American Wasteland

How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food

(and what we can do about it)

Jonathan Bloom
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PRAISE FOR AMERICAN WASTELAND:

“While the very best way to end the food hardship now faced by 49 million Americans would be to increase wages and expand the federal safety net, doing more to recover excess food could play an important role in feeding more hungry Americans and filling in the gaps when those other efforts fall short. Jonathan Bloom’s fact-filled book is an important wake-up call and prod to action.”
—Joel Berg, Executive Director, New York City Coalition Against Hunger, author of All You Can Eat: How Hungry is America?, and former USDA Coordinator of Food Recovery and Gleaning

“How is it that America can be dumping so much food, yet still be overweight? It seems that something is askew, and Bloom’s work uncovers it eloquently and with great insight. Bloom reminds us that good stewardship of our resources is not only easy, it is the key for us to thrive.”
—Jeff Barrie, Documentary Filmmaker, Kilowatt Ours

“A fascinating read that explores the full depth of food waste from every angle. American Wasteland is chock full of research showing how essential it is that we strive to raise awareness that food is not trash—it has no place in landfills. Bloom also addresses composting, touching upon its many economic, social, and environmental benefits.”
—Wayne E. King Sr., President, U.S. Composting Council

“Food isn’t just gas for the body; it binds us together as a people and it’s the key to our future. American Wasteland is a bold call to arms, providing shocking examples of waste (most of it preventable), as well as strategies to divert that food back into communities, insuring that NO food goes to waste, and no citizen goes hungry.”
—Robert L.E. Egger, President, D.C. Central Kitchen/ Campus Kitchens Project/V3 Campaign

“As much about the food we eat as it is about the food we discard, American Wasteland draws our attention to a culture of excess and wastefulness and the threats that this cultural mindset poses economically, environmentally and ethically. Bloom challenges us to open our eyes and engage ourselves in an issue that we cannot ignore.”
—Josh Viertel, President, Slow Food USA

“Bloom does a thorough job identifying places in the food chain where food is wasted—food that could feed the hungry instead. American Wasteland is an excellent read for anyone who wants to know how surplus and scarcity can exist in the same country or in the same city.”
—Jilly Stephens, Executive Director of City Harvest
American Wasteland
How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)

Jonathan Bloom
TO EMILY, without whom this book would not exist and the sun would not rise.

TO BRUCE, without whom this book would have been finished sooner, but for whom I count my lucky stars.
INTRODUCTION

A forsaken orange sits in a Raleigh, North Carolina, parking lot.
PHOTO BY JONATHAN BLOOM

Every day, America wastes enough food to fill the Rose Bowl. Yes, that Rose Bowl—the 90,000-seat football stadium in Pasadena, California. Of course, that’s if we had an inclination to truck the nation’s excess food to California for a memorable but messy publicity stunt.¹

As a nation, we grow and raise more than 590 billion pounds of food each year.² And depending on whom you ask, we squander between a quarter and a half of all the food produced in the United States.³ Even using the more conservative figure would mean that 160 billion pounds of food are squandered annually—more than enough, that is, to fill the Rose Bowl to the brim. With the high-end estimate, the Rose Bowl would almost be filled twice over.

If those numbers don’t hit home, consider that the average American creates almost 5 pounds of trash per day.⁴ Since, on average, 12 percent of what we throw away is or once was edible, we can estimate that each one of us discards half a pound of food per day. That adds up to an annual total of 197 pounds of food per person. Ominously, Americans’ per capita food waste has doubled since 1974.⁵

How we reached the point where most people waste more than their body weight—
or at least the average American body-weight—each year in food is a complicated tale. In short, Americans’ gradual shift from a rural, farming life to an urban, nonagricultural one removed us from the sources of our food. Our once iron-clad guarantee of inheriting generations of food wisdom became less so, as busier lives forced many of us to leave the kitchen or spend less time there. Convenience began to trump homemade, and eating out drew level with dining in. We have higher standards for our meals, but diminished knowledge about how to maximize our use of food. Many of us don’t even trust our noses to judge when an item has gone bad. Yet, our awareness of pathogens has multiplied, and we apply safety rules to food with the same zealous caution that we apply to allergies, kids walking to school, and most everything in modern life.

