decompose naturally in a landfill, she says. But, given the scale of waste that ends up in the landfill and a lack of oxygen, a banana, for example, doesn't decompose as quickly or completely as we might expect. Anaerobic conditions contribute to production of methane gas, which is 25 times more dangerous than CO₂. According to Lam, “We consumers are creating climate change in our own kitchens.”

A 2015 paper that Brian Wansink, Ph.D., professor/director of Cornell Food and Brand Lab, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, co-wrote with Gustavo Porpino and Juracy Parente, asserts that “the top causes of food waste . . . include buying too much, preparing in abundance, unwillingness to consume leftovers and improper food storage.” In 2016, they collaborated again and came up with this finding: “Mothers often like serving large portions to express affection toward their families, and . . . those who experienced food insecurity in the past are especially likely to overstock food as a precautionary measure.” This leads to accumulation of more leftovers, and, the authors add, “Non-use of leftovers was the most frequent type of food waste identified.”

TOP LEFT: Brian Wansink, director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab.
TOP RIGHT: Cornell Food and Brand Lab's supermarket.

company maintains a small area of refrigerated space where excess food awaits pickup by organizations such as API that, in turn, serve it to the community's needy. “Helping people that may not be able to afford healthy, nutritious meals improves their well-being and gives them a better chance to improve their lives,” Channell says.

The relationship between the hospital and the charity developed from a chance meeting when Shannon Spencer, API director, and Cheryl Queen, a Compass One media representative, connected at a conference. Today, says Spencer, Morrison is a key player, making it possible for her operation to not only deliver meals to people in their apartments, but to run 12 Baskets Café, where all the food is donated and meals are free.

The recipients

The flip side of giving is receiving, and this is where community organizations, congregations and other groups claim the spotlight. They collect the food donations, sort them, allocate them and feed people who might otherwise not eat.

Youthful grassroots enthusiasm is in large part responsible for the rapid growth of the Food Recovery Network (FRN), College Park, Maryland, a 501(c)(3) national nonprofit organization that currently has 191 chapters in 43 states, most of them on college campuses. Launched in 2011 by students from the University of Maryland, Brown University and the University of California, Berkeley, FRN aims to reduce food waste at its source. “We work closely with dining hall managers at various schools, arrange to take their leftovers and redistribute them where they will do the most good,” says Regina Northouse, FRN's executive director.

“FRN has allowed us to provide warm, full meals, groceries and healthy choices to families throughout Worcester (Massachusetts),” says Bill Riley, St. John's Food for the Poor, a charity working with the chapter representing College of the Holy Cross and Clark University, two local colleges.

Says Jeannette Warnert, St. Paul Catholic Newman Center, who relies on the FRN chapter at California State University, Fresno, “Every Friday our food pantry serves 50-75 families in need of anything we can spare. Lines form around the building hours before the pantry opens.”

In New York, City Harvest has been functioning since 1982. This year, it will collect 55 million pounds of excess food to help feed nearly 1.4 million people struggling to put meals on their tables. Through relationships with farms, grocers, restaurants and manufacturers, City Harvest obtains nutritious food that would otherwise go to waste and delivers it free of charge to 500 soup kitchens, food pantries and other community food programs across the five boroughs.

“Our Food Rescue Facility in Long Island City, Queens, is 45,000 square feet. Our fleet of 22 trucks is housed there, and there is storage available for perishable food like produce, dairy and meat, as well as nonperishable food such as canned goods and beverages,” says Samantha Park, City Harvest's communications manager. “We have a full-time staff of over 160 employees, and also benefit from help extended by more than 15,000 volunteers each year.”

Daily Table, Dorchester, Massachusetts, offers ready-to-eat, grab-n-go meals, salads, sandwiches, smoothies and soups, as well as a limited selection of fresh produce, dairy and dry grocery items. Unlike some venues that serve the needy, however, it even has places where shoppers pay. But not one cent of those payments is profit. “We are an innovative 501(c)(3) retail format store designed to deliver affordable nutrition to the food-insecure through utilizing recovered food, as well as purchasing product at deep discounts,” says Doug Rauch, founder/president. Primary funding





CONNECTING DONORS TO THOSE IN NEED

Food Donation Connection (FDC), Knoxville, Tennessee, connects food donors with recipients. Among the donor participants are:

HMSHost Corporation, Bethesda, Maryland, has food donation programs at 60 airports around North America. In Tampa, Florida, alone, contributions of surplus food have fed more than 100,000 people.

Darden Restaurants, whose brands include Olive Garden, LongHorn Steakhouse, The Capital Grill, Bahama Breeze, Seasons 52 and Yard House, says FDC manages its Harvest Program.

At Yum! Brands, media specialist Tyler Hampton lauds FDC for “helping us feed hungry people each and every day by coordinating donations to charities just around the corner from our restaurants.”

Ian Olson, U.S. sustainability director for McDonald’s USA, says FDC helps the chain’s owners/operators develop and launch food donation endeavors with local food kitchens.

In the U.K., Nando’s Bob Gordon says FDC taught his company a system for simply and safely donating cooked chicken. “We’ve been doing it for three years now,” he says. “We owe FDC a great debt.”

comes from more than a dozen foundations and individuals. PepsiCo Foundation and The Kendall Foundation are founding funders/partners.

Everything at Daily Table is presented at prices that compete with or are lower than the less-nutritious food choices in fast-food shops or local for-profit stores, Rauch says. “We collect excess wholesome food that would otherwise be wasted. We get it from manufacturers, growers, distributors and retailers, and we offer it in an upbeat, bright, friendly retail format providing a dignified experience.”

Because Daily Table has a kitchen onsite, it can use “imperfect” produce that even food banks don’t want, turning it into nutritious meals. It currently provides more than 100,000 servings weekly of food that is informed by a strict nutritional guideline set by a nutrition task force from Boston’s Med-Ed community.

“We are a free-membership store, open to everyone, but targeted to serve the economically challenged in our community,” says Rauch. “We currently have over 9,000 members that have signed up for our services.

“Food is a precious resource. It shouldn’t be wasted. We need to find a way to provide adequate, affordable nutrition to the 48 million food-insecure—the hungry—in a manner that is both sustainable and dignified. We need to do this not just because it’s building to a disaster in health care costs, or even because the environment will suffer through greenhouse gases, but because it’s the right thing to do and because we can. This is within our grasp. We have all the food needed to feed the world already being produced—but too much of it is going to waste.” ■

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
1) & 2) A Daily Table customer picks out peaches priced at 79 cents per pound; and apples, one of the locally sourced products for sale. 3) Daily Table’s 10,000 square-foot Dorchester, Massachusetts, store.

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PHOTO CREDIT Opposite, top left: Bruno Imbroisi/Embrapa