



American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)

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What Tom Vanderbilt did for traffic and Brian Wansink did for mindless eating, Jonathan Bloom does for food waste. The topic couldn't be timelier: As more people are going hungry while simultaneously more people are morbidly obese, *American Wasteland* sheds light on the history, culture, and mindset of waste while exploring the parallel eco-friendly and sustainable-food movements. As the era of unprecedented prosperity comes to an end, it's time to reexamine our culture of excess. Working at both a local grocery store and a major fast food chain and volunteering with a food recovery group, Bloom also interviews experts—from Brian Wansink to Alice Waters to Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen—and digs up not only why and how we waste, but, more importantly, what we can do to change our ways.

American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It) Details

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From Reader Review American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It) for online ebook

Peter says

This book had its flaws (I found it a bit too long, and sometimes he didn't see past his central issue--e.g. is prison labor really part of the way to end food injustice?). But it's also really enlightening and engaging. I did not understand the scale of our food waste, all along the supply chain, not the scale of the environmental damage wrought even by biodegradable waste in landfills. Important stuff.

Carolyn says

This book touches on a subject dear to me, because I really hate food waste. Having been broke in my life as some of the people the author refers to in his book, I think twice about throwing food away. I found many of the chapters fascinating, especially the one on restaurant waste. However, some of his suggestions were crazy-liberal. Right, we need a food waste Czar. That's just great...

Byron says

When I saw this at the library I was pretty excited. Getting home I read about two-thirds and had to give up for a couple of reasons. The book fails to really explain the food waste problem, instead it seems Bloom felt he had enough blog posts describing food waste that he could assemble them, poorly, into a book.

I feel a good book on food waste would have said, "We waste food for reasons A, B, C, etc, and we can solve this by doing X, Y, Z." Instead, American Wasteland says a little about A, a little about Z, then goes into 2, then C, then Z again. If I recall, he also makes an explicit point at the beginning to not count food lost in standard farm losses including transportation, and then makes a big point about food lost in the farming cycle and on trucks. Finally, I think he references a website for information whereas a thoughtful author would have not included the data unless he could speak with the author.

I'm glad there are guys like Bloom doing what he does in the blogosphere regarding food waste, as it is a huge problem and needs advocates. However, I think he should have left the collection of examples to a long article, and saved the book for later.

Jill Urie says

I really enjoyed this book! It got a bit long-winded at times. But, again, I liked it! It has caused me to reevaluate a lot of my food habits. And it makes me grateful that I live in a city that does composting. And it makes me sick how much food is wasted before the food even enters my sphere of influence at the grocery store and in my kitchen. Unbelievable.

Leslie says

This book had the most profound influence on my thinking and behavior of any book I will read this year. The reason I didn't give it 5 stars is that it's not a classic that I will want to reread in future decades.

I heard about and read this book because Bloom was a graduate student in journalism at UNC. As expected, he's a good writer and illustrates his points with compelling and easy-to-read stories.

Here are some of the really important things I learned from this book:

- anaerobic decomposition of organic waste produces methane, which is about 4x as potent a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide. I felt silly for not having known this, but I truthfully hadn't really thought through the chemistry before.
- organic waste that goes into landfills decomposes anaerobically. That's why there are vents to decompress the gas.
- therefore:
- we should not overfarm (easier said than done)
- we should help what we grow get to people who need it, farm animals, compost heaps (where turning it over allows aerobic decomposition), or anaerobic digestion centers that turn the methane into electricity or natural gas.
- we should be easier on our grocers: accept produce that is less than perfect and uniform in appearance, encourage them only to bake bread that they have a reasonable chance of selling that day and then be okay if they run out before our 9:30p.m. grocery run, encourage them to sell discounted foods that are closer to expiration dates but still edible, and discourage buy-one-get-one-free campaigns
- we should plan meals so that we use perishable foods before they go bad
- we should recognize that "sell by," "best by," and "use by" have different definitions, all of which are generous and political, and should guide but not dictate our consumption
- we should probably decrease production of shelf-stable foods (even food shelters are often overstocked)
- "all you can eat" is really wasteful. At minimum, we need to jettison the trays (which reduces plate waste by 20-50%, water consumption by ~3.5gal/tray, and energy consumption by about 1.5kw/tray)
- we should be okay if restaurants run out of stuff (as long as they make a sincere effort to help us have an enjoyable experience anyway)
- we should appreciate that smaller, more focused menus generate less waste (has anyone else shuddered with paralysis at the number of options the Cheesecake Factory offers? All those options require them to keep the necessary ingredients on hand.)
- LeanPath is a company that produces waste-reduction products, like the ValueWaste app that lets restaurants track the amount, nature, and reason for their "back of the house" waste
- the UK's "Love Food Hate Waste" website is helpful

HR-ML says

An excellent, thought-provoking book, written in 2010.
Hardback edition.