Certainly, some food loss is unavoidable. For example, there are many potential pitfalls, such as harsh weather, disease, and insects invading farmers’ fields, that are outside of our control. And then there’s storage loss, spoilage, and mechanical malfunctions. I classify all of the above factors as loss, not waste (also omitted when I use the term “waste” are inedible discards like peels, scraps, pits, and bones). Broadly speaking, I consider food “wasted” when an edible item goes unconsumed as a result of human action or inaction. There is culpability in waste. Whether it’s from an individual’s choice, a business mistake, or a government policy, most food waste stems from decisions made somewhere from farm to fork. A grower doesn’t harvest a field in response to a crop’s lowered price. Grocers throw away imperfect produce to satisfy their (and, as consumers, our) obsession with freshness. We allow groceries to rot in our refrigerators while we eat out, and when at restaurants we order 1,500-calorie entrées only to leave them half eaten.

We’re not going to revert to an agrarian society anytime soon, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a greater appreciation of our food. While completely eliminating food waste may be impossible, reducing it isn’t. Improvements are needed at all steps of the food chain, but most importantly at the part that involves us. Buying wisely, and maximizing our food use once it’s in our possession, would go a long way toward minimizing that daily Rose Bowl-sized pile of waste.

My fascination with wasted food started in the sweltering lair of one of America’s oldest food-recovery groups, D.C. Central Kitchen, in 2005. I’d been cruising through most of my twenties as an increasingly food-focused journalist, but I hadn’t quite found my niche. That summer day in our nation’s capital, my task was to man an industrial-sized vat of pasta. This was not a plum assignment in a building without air conditioning. Yet the job’s mindlessness granted me time to look around while I stirred the spaghetti with an oar. I noticed a variety of foods that somebody hadn’t wanted. And it was all good stuff, too. We’re talking about racks of lamb, ribs, and nice vegetables. Such abundance, all waiting for redistribution to the hungry.
What was the story? Where did these foods come from? Why were they cast away? And what happens in cities that lack such food-recovery organizations?

My curiosity about these questions led me to investigate the extent of food waste in America. I declined a traditional journalism job after graduation in order to focus on food waste—even if it made future meals with friends and family a touch uncomfortable. I launched a blog (WastedFood.com) in late 2006. Along the way, I began to be interviewed and was invited to give talks on the subject. It’s an odd thing to call oneself a food-waste expert, but life’s funny like that.

But there’s more to it. I’ve always had a sense that food was not something to be wasted. Ours was not a house where one had to clean one’s plate, but my brother and I certainly had to try everything. It was a place where all shapes and sizes of leftovers were saved, whether we were eating in or out. Chinese food containers accompanied us home from every meal at Chef Chang’s or Lotus Flower. And having a leftover smorgasbord night was not uncommon.

Outside the kitchen door of my childhood home, a Victorian built in the 1890s, sits a hole with a cover operated by a foot pedal. The mauve-colored lid is akin to a foot-operated trash can. There’s good reason for the similarity—it was where our predecessors dumped their food scraps for a local pig farmer to collect. As a kid, I had no idea what this contraption was for; it was just a nuisance during driveway basketball games. Looking back, though, I suppose the topic of food waste has been with me all along.

Less symbolic and more important, I grew up watching my Grandma Bloom eat. A teenager during the Depression, she’d get every morsel of meat from chicken drumsticks and, on New Year’s Eve, lobster legs. On the other side of the family, Grandma Abby has another method for avoiding waste: attempting to serve all that she’s prepared with her loving brand of “persistent hospitality.” Anyone familiar with the Jewish Grandmother Code of Conduct will understand that this means she relentlessly pushes food on guests. And in his day, if there was anything left on your plate, Grandpa Jack made it disappear.

Growing up the son of second-generation Americans in Yankee Massachusetts, I was destined for thrift. The majority of immigrants to this country brought and continue to bring a culture of thrift that’s less a choice than a necessity. That includes the Anglo Saxon settlers who arrived in the seventeenth century. Their habits, the vestiges of which still pervade the Northeast as “Yankee culture,” were nothing if not practical and thrifty. If you’ve ever seen a New Englander make pot-scrubbing powder from eggshells, or breadcrumbs from stale bread, you know that many of us delight in avoiding waste.

