

Appendix 5: Declare a War on Waste!

Story at-a-glance

- This second installment of the documentary TV series “Hugh’s War on Waste,” which debuted in 2015, highlights one man’s attempt to spearhead radical change throughout the U.K. related to food and clothing waste
- Britons throw away about one-third of all the food produced within the U.K.
- Twenty percent of crops grown in the U.K. never get eaten due to cosmetic standards imposed by supermarkets, calling for the rejection of fruits and vegetables that are imperfect in size, shape or appearance



The second installment of a documentary TV series “Hugh’s War on Waste” highlights one man’s attempt to spearhead radical change throughout the U.K. related to food and clothing waste. Host of the BBC One show launched in 2015, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, an English celebrity chef, broadcaster, writer and environmental activist, suggests that farmers, retailers and consumers all contribute to the tons of waste occurring across the U.K. every day.

Fearnley-Whittingstall asserts Britons throw away about one-third of all the food produced within its borders. Moreover, 20% of the crops grown in the U.K. never get eaten because quality standards in supermarkets call for the wholesale rejection of fruits and vegetables that are not “absolutely perfect” in terms of size, shape and appearance.

[If one were to look at the produce produced in my garden, about 80% would not meet commercial standards. It’s perfectly delicious. It’s just not necessarily especially ‘pretty’. Until you grow your own fruits and vegetables, you never even think about the fact that much of what is grown on farms never cuts the mustard when it comes to meeting commercial grocery store ‘standards’. We’ve become a spoiled nation and the cost of food is invariably higher than it needs to be because of ‘standards’. Emmale and I have learned to be far less ‘picky’ in our requirements for what constitutes viable food—and it’s resulted, as in the case of my peaches/nectarines and tomatoes mentioned in the overview of this appendix, in saving a LOT of money.]

Because “Hugh’s War on Waste” has stirred a global “Waste Not” movement, I invite you to take this opportunity to consider how you can be a more conscious consumer. If you routinely throw away half-eaten meals and perfectly usable clothing, or frequently toss food because it spoils before you made a plan to eat it, this documentary is for you!

Grocers Discard Massive Amounts of Edible Food

Fearnley-Whittingstall points out that Britons purchase more than 40 million tons of food annually, which, for the most part, is channeled through seven supermarkets, including the five largest (based on sales volume): Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Asda, Morrisons and Waitrose (which is owned by John Lewis). His “War on Waste” campaign targets these big retailers, most of whom claim on their web sites that food waste is not an issue.

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In fact, Sainsbury's and Tesco claimed they were doing everything they could to ensure food that was still suitable for human consumption was getting to people in need. However, after going "dumpster diving" at two prominent retailers, Fearnley-Whittingstall was shocked to discover just how much edible food was, in reality, being liberally tossed out by grocery stores. About the late-night discovery of massive food waste at one Waitrose store, he said:

"This branch of Waitrose has binned hundreds of pounds worth of perfectly good food tonight, but that's not something they'll be admitting to their customers. Here's what it says on the Waitrose web site: 'Surplus food that is fit for consumption is donated to local charities.'

That's the front-facing message Waitrose is putting out to all their customers about their food-waste policy, and I think it's flawed... Either they are deliberately misleading their customers or Waitrose doesn't know what's happening in their stores."

Waste Less, Save More

Armed with the video footage, Fearnley-Whittingstall arranged a meeting with Quentin Clark, head of sustainability at Waitrose. Prior to seeing the video evidence, Clark claimed Waitrose follows a three-step process for handling edible food it deems to be no longer saleable:

- 1 Promote the item to customers at a reduced price
- 2 Offer the item to employees at a further-reduced price
- 3 Donate the item to local charitable organizations within the local community

When Clark was shown highlights of the dumpster-diving excursion, he seemed genuinely surprised at the amount of edible food that had been tossed at the Waitrose store in Old Sodbury. Responding on camera, he stated, "Our commitment is that we don't want any food fit for human consumption to be disposed of."

