

SUSTAINABILITY CORNER

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Minimizing Food Waste—And Making More Money Because of It

Everyone knows not to waste food and that wasting food is an issue. In fact, It's a BIG issue. But why?

The Cost of Food Waste

Before we look at food waste, we need to remember that when food is wasted, the environmental impacts (and economic impacts to your foodservice business) include more than the food itself.

For food to be grown, raised, harvested, processed, brought to market, etc., there is a considerable amount of land, fertilizer (which is usually an oil-based product with its own environmental issues), water, electricity, and oil/gasoline involved, which results in the wasting of land, fertilizer, water, electricity, and oil/gas. Wasted food ends up in landfills where, instead of decomposing naturally, it contributes to the production of greenhouse gases. The reason is that food that is eaten, or goes into compost, decomposes naturally. Food that goes into landfills, often in plastic

bags, rots. You know what just a little rotten food looks and smells like. Imagine a landfill of it!

Besides the environmental and sustainability issues of these resources (i.e. water, land, transportation), the overhead costs of these resources are charged to your company when you order food products.

In other words, every food product that goes into your trash can equals lost profit! The trash can is a cost center of your operation. You need to realize that any food item that goes into the trash can has to be thought of in the same way as labor costs, rent, insurance, etc.

This article will show you how your operation can minimize food waste and, as a result, make more money by minimizing waste.

What is Food Waste?

Food waste is a broad term but basically means that food was not used for its intended purpose of feeding people. This occurs at all levels of the food production system. Examples include, but unfortunately are not limited to, the following:

- Produce that never leaves the farm because it is not considered to “be perfect” due to blemishes or size issues.
- Product that is discarded at market or in food service operations because it was held too long and has spoiled or gone past its recommended date.
- Product that is wasted during prep. Apple peels are edible but in preparing apple pie, they often end up in the trash. Think about all the wasted product of tourné potatoes.
- Too much food is put on the plate and ends up being scraped into the garbage.

Of course, food is wasted in people's houses as well, but this article focuses on what you can do in foodservice to minimize food waste, help save the environment, and, of course, increase your bottom line as well.



Take Action

Here are some things that you can do to minimize food waste in your operation. The ideas range from things that you can do today to ideas that will take some planning and collaborating to accomplish. You probably can't do them all in your operation but strive for as many as you can achieve.

Perform a menu/recipe/portion audit.

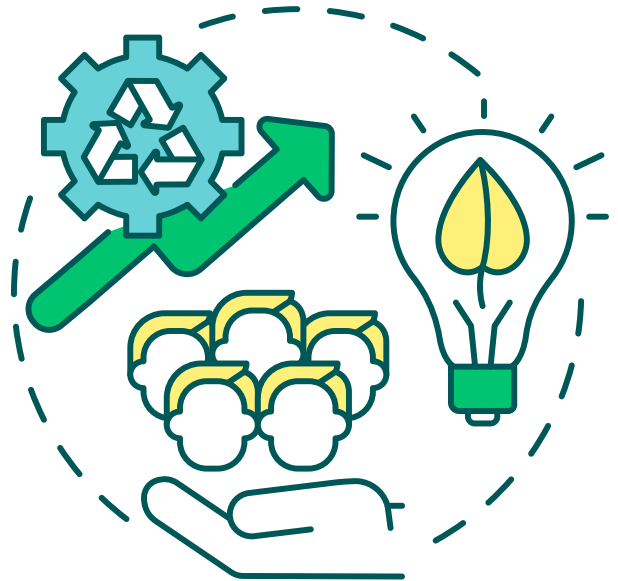
- Does your menu contain a lot of ingredients that are only used in one or two dishes? Because of minimum ordering quantities, are you wasting a lot of the ingredients due to spoilage or expiration dates?
- Could your recipes be modified so that there is less waste in the prep or cooking process. For example, can you peel the bottom of asparagus instead of cutting off the tough ends?
- Could you use trimmings from one dish as the basis for other dishes? For example, if you are deboning chickens, you make chicken soup with the bones.
- Are your portion sizes too generous for a particular dish or for most of your menu items? If you see one or more menu items constantly coming back to the kitchen with a lot left on the plate, you are wasting food and probably undercharging the customer.
- Is there too much use of to-go containers? If many customers are asking for containers after dining, it means you are serving them two meals on the plate and charging them for one. Wasted food, lost profit!

Keep small, clear trash containers in your prep areas.