I’m also a bit of a cheapskate (although, to be fair, I prefer the term “pragmatic”) — and I love both preparing and eating food. I abhor the thought of food going to waste, both because it’s anathema to my cheap, er, practical, soul and because it’s a horrible fate for edibles that could otherwise help feed those who go without or just make something delicious. And after learning more about the resources that go into growing crops and raising livestock and the environmental impact of landfilling food, seeing
those goods squandered frustrates me even more.

Despite all of my attention to the topic, I still waste food. Some items in our house go bad before my wife and I can use them (I’m looking right at you, cilantro bunch). Other foods get buried and forsaken in the fridge. And occasionally—with a dash of guilt—I toss something that just doesn’t taste good. Okay, fine—it’s more like a dollop than a dash.

Two years ago, when I was working at an anaerobic digestion company in Raleigh, North Carolina, an odd sight stopped me in my tracks as I walked across the parking lot one morning: an abandoned orange. In an otherwise immaculate strip of asphalt—because it was one of those places that contracted landscapers to leaf-blow the parking lot weekly—it was not hard to spot. I was transfixed. I returned to my car and got my camera to take pictures of this forsaken fruit. I couldn’t imagine who would throw out what appeared to be a perfectly good orange. The exterior was a little dirty, but that’s why oranges have skin. And I guessed that the spot of grime came courtesy of the asphalt. So what did I do? What would anyone who was blogging about food waste do? I ate it. And it was fine.

In addition to wondering who would discard a perfectly good orange, I couldn’t imagine who would drop it onto the ground. Because, with the exception of cigarette butts, we just don’t see people leave their trash behind as much these days as we did, say, twenty years ago. Collectively, we decided it was an unpleasant behavior and directly and indirectly set about to curtail it. Putting a name on the behavior—“littering”—helped. The Pennsylvania Resources Council created the “litterbug” idea in the early 1950s and allowed others to use it, and publicity campaigns followed. States made it worth our while to turn in bottles and cans, and eventually counties and municipalities made it much, much easier to recycle through curbside collection.

Today, seeing someone drop a can on the ground or even in the regular trash is rare, but few passersby would bat an eyelash if you threw away half of a banana. A common misconception is that food automatically returns to the soil. But although it does not seem as harmful as inorganic trash, food waste, in truth, is more damaging than most other litter. Organic materials (such as foods) are the ones that release greenhouse gases into the environment as they decompose.

Food waste isn’t considered problematic because, for the most part, it isn’t considered at all. It’s easy to ignore because it’s both common and customary. William Rathje, director of the erstwhile Garbage Project, a University of Arizona study that examined America’s trash habits for more than thirty years, told me that food waste and its consequences go largely unnoticed. Why? Because it doesn’t pile up like old newspapers; it just goes away, either down the disposal or into the trash.
you start looking for it, you can’t miss the abandoned appetizers and squandered sandwiches.

Whenever the topic of food waste comes up in a conversation I’m having—after the awkwardness passes, if there’s eating involved—most everyone has an intense reaction. Regardless of their take on the subject, each person has a strategy, an anecdote, or a question. I have yet to meet somebody who is pro-food waste, but many aren’t convinced that it’s important. And a good number of people, regardless of how they respond, don’t behave as if it matters much.

But food waste matters. A lot. Wasting food has harmful environmental, economic, and ethical consequences. That’s why we can’t afford to ignore it anymore. You may see that orange and think that it’s just one piece of fruit. True. But what if all 130 million households in America tossed out that amount or more of food each day?¹⁰ We’d need a pretty big bowl to contain all that squandered food. Something about the size of the Rose Bowl.

In the coming pages, I’ll take you to abandoned harvests, pristine supermarket produce sections, and restaurants where abundance is always on the menu. We’ll end up close to home, well, actually, in your home. Because, as we’ll see, wasted food occurs there, and all around us. Still, we remain blissfully unaware of it.

You may be amazed by how freely and easily we dispose of food, from farm to fork. But it can be equally amazing how freely and easily we can diminish our vast squandering. To achieve that feat, though, we need to fully understand and acknowledge the scope of the problem.
A team of pickers harvests iceberg lettuce in Salinas, California.
PHOTO BY JONATHAN BLOOM

chapter 1

Waste from Farm to Fork

I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use our natural resources; but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us.
—TEDDY ROOSEVELT

Salad Days

“Welcome to Salinas, Salad Bowl to the World.” The weathered sign along Highway 101 greets visitors to this California ag town with that humble claim. In case the endless rows of lettuce crowding the road don’t communicate the Salinas Valley’s focus, businesses like Vegetable Growers Supply and the Rain Store (irrigation)
probably will. And the massive packing plants of Taylor Farms, Fresh Express, and River Ranch Fresh Foods certainly will.