After further discussion, Clark agreed Waitrose had work to do to refresh its corporate policy on the handling of food waste. He added, "We are not intending to deliberately deceive ... because we don't want food that should be eaten to not be eaten."

In 2016, supermarket giant Sainsbury launched its "Waste Less, Save More" program, a five-year plan aimed at helping customers save money by reducing waste. The initial plan was to get customers to reduce waste by 50 percent. Alas, by the end of the first year, it became clear this goal would not be met, and the supermarket chain ended up scaling back its expectations. Turns out behavior is more difficult to change than expected.

Introducing Waste-Not, Want-Not Cafes and Food-Waste Warehouses

Even before the production of the documentary, resourceful people were recovering wasted food from the garbage bins of local grocery stores and repurposing it. Among them were Catie Jarman and Sam Joseph, owners of a Bristol pop-up café called Skipchen—a name combining "skip," which is the British word for a large-topped waste container and "chen," from the word "kitchen."

At the time of filming, Skipchen had been serving reclaimed food to its customers for months using a "pay-as-you-feel" business model. To get a firsthand look at the waste, Fearnley-Whittingstall accompanied Jarman and Joseph on one of their late-night visits to Tesco and Waitrose stores. As usual, they plundered skips that were chock-full of bottled drinks, bread, candy, fruit, meat, vegetables and other edible fare.

Jarman and Joseph estimate they have fed some 25,000 people during the past seven years with the bread, meat, produce and other items they have reclaimed on their middle-of-the-night scavenging rounds. At the time of filming, Skipchen, which is affiliated with

the Real Junk Food Project, was one of about 10 “waste-not, want-not” cafes scattered across the U.K.

These food-waste restaurants offer quality meals at prices determined by the customer, based on what he or she can afford. According to The Independent, the U.K.’s first food-waste supermarket opened last year in Pudsey, near Leeds—another brainchild of the Real Junk Food Project:

“Food-waste campaigners from the Real Junk Food Project have opened ‘the warehouse’ ... Customers are invited to shop for food thrown out by supermarkets and other businesses. The food is priced on a ‘pay as you feel’ basis, and has already helped desperate families struggling to feed their children.”

Adam Smith, founder of the Real Junk Food Project, hopes to open similar warehouses in cities across the U.K. “Every city will now obtain central storage and run a ‘people’s supermarket,’ as well as Fuel for School,” he said. Fuel for School is a project that delivers surplus bread, dairy products, fruit and vegetables from local supermarkets to schools, where it helps to feed some 12,000 students each week.

Charitable Organizations Step in to Redistribute Excess Food

Continuing his investigation into retail food waste, Fearnley-Whittingstall interviewed Lindsay Boswell, chief executive officer of FareShare, a charity that has as its mission to redirect food waste to community groups that provide meals to people in need. Boswell suggested large retailers prefer over supply to under supply as a strategy for keeping customers happy.

He said: “The biggest crime in the food industry is to not be able to meet demand, and that starts when you and I walk into a supermarket. If the shelf is bare, we’ll go to their rival.” As a result, most stores purchase excessive amounts of food that often goes to waste before it can be sold. Stated Fearnley-Whittingstall, “As long as overproduction is the cornerstone of the supermarket business model, there will always be perfectly good food going to waste.”

In 2016, FareShare rescued 13.5 tons of wasted food while supporting more than 6,700 charities, which, combined, serve[d] an estimated 28.6 million meals to people in need.

A report issued by the Waste and Resources Action Program (WRAP), a U.K. charity focused on waste reduction and sustainability, indicated nearly 2 million tons of food is wasted in the nation’s grocery supply chain annually. In 2015, only 47,000 tons of the 270,000 tons of potentially available, edible food waste was passed on to organizations that redistributed it.