Many foodservice establishments have replaced the trash cans located throughout the kitchens with small, clear, plastic containers at each workstation. The containers have the name of the employee on them, and the chef can watch who minimizes food waste and who needs to be coached more. This method is most effective when the trash can is placed at or near the chef's office or where the chef will be at the greater part of the day. That way, when an employee empties a container, the chef notices.

Educate your team.

Does your team know how to minimize food waste? Have you provided them with training on how to sharpen and hone their knives to minimize waste? Do they know the most effective ways to trim and prep? Do they know how to do such basic things as to revive lettuce? Do they know why they need to minimize waste for the good of their community, the country, and the world? Do they know how wasting food affects your bottom line?



Run specials.

Until recently, it was very common for restaurants to run daily specials. It was no secret that chefs and managers created specials to utilize (and not waste) food products. For example, if a kitchen had extra onions, the special would be French onion soup. If there was a lot of bread in the kitchen that was starting to turn stale, then bread pudding would be a dessert special.

Note, for this to be effective, you must still uphold your establishment's quality standards. In other words, the French onion soup, bread pudding, or whatever you make, must still be a quality product.

Prepare family meals.

A good use of food that doesn't make it to the customers' plates can be used for family meals. Some ideas include the following:

- Fried rice or fried noodles
- Stir-fry
- Frittatas and omelets
- Creative stews, chilis or soups
- Salads based on leftovers (such as pasta or potato salads)
- "Bread" pudding made from leftover cakes, cookies, as well as sweet breads and pastries
- Juices and smoothies made from trimmings and vegetables/fruit that are not plate-worthy

Please note that many of these ideas could be the basis of your specials.

Manage how much you order.

Is the person in charge of ordering simply ordering too much? Is the person so concerned about running out of products that too much is being ordered? Is it time to retrain that person?

Conduct a FIFO training.

Does your staff understand and follow “First In First Out”? If not, you are probably wasting a lot of food and money on having expired products discarded. Again, things should not be thrown out without the manager or chef knowing, otherwise the problem will just continue.

Are your plate, salad bar, or buffet garnishes necessary?

Garnishes are seldom eaten and probably would not be missed if they were not used. How much product, prep time, and money would you save if they were minimized?

Use “ugly” products.



Many food products are wasted because they just aren't pretty. In many areas of your operation, you could probably use less than perfect fruit. For example, if you are making carrot cake, it doesn't matter if the carrot was a bit gnarled. For making potatoes au gratin, it doesn't matter if there were cosmetic spots on the potato skins. Pureed soups, for example, don't need perfect vegetables. Salsas, tomato sauces, etc., don't need perfect tomatoes of a certain size. Juices and smoothies certainly don't require perfect fruits and vegetables.

In many places, it is difficult to buy less than perfect produce because of the restrictions placed on farmers and suppliers by boards and associations, local government, and consumers. However, talk with your suppliers, particularly your produce suppliers, and see

if they can get you these products. And, since they are less expensive, you can help minimize food waste and increase your bottom line at the same time.

Sell your wasted vegetable oil (WVO)

Most commercial establishments sell their used vegetable oil for good money. If yours is not one of them, you may want to look into authorized companies that PAY YOUR BUSINESS to take away your used oil.

Upcycle your food waste products.

This is probably the most difficult time on this list to do, but it is worth investigating. Upcycling involves using food waste products from your operation to make an additional product. For example, instead of throwing out chicken bones, you make chicken soup.

However, for many operations, upcycling can be used between operations. For example, spent grain from breweries can be used to make bread or pizza inside that brewery or in another operation. Ice cream flavorings can involve upcycled food obtained from places that previously would have just dumped them in the landfill. And, since the products used are “waste” products from the other business, they are often available for a lower price than “new” products which you would have to process.

Donate and receive tax benefits.

If you donate food, you may be eligible for tax benefits. For more information on this, talk with your business' tax advisor and/or view the link at the end of this article which states: “Receive Tax Benefits by Donating - If you donate healthy, safe, and edible food to hungry people, your organization can claim tax benefits. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act protects food donors from legal liability.”

Summary

Minimizing food waste helps the environment in several ways. It minimizes the wasting of land, fertilizer, fuel, electricity, etc. It minimizes food going into landfills where the food will release greenhouse gases as they deteriorate. And most importantly, a key way to improve your bottom line is to look for multiple ways to minimize your operation's food waste.

For a more detailed look into food waste, statistics on the issues involved, and additional ideas on saving money, take a look at Sustainable Management of Food published by the US EPA (Environmental Protection Agency.)