Author, Jonathan Bloom (hereafter Bloom) noted that people in the US, wasted enough food daily to fill the 90,000 seat football stadium, the Rose Bowl! Likely even worse in 2018.

Bloom noted that food in landfills, trapped heat caused methane gas & therefore contributed to global warming. He tracked food from growing, harvesting & distributing to groceries & restaurants. Farmers were up against time, the elements, insects, market forces. And a reduced availability of migrant workers, who were paid by the pound (not hrly) and made a living going farm to farm to pick. Farmers grow too much food & restaurants and grocers ordered more than they needed. They feared having insufficient inventory or customers would go elsewhere. Too small or odd-shaped produce, still edible and w/ no insect damage, was rejected, as time was money to the pickers. And the produce owners valued pristine produce as did retailers and consumers.

Farmers were/ are pressured to grow perfect produce in appearance and size. At times crops became 'walk-bys' (left in the fields: more cost effective to ditch than to sell them at market), or the produce went to hog or cattle farmers as feed. Some secondary markets bought odd, imperfect or too small produce.

Bloom mentioned US consumers got confused by terms "sell by" (for retailers use only) vs "best-by" (best quality) vs 'use-by" (the date after a consumer should NOT eat an item). He advocated for groceries exclusively using "use-by" dates

He shared companies are reluctant to donate edible, unused food, for food recovery to soup kitchens, homeless shelters and so on D/T possible liabilities. However, the 1996 federal law, called the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act protects those who donate good food in good faith. The exception IE "intentional misconduct or gross negligence." Cos. w/ self-service salad bars were/ are prohibited by law from donating these remaining self-serve items.

Bloom made some suggestions to avoid food waste-

- 1) having recess before lunch: school kids will work up an appetite
- 2) using a size 10 inch plate (usually less waste)
- 3) more closely planning meals for no left-overs
- 4) neighbors/ friends sharing cost of atypical food ingreds.
- 5) restaurants re-purposing food IE make chicken salad from rotisserie chicken

- 6) gleaming: volunteers removing/ passing on fruit from a neighbor's backyard fruit trees (w/ permission)
- 7) composting by individuals, businesses, etc.
- 8) food recovery from groceries, diners, etc (unfortunately protein is usually the item least recovered.)
- 9) batch-cooking by restaurants: preparing food ahead but cooking it only when it is ordered.
- 10) having a tray-less college campus (discourages over selecting food in dining halls, w/ 'seconds' still available)

Revised.

Eleanor says

As if I was going to give this any less than 5 stars given that it is the first book (to my knowledge) in which I am personally thanked in the acknowledgments. Interestingly, this book has also inspired more chatter on public transit than any book in recent memory. I confess that in each instance I was unable to resist dropping that the author was, you know, a close personal friend. And then I would follow-up such encounters by texting Jon who is, you know, a close personal friend to tell him about it. I think he wishes I could read the book for months to inspire continued buzz.

I don't think I've ever read another book more likely to have an impact on my daily personal habits. Food waste is a problem and a problem I can do something about. I think Jon did a great job researching in interesting ways (working at McDonald's, working at grocery stores and traveling to England to talk to politicians about their superior food waste policies). I also enjoyed the touches of humor.

Strong work, JB!

Christina Dudley says

Very interesting and not entirely disheartening discussion of tremendous waste in the American food chain, from field to store to restaurant and home. Inspiring suggestions to make changes.

Lisa says

We waste very little food at my house, so I find it hard to believe that Americans let almost half of our food go to waste. The author explains many of ways food go to waste in this interesting easy to read book. One of the big food wastes is that produce never makes it out of the fields unless it is perfect--it simply gets plowed under. OK, I know I am not going to buy any produce unless I am sure it is really good. I love really good produce, fruit especially and I want it to be the best. I carefully pick out the best looking apples (or whatever) and I don't want bruised or anything less than perfect. Just looking good isn't enough for me--the taste and consistency must be perfect.

There is lots of waste at the grocery store when less than perfect fruit or dated fruit is discarded. Many

people buy too much at the grocery store and throw away what they can't eat--along with their left overs.

This would be a good book for people at food banks and other related nonprofits to read. It could help them to find a way to gather food that can be used at soup kitchens and for the homeless. A few times I have gone to Einstein bagels when they close and collected the bagels that would be thrown away and taken them to the church where we made them into sandwiches which we packed into lunches for the homeless who were being sheltered in various churches. I went to Panera to see if I could collect their bagels, but they have a policy that they will only donate to a group that is willing to come every week on a set day. So I guess they let their food go to waste often.