Boswell believes the WRAP figure is understated, suggesting, “as much as 400,000 tons of good, in-date surplus food could be redistributed to feed people each year.” He says his goal is to increase the amount of wasted food FareShare saves from just 2 percent to 25 percent. Clearly, there is more work to do.

The Quest for Aesthetically-Pleasing Fruits and Vegetables

Fearnley-Whittingstall visited a family farm in Norfolk where 20 tons of parsnips had been deemed unsalable for purely cosmetic reasons. The family had been supplying parsnips to Morrisons since the 1980s, but was forced out of business due to, in their opinion, unreasonable demands placed on them by the corporation. Fearnley-Whittingstall commented:

“The idea a parsnip should be selected under some kind of beauty-contest rules is absurd. Often you are talking about a size variation of a couple of millimeters, and this is the sole basis on which edible produce is being rejected.”

In support of their strict cosmetic standards, supermarket chains around the globe have long claimed consumers won’t buy unshapely produce. In the movie, two corporate execu-

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tives from Morrisons, which has nearly 500 stores across the U.K., balked at the idea of displaying less-than-perfect produce. One executive stated:

“The thing is, customers look at a product that is scarred or oddly shaped and think, ‘I don’t want to buy that product.’ The worst thing would be to move the problem with unsightly produce that exists on the farm into our supermarkets.

[And herein really is a serious issue: Customers with conditioned though unrealistic standards. I’m reminded that what’s rejected and thrown away in this country would doubtless be relished in a country like Haiti or some of the African countries w[h]ere real starvation is very much a day to day reality.]

The Crooked Veggie Campaign

After the documentary aired, Asda, the U.K.’s third-largest grocery-store chain, launched a variety of “wonky (crooked) vegetables” under the label of “Beautiful on the Inside.” Waitrose also experimented with selling imperfect produce, including knobby tomatoes that, in the past, would not have been deemed acceptable.

Fearnley-Whittingstall, who has little fondness for what he dubs “the industrial food machine,” declares he is tired of powerful manufacturers and retailers dictating the nation’s food standards. He told *Saga Magazine*:

“Grow a carrot that doesn’t look sufficiently carroty—one that might have a minuscule deviation from the approved elongated orange triangle—and it will never see a supermarket shelf. Pluck a tomato you couldn’t mistake for a billiard ball, and the chances are you will be stuck with it.”

Tristram Stuart, an expert on the environmental and social impacts of food waste, who has been investigating the hidden world of supermarket waste for years and was interviewed by Fearnley-Whittingstall for the film, said:

“Every farmer I speak to is resentful of the waste they experience. They grow the food throughout the year, and then they see it rot in their fields when orders and standards change unexpectedly. But they can’t do anything about it because, if they complain against the supermarkets, they risk losing their business.”

10 Ways to Reduce Food Waste

According to Fearnley-Whittingstall, “On average, U.K. families throw away a shocking £700 (\$912) of perfectly good food every year—often because they’ve simply bought too much in the first place.” The most-wasted fresh foods, he states, are bread, fruit, milk, potatoes and salad. The *Mirror* suggests 24 million slices of bread, 1.5 million sausages and 1.1 million eggs are being dumped every day.

Besides being mindful while you are shopping, below are 10 tips you can apply to your life today to help you reduce food waste. Several of these tips were actively promoted in the documentary.

- **Shop wisely**—Plan meals, use lists and avoid impulse purchases. Says Fearnley-Whittingstall, “It’s hard to beat the discipline of a good old-fashioned shopping list: Plan ahead and then stick with the program.”
- **Buy local**—Locally produced foods are fresher, can be kept longer and leave a smaller ecological footprint.
- **Buy imperfect fruits and vegetables**—Rather than searching for the perfect specimens, don’t be afraid to buy fruits and vegetables containing blemishes or bruises.
- **Get educated about dates**—Use-by and best-by dates are manufacturer suggestions and may not necessarily correlate to the item being unsafe for consumption. In fact, many foods are safe and consumable well after their use-by date. Apply common sense, and use your eyes and nose to assess if something is safe to eat.
- **Freeze food**—Instead of letting food spoil, freeze it before it has a chance to go bad.

