



# Waste and food education

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## The key facts in brief

The problem: food waste is hard to digest (it has to be said). Because if the FAO estimations are correct about the need to increase agricultural production by at least 60% in the coming years to feed a population that will reach 9 billion by 2050, according to the same estimation the world currently loses or wastes (there is a difference) over a third of the food that is produced, processed, transported and distributed: more than 1.3 billion tons of food that is still edible and that could feed approximately 2 billion people for an entire year. It therefore makes no sense to increase food production for a growing population, for it then to go to waste. It makes more sense to start eliminating this wastage and then increase production. The value of food needs to be restored starting with a new education on food and the environment..



## To better understand: a few basic concepts

### What is meant by waste? How does it differ from the term refuse?

Let's start with the English word waste: it means refuse, scrap, and even devastation and destruction. A wide range of meanings that the English language sums up in a single word. Not so with the Italian language, which instead has distinct words for the terms refuse and waste. While, of course, with the English word waste, everything is simplified and it's easy to get confused. In order to understand and be able to take action, we must separate and distinguish the terms. It makes sense to distinguish between "refuse" and "waste", perhaps by giving an example. So, if I eat a yogurt and throw away the plastic pot, this really is refuse. However, if for some reason I don't eat that yogurt (it expires that day as I had forgotten that it was in the fridge) and then throw it away, even if still edible, then this really is waste. The plastic pot together with its contents end up in the bin. But to produce it, natural and human resources (labor) were used. I therefore throw away money (euro), soil (hectares), water (hectoliters) and energy (kilowatts), all limited resources, even if renewable over time. Wastage is therefore linked to our habits and lifestyles. To a certain extent, throwing away refuse is necessary, but we must not be wasteful.

### But why do we throw things away and why do we waste? What drives us to do something that in our culture is considered negative and even immoral?

Waste means to dissipate, to squander, to treat something badly that actually deserves more care and attention: starting with the food we eat. In Italy, the Waste Watcher 2013 report (National Monitoring Center on Domestic Waste sponsored by Last Minute Market, a spin-off of the University

Bologna and available at: [www.wastewatcher.it](http://www.wastewatcher.it)) reveals that in 2013 domestic waste cost Italians a staggering 8.7 billion euro, with an average of around 213 grams of food thrown away each week (that's 7.06 euro per week per family). In Switzerland, however, analysis (in 2012) showed that almost one sixth of household refuse was food (30 kg of food per capita, equal to 251,000 tons, of which 15,000 was made up of meat and fish, with 236,000 tons coming from other foods). The latter part consisting of untouched or only partially consumed food, such as bread, fruit and vegetables, 10% from cooked and 20% from expired food still in its packaging.



## Food education against waste

There are numerous Italian and international initiatives to reduce food wastage. An example from Italy is *Un anno contro lo