Food banks are sometimes notified about food on farms that they could have if someone would come get it, but because of lack of resources they are unable. Families that are looking for opportunities to volunteer could read this book and see how they could help gather food for the hungry.

I have seen people with big gardens that let tomatoes and other good produce rot on the vine or on the ground. Maybe they don't have time to pick it; that can be very time consuming. I had planned to grow extra produce and donate it the food bank, but I found there are a lot of hungry people even closer. We have lots of young families at church where the husband is in dental or medical school and they are living on loans. They are happy to enjoy my extras. Some of my Goodreads friends are included!

The author did have a few crazy ideas like a food czar. We don't need any more czars! People can help people, we don't need the government involved in this!

My dad always used to say, "Take what you want, but eat what you take." Good advice today!

Milan M says

This book is an all encompassing introduction and deep dive into the various facets of food waste within the United States and various locales around the world. It lays a good foundation for understanding the underpinning of why food waste is so egregious (beyond the simple fact of nourishment being wasted and others starving), the various problems that contribute to food waste - harvesting at the farm, culling due to imperfections, cost to harvest, logistics and perishability, subsidies for mass (2x the needed) production, damage in transit, further culling at grocery stores, prepared foods/hot bar proliferation, potential liability (or thought there of) due to causing a recipient of food to become sick, impulse purchasing, plate/portion sizing, lack of connection with food and so many other components that contribute to this issue.

The author is comprehensive, but almost too much so. Several lines and topics are repeated not once or twice, but three times in the book, causing the reader to scream "get on with it already". Beyond the comprehensive foundation this book gives the reader and anecdotal evidence from not only the author's "covert" missions in McDonald's, Supermarkets and other operations (as well as his discussions with folks industries) are the topics and potential solutions he outlines as a starting point to understand, bring awareness to and combat this large issue in the US and around the world.

From commissioning a new study to see how bad things really are in present day, to bringing a figure head/czar within the USDA (appointed by the President) to life, launching an awareness campaign (akin to the UK), changing subsidies - incentives and penalties at the farm level to lower production - increase harvesting yields and promote donation, to banning or penalizing monetarily food waste from going to

landfills and simultaneously launching AD (anaerobic digestion) centers to power our grids - these and many other show a true light and road ahead for what is a very daunting task for a nation of our size.

Overall worth the read, but through page 150-240 it gets tough, power through though as there are good things on the other-side and the repetitiveness does help with retention.

Alexis says

I found this book really enlightening and eye-opening. I'm an agricultural reporter and people are always talking about how we need to increase agricultural production and feed the world. No one ever talks about how we waste a huge amount of food. The US wastes about half of the food it produces. This is all along the value chain- in farming, supermarkets, restaurants and at home. At home, the average person wastes about 197 pounds of food a year.

Bloom is a good writer and he managed to shed some light on a topic that could be a little dry. I think that food waste needs to be talked about more, especially in agricultural circles. I plan to read more about this subject.

Mandy Prasad says

Everything that you didn't know about American food waste and why you should care. Although somewhat repetitive throughout the book, Bloom does a thorough job of uncovering why Americans are wasting food, how much we are wasting, and why we should stop wasting all this food. I heard about Bloom from a documentary called "Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story" of which Bloom directed. There are a lot of similarities in the documentary and the book. The documentary does a great job of demonstrating the levels of waste in the United States (and other first world countries). However, the book goes into much more detail about what you can do as an average American citizen to decrease your levels of food waste and to help your community. At the end of reading this book, your appreciation for food will increase and you will start to see food for what it is: a precious commodity that cannot and should not be wasted when there are plenty of hungry people in need of food (even right in your own community).

Connie Martin says

While I enjoyed the message of the book and the author did a lot of work and research to cover many angles of this topic, I felt that it was very repetitive. Over and over again we were given new citations and statistics to convey roughly the same messages over how much food is wasted at various stages of its production and use. The author does have a nice voice. If you know nothing about food waste, this is a great place to start. If you know a moderate amount, you may find yourself skimming.

Susan says

Very heavy on statistics and a bit dry at times, but fascinating look at food waste in the United States. It

definitely affected how I look at my small part (I noticed trying to use up restaurant leftovers and have been thinking about using my bread loaf ends to make bread crumbs). However the real waste is on a macro level, not micro, and that is eye-opening. Change needs to happen on a global scale and Bloom does a great job painting the whole picture.

Tome Reader says

I don't deny food waste is a big problem in my home. It probably is in your home too.

This book is dry and dense like a fruitcake you'd want to toss out. It's loaded with facts and figures and no pictures and therefore no breaks. Bloom talks about a fascinating subject and focuses hard on the problem, but offers little practical solutions. You kind of have to figure it out yourself. Shop better, plan better, clean your plate and feel guilty.