Leafy greens of all varieties line the finger-shaped valley from the foothills of the Gabilan Range to the edge of the Santa Lucia Range. Not surprisingly, the majority of America’s lettuce is grown in Monterey County. In reality, that means Salinas and its surrounding fields. There, oil-laden fertilizers, pesticides, and thousands of gallons of water are called upon to bring seeds to green fruition.

One can even find salad greens at the Crazy Horse Canyon Landfill. When I visited the now-closed landfill, an inch of shredded lettuce obscured the ground like a dusting of green snow. Atop the mountain of trash, Robert Correa oversaw the delivery of 200 tons of excess, rejected, or misbagged produce every day until the landfill’s closure in 2009. The dump closed because it was full, an outcome hastened by that ceaseless supply of green waste.

“‘It’s a slow day for ag waste,’” Correa told me during a visit to Crazy Horse, but we were still crunching lettuce with almost every step. Here, lettuce that was still perfectly good—crispy, even—had been thrown away for various reasons. It may have been damaged in the warehouse, or maybe it sat for too long to withstand shipping. Regardless, the majority of it was edible at the time it was dumped at Crazy Horse. While we were walking around, I spotted some lettuce and spinach still in the plastic tubs that you’d find stacked in the supermarket cold case.

I observed lettuce-harvesting up close one early autumn day on a press tour organized as part of Salute to Agriculture, an event celebrating the city’s farming accomplishments. As advertised, the tour provided an “unprecedented opportunity to actually see how the fresh and flavorful produce and wine from the world-famous Salinas Valley is produced and processed.” We visited a field of one of the largest growers in the area, Ocean Mist Farms, and saw a crew of Latino pickers in jeans and baseball hats laboring among rows of lettuce. Anglo and Latino supervisors observed the work in outfits straight out of a Wrangler ad.

The harvesters, both men and women, toiled behind a 40-foot-wide rolling contraption that served as a mobile assembly line. The wheeled vessel carried flattened cardboard boxes and plastic bags; workers, in pairs, used these to create cases of wrapped lettuce that would eventually land at supermarkets. The harvesting rig sailed through the rows, with workers picking under the Mexican flag that adorned the vessel. The teams of two picked, cleaned, bagged, and boxed the iceberg.

Without looking down, pickers squeezed each head for a split second. The ones that didn’t feel right were not harvested, leaving what looked like perfect lettuces in the rig’s wake. While the workers are paid a “piece rate” based on the total number of cartons they pack, they also know that their work must pass scrutiny. In order to receive credit for their labor, they must make sure the lettuce will withstand random inspections done at the cooling shed. They scrawl their number on each box so that their work can be traced back to them. Given the dual priorities of speed and quality, the workers don’t stop to check a head of lettuce twice. If it doesn’t feel perfect, or it’s the wrong size or shape, it’s left in the field.
That’s the way their supervisor, Art Barrientos, wants it. Barrientos, Ocean Mist’s VP of harvesting, with more than thirty years of service and an easy smile, explained to us tour visitors how the grower’s quality assurances start in the field. “You better not be putting anything we don’t want in the box,” said Barrientos. “If it doesn’t meet our standard, it stays in the field. That’s our model.”

When I asked what was wrong with the bypassed heads of lettuce, Barrientos picked one up to illustrate its shortcomings. He squeezed it a few times and guessed that some rot had set in. Slicing it in half with his handy paring knife, he held open two pristine, icy green halves. “Hmm,” he said. He couldn’t say why this one wasn’t picked.

Yes, Barrientos could have grabbed a lettuce that was clearly rotten. The point is, he didn’t. On a random inspection of castaway lettuce, he came up with a perfect head.

Our Stretched Food Chain

It’s not as if growers want to leave healthy food in the field. Every pound of produce is potential revenue, and that lettuce left to rot in the fields likely means lost profits. But in addition to wanting to ensure quality, growers ask their pickers to be selective in the field because they know the lettuce has a long way to travel. Some heads go cross-country, and others even farther. The average U.S. supermarket produce item travels 1,500 miles before it arrives at its destination. A tiny bit of decay at the time of harvest could mean a rotten head by the time the shipment reaches the grocery store.