Freezing overripe fruit, for example, is the first step in transforming it into juice pops or homemade sorbet.

[Emmale and I are big believers in freezing food and, to a lesser extent, home canning. We have the small freezer at the bottom of the refrigerator, a freezer in the garage and am in the process of getting a second freezer. There are often times when fruits and vegetables are available at a really good price (or even free) but storage then becomes an issue. Of course you can't freeze everything—watermelon doesn't freeze well—but much from the produce department can be frozen if properly processed. Freezing is also a great way to save money because you can buy in bulk (see chapter 25, "Buying in Bulk") and save a lot.]

- **Store fresh food properly**—Retain fresh fruits and vegetables in their original packaging and avoid washing them until you are ready to eat them. Also, to prevent oxygen from accelerating decay, press or squeeze excess air out of the bag before securing it with a twist tie or zipper-type seal.
- **Consider juicing**—Juicing is an excellent way to finish up aging produce while improving your health and managing your weight at the same time.

[I'm glad juicing was mentioned. Much of my not-so-pretty fruit and vegetables end up juiced. In liquid form, nobody really cares how 'irregular' or 'substandard' my produce is.]

- **Choose smaller portions**—When you prepare larger meals at home, be sure to have a plan for eating or freezing the leftovers. At restaurants, ask about half-portions, which are often available upon request and sometimes even at a reduced price.
- **Eat your leftovers**—Change your mindset about eating leftovers at home, and order only what you can reasonably eat at restaurants, particularly if your usual habit is to bring leftovers home but not eat them. About cooking with leftovers, Fearnley-Whittingstall said, "[It] isn't just about making do—in my experience, meals made from bits and pieces ferreted from the fridge are often the most satisfying and delicious of all."

[This is one area where food is often wasted. My favorite use for leftover food is on burritos. You can serve just about anything, hot or cold, as a wrap. Emmale and I make it a point to be very cognizant of what's available in the refrigerator. Not only does efficiently consuming leftovers save money, it also saves on cooking time and on dishes that have to be washed.]

- **Compost food scraps**—Composting food scraps, including any wasted food, returns nutrients to the soil and reduces organic waste in landfills.

[Again, I'm thrilled that the author included this. The vast majority of fruit and vegetable scraps end up in a plastic storage container on the kitchen counter. It's emptied into a large bushel sized plastic container in the back side of the yard. Amazingly, there are very few pest problems and the produce quickly breaks down. In fall and spring, it's all incorporated back into the garden. In fact, almost all kitchen scraps, as well as weeds and shrub clippings, end up recycled either into the garden or as mulch over paths in the garden.]

- [The one suggestion this author didn't mention, and it's a good one, besides using a shopping list—which is always a good idea—is don't shop when you're hungry or emotionally upset. A lot of impulse shopping, and grocers can be very efficient in their efforts to get you to buy items, such as potato chips or convenience foods when your guard is 'down', can be stopped cold in its tracks by being in an alert and oriented frame of mind when temptation is easiest to resist.]

Clothing: Another Huge Area of Unnecessary Waste

As he went snooping through garbage cans around the U.K. as part of his investigative efforts related to the movie, Fearnley-Whittingstall was quite surprised by the amount of perfectly decent clothes that were being discarded. He noted:

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“We’re binning over £150 million (\$195.4 million) worth of clothes every year, and they end up either being incinerated or buried in a landfill. Clothes are cheaper than they’ve ever been, and on average we own four times more garments than we did 30 years ago. A lot of people go clothes shopping these days not because they need new clothes, but because it makes them feel good.”

In the course of his exploration into why so many wearable clothes were being indiscriminately tossed, Fearnley-Whittingstall interviewed several teenagers about their clothing preferences and shopping habits.

