



Waste not: Creative cooking, composting go a long way

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“Clean your plate; there are children starving in China!”

Your parents’ old saying has become a cliché, but they were on the right track, even if we questioned their reasoning.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, a staggering one-third of the food produced in the world is wasted, rather than consumed. In North America, more than 20 percent of all meat is wasted. Some of that meat spoils before it can be distributed and some is damaged by bad handling, but more than half is simply wasted by restaurants, grocery stores and consumers.

What does that mean for Chicago? Based on data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 8 billion pounds of edible meat is wasted each year in the United States — approximately 7.5 million chickens, cows and pigs in Chicago alone, gone.

“With more than a billion people going hungry in the world, that’s a huge problem,” says Danielle Nierenberg of the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington, D.C., environmental research organization.

The average American family wastes more than \$600 worth of food a year, according to a 2004 study by the University of Arizona.

Nierenberg explains the problem in terms of cost. “Since food is so cheap in the United States, we waste tons of it, just like we leave the water on while we brush our teeth. We buy too much of it, and it goes bad,” she says.

We’re all part of this. How many times have you found forgotten produce rotting in the back of your refrigerator or meat too freezer-burned to be identified?

Chefs and their scraps

Some enterprising Chicago chefs, retailers and restaurant owners are doing their part to reduce or divert that waste, through whole-animal butchering, donations, consumer education, composting and recycling.

At City Provisions, a deli and catering company in the Ravenswood neighborhood, sustainability is more than just a buzzword. Owner Cleetus Friedman makes eliminating waste part of everything the business does — from using every part of an animal, not just the fancy chops and steaks, to donating the restaurant's fryer oil to be converted into biodiesel for farm trucks.

Friedman describes the process: "When we get a whole lamb, a whole hog, we use that whole animal. Sausages, pates, terrines, head cheese, all the way down to stocks." To some customers, these are strange and antiquated dishes. To others, they are hard-to-find delicacies.

At every station in Friedman's kitchen, vegetable scraps are collected in buckets. At the end of the week, the truck from LaPryor Farm that delivers his pig takes those scraps back to the farm to feed to animals. Friedman doesn't get a price break for feeding the pigs, but that's fine with him.

"It's the right thing to do. It affects my hogs, because they're eating well. I don't consider it a money issue. It's just what we do," he says.

At the Butcher and Larder, a butcher shop in Noble Square, whole-animal butchery is the order of the day. Like Friedman, owner Rob Levitt gets his animals intact, not in plastic-wrapped pieces, and he uses all of them.

When Levitt decided to move toward sustainable meat, farmers told him that a lot of their animals were wasted because people wouldn't buy them.

"Farmers would tell me that they could sell plenty of pork chops and bellies, but not heads and hams. That means, at some point, fresh hams were going in the garbage," he says.

Now, some of those pigs go to Levitt, and all of the meat gets used.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, almost 13 percent of all municipal waste is food, much of which could be composted.

At North Pond in Lincoln Park, chef Bruce Sherman insists that all garbage going out of the restaurant be sorted five ways, to keep track of recycling and compost. It's not easy to train the staff, says Sherman.

"It takes effort, and I get that after a long day, it's tempting to take shortcuts, but that's not what we are about," he says.

Similarly, Friedman admits, "It takes a little bit of coddling, sometimes. I'm sometimes picking plastic out of the trash. But, we don't live in a perfect world. I only hope that people follow my lead, because if I see eggshells in the trash can, that upsets me."

Another way to reduce waste is by donating meat that would otherwise be thrown away. The Greater Chicago Food Depository, through its Food Rescue program, saved about 3.8 million pounds of meat from being thrown away last year at grocery stores.

Working with large chains like Jewel-Osco, the Depository picks up meat that is nearing its expiration date and distributes it, frozen, to its partner agencies, who in turn give it to people who need it.

With meat, be creative

Restaurants and grocery stores aren't alone in the fight against waste. Consumers are important, too.

"Food is something we interact with every day," says Chicago food scientist Jim Javenkoski, who runs the Local Food Wisdom website and organizes culinary events such as farm dinners. "We need to be more thoughtful about the system."

Learning to be more conscious about reducing waste often starts with realizing where food comes from. When you buy a chicken breast in a grocery store, there was once a whole chicken attached to it — a chicken that, in many cases, was discarded because the dark meat or the bones were unwanted.

Friedman remembers a bride who wanted to serve beef tenderloin at a wedding, a traditional meal for a banquet but one that he prefers not to serve. Why? "Beef tenderloin for 500 people is 35 cows, and what do we do with the rest? Tell that to the bride, and see what she thinks."

Nierenberg identifies a cultural shift in the way we look at meat, a shift people like Friedman and Levitt are trying to reverse.

"Before the 1940s, we didn't waste as much meat. People knew how to eat the whole animal," says Nierenberg. "But we've lost our taste for most meat, in a focus on the 'good parts' of the animal," such as steaks, chops and breasts." There's plenty more to work with.

When Levitt opened his shop early this year, he was worried that people would only want typical cuts of meat. At first, a lot of them did — but things have changed.

"In a very short amount of time, we've had a number of people who came in looking for the usual suspects, and now they come in and regularly ask for odd cuts," he says. That's important, because part of shopping at a whole-animal butcher is the realization that there isn't an infinite supply of fancy steaks. Premium cuts make up only about 14 percent of a cow, Levitt says.

"There's more to a cow than a ribeye. There's a whole animal there," he says.

Reducing waste is about learning and getting creative. It is about paying more attention to what you buy, where you shop and what you throw away.

If your butcher doesn't have exactly what you want, try something new — and don't turn up your nose at an odd cut of beef. It might turn into the secret ingredient your family talks about for months.

Friedman sees those moments when he has to tell someone that City Provisions is out of a product as an opportunity to teach about the realities of animals.

“It’s not just saying ‘We’re out of something.’ It’s “We’re out of something” and here’s why. Now try something new,” he says.

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