

# TIME

## How to Avoid Food Waste This Holiday Season

Posted by **BRYAN WALSH** Thursday, November 24, 2011 at 5:00 am

The U.S. wastes 34 million tons of food annually. Credit: Photodisc / Getty Images

---



Does anyone else think it's strange that Thanksgiving—a holiday meant to commemorate the moment when white settlers in America were **essentially saved from starvation**—now involves the biggest day of overeating in the calendar? (Actually, no, that makes perfect sense.) In any case, Thanksgiving will involve food, and lots of it—the National Turkey Federation estimates that Americans **will eat nearly 46 million turkeys** today, not to mention, stuffing, cranberries (**watch out for the BPA**), pumpkin pie and miscellaneous fixings. Put it all together, and it's little wonder that the **self-reported weight** of the average American is now nearly 20 lbs. heavier than it was in 1990.

Now we could not eat all of that food—but then a lot of it would end up going to waste. In fact, food waste is a major problem around the globe—**an estimated 1.3 billion tons of food**, or about one-third of global production, is lost or wasted each year. In a world where nearly 1 in 7 people **goes to bed hungry**, that waste is criminal.

In developing nations, much of that food loss actually occurs in the field or on the way to market, thanks to poor farming practices and lack of infrastructure. But in rich nations like the U.S., most of the waste is due to consumers simply not clearing their plates—about 220 lbs. is wasted by each person at the consumption stage.

One way to avoid that—while reducing obesity—would be to simply to prepare smaller meals, even at Thanksgiving, **as this piece** from Elizabeth Weingarten of *Slate* argues. Meanwhile Danielle Nierenberg of the Worldwatch Institute—a Washington think tank that focuses on sustainability—**has a few more tips** on how to avoid food waste at the holiday season. I've condensed after the jump—and at the very least, hold onto your leftovers. (And any snarkiness is purely my own):

1. Be realistic about how much food you'll actually need to serve your guests—and don't be afraid to be a little stingy. (Seriously, have you seen the size of the average

American?) The Love Food Hate Waste organization has a "[perfect portions](#)" planner that can help you right-size your meal.

2. Create a list before you go, to cut down on the risk of impulse buys that will empty your wallet and swell your table.
3. Use smaller utensils and smaller plates to encourage smaller portions, thus reducing waste. Guest can take second or third servings, but the very act of having two reach for more food could be a discouragement. In other words, just do the opposite of [what a fast food place does](#).
4. Encourage self-serving, which let guests choose for themselves whether they really want the Grandma's bricklike potatoes au gratin.
5. Store your leftovers safely, to keep them tasty for the future, and to avoid, you know, [killer foodborne illnesses](#).
6. Compost your food scraps instead of simply throwing them out. It helps to have a garden or to live in San Francisco, which [encourages citywide composting](#).
7. Create new meals from those leftovers—again, the Love Food Hate Waste site has [a number of useful recipes](#) for food scraps.
8. Donate whatever you can't use to [your local food bank](#).
9. Support food-recovery systems like New York's [City Harvest](#), which will actually collect leftovers from you.
10. If you're giving food as a gift, steer clear of highly perishable items and try to pick foods that you know the recipient will actually enjoy. In other words, skip the fruitcake.

More from **TIME: [Stopping Bushmeat Is Good for Conservation—and Bad for Hunger](#)**

*Bryan Walsh is a senior writer at TIME. Find him on Twitter at [@bryanrwalsh](#). You can also continue the discussion on TIME's [Facebook page](#) and on Twitter at [@TIME](#)*