He was shocked to learn about vlogs, or video blogs, focused on the “high” achieved from what could only be described as an addiction to clothes shopping. He readily admitted he had never heard of vlogg such as Patricia Bright, Tanya Burr or Zoella, who show off and chat about their latest purchases via YouTube for millions of loyal and adoring fans.

[One of the ultimate in recycling: Emmale and I actually get a lot—not all—our clothes from any one of the area thrift stores. Granted, it’s not top of the line stuff but is workable for most purposes. To be sure, for when I work in the garden it really pays to wear secondhand clothes as it’s not long before my work clothes end up seriously stained with garden dirt. The downside of gardening is that it’s not an especially neat process though getting out and ‘working’ the earth certainly has many therapeutic benefits.]

Cheap ‘Fast Fashion’ Encourages Shopping Addiction

Fearnley-Whittingstall believes these vlogg are “part of a turbo-charged fashion industry that seems hellbent on persuading you to buy more than you need.” Because clothes are so cheap, he suggests, you may not think twice about throwing them away to make room for more. One teen shopaholic said:

“About every two weeks, I go for a big shop. There’s no need to buy as much as I buy, but I like it. I don’t regret spending money. I just think, ‘Oh, like, I’m happy now that I’ve bought myself something.’”

Realizing he could do little to influence the nation’s love affair with fashion, Fearnley-Whittingstall hoped simply to make people more aware of the options they have when it comes to clothes they no longer want. In dramatic fashion, he dumped a pile of 10,000 individual clothing items, weighing a whopping combined total of 7 tons, in the middle of a busy shopping mall.

The crowd that gathered around, and later picked through the pile as part of a free clothing giveaway, had trouble guessing how long it takes the whole of Britain to throw away that amount of clothing. Guesses ranged from one week to several days or just a few hours. The crowd was shocked to learn it takes just 10 minutes! The cost of such gross waste has far-reaching effects. Says Fearnley-Whittingstall:

“When you throw this stuff away, you throw away all the work that’s gone into them and all the resources, the water, the oil, the energy, the machines and the human labor. That all goes in the garbage, too. Chucking away clothes at our current rate is clearly an environmental disaster.”



How You Can Help in the Battle Against Waste

“Hugh’s War on Waste,” which is fueled by Fearnley-Whittingstall’s inquisitive nature and confrontational personality, hits on important topics that are worthy of serious consideration at a macro level, but even more importantly, at a personal level. Each of us must face the reality that our habits and lifestyle choices, without a doubt, affect the environment and people around us. Food waste, for example, is a serious issue—not just in the U.K., but worldwide.

It’s unnecessary for people to go hungry while others waste tons of good, edible food that is readily available. It makes no sense for surplus food to be trashed when it could easily be redistributed to charitable organizations in the local community. Like Fearnley-Whittingstall, I believe large grocery store chains and food conglomerates should be held accountable for their part of the waste equation.

I would encourage you to assess your own waste patterns. To get started, choose one or two of the food-waste tips shown above and begin today to make positive changes in how you handle food.

You might also consider checking with your local grocery store to find out what they do with surplus and expired food. Most certainly there is a food pantry, homeless shelter or soup kitchen that could benefit from donated food items. Everyone deserves access to healthy food, and you may be able to help make a connection to ensure the availability of food to those who are in need. For more information and ideas, check out “Hugh’s War on Waste” and the “Waste Not” campaign on Facebook or Twitter.^{1}



In spite of the policies beyond their control—and much of this they can’t do anything about—the Produce Department at my local grocery store does much to minimize waste including judicious ordering and discounting produce that’s ‘getting on’. Too, as a company they actually do a great deal to support Ozarks Food Harvest in terms of both food donations and charitable giving. As grocery stores go, my local grocery store is very much into helping the community as much as possible. They are a credit to their community.