All produce companies want to ensure that a vegetable picked today will not just be edible, but enticing, on vendors’ shelves. Hence, a head of lettuce that is perfectly good now—but shows signs that it could be less than ideal in two weeks—won’t be picked. From a freshness perspective, the producer wants it to be the same kind of produce you’d hope to find at a farmers market. Joe Pezzini, the vice president of operations at Ocean Mist, told me their that these time constraints determined their policy. “There’s a seventeen-day shelf life for iceberg, if the cold chain is maintained,” he told me over breakfast at my Salinas hotel. “You can’t store it and hope the market improves, like with corn.”

On the Salute to Agriculture tour, I was told that Ocean Mist harvests 97 to 98 percent of its crop. From what I saw on my one-day visit, that estimate seemed optimistic, at best. Whatever their actual rate, the word around Salinas is that Ocean Mist is one of the most efficient farms in the area. That word comes from John Inman, an agricultural consultant who has worked in Salinas agriculture since 1965 and whose business card bears the nickname “Mr. Equipment.” He puts the average harvest rate industry-wide at 85 to 90 percent and says that lettuce is among the most efficiently harvested crops in the valley. The cycle of planting and harvesting (or not harvesting, as the case may be) continues unabated nearly year-round.

Pezzini declined to estimate the percentage of unharvested lettuce, but he did concede that it’s more than he’d like. “It’s fair to say that in any given field, in any
acre, there are some good heads that could be eaten,” said Pezzini, who has been at Ocean Mist for more than twenty-five years. “They might have some blemishes or something that the market doesn’t want, but all in all there’s produce out there that could be consumed. The pressure from the market is pretty acute. We’re all out there trying to create perfect produce.”

At Ocean Mist, when I was observing, it seemed that about one out of every five heads remained in the field. However, using a conservative estimate of 90 percent harvested, we can make some rough calculations. Since growers in the Salinas Valley produced 153,495 acres of lettuce in 2007, that’s the equivalent of not harvesting 15,350 acres, or leaving more than 13 million pounds of lettuce in the field. And that’s just lettuce.

The heads of iceberg that do make it out of the field are trucked to a climate-controlled storage facility—the cooling shed—where the lettuce is inspected and chilled to bring its core temperature down. An array of 18-wheelers connect to numbered loading bays to begin what can be a cross-country journey to grocery-chain distribution centers or wholesale warehouses.

Often called “reefer” trucks, these refrigerated tractor trailers don’t carry pot. Rather, they haul just about every kind of produce grown in the valley. The trucks and their refrigeration units guzzle diesel. Since most truckers operate independently from growers and receivers, skimping on the refrigeration was an occasional practice not too long ago. Since cutting back on cooling can disrupt the “cold chain” and cause the lettuce to break down sooner, most growers have instituted preventive measures to ensure adequate, consistent refrigeration. Still, trucks and their refrigerated units break down from time to time. Although nobody has calculated the amount of produce lost for this reason, it’s another pitfall that leads to waste, as are crashes. Accidents caused by weary truckers or careless commuters can render cargo worthless or prompt delays that jeopardize shipments.

Most shipments of lettuce go to distribution centers for grocery stores such as Kroger, Safeway, and Whole Foods as well as to Target, Costco, Walmart, and other superstores. In addition, some trucks head for wholesale “terminal markets” that supply smaller grocery stores and restaurants. Whole Foods’ South Region—which includes Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, and part of Florida—receives most of its lettuce from those Salinas fields. The shipments arrive at the chain’s Braselton, Georgia, facility, 40 minutes outside of Atlanta. The 100,000-square-foot South Distribution Center handles produce, meats, and frozen foods in addition to dry groceries.

There, as at all endpoints, the product is inspected once it arrives to ensure that it’s in satisfactory condition. Items need to be in pretty darn good shape, as they still can sit in the facility for four to six days and then must last on the shelf and in customers’ homes. The inspection guidelines should be the same for all stores because the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides standards for all agricultural products. For each pallet of product, inspectors look into a few boxes to make sure the produce makes the grade. Yet some stores may be more stringent than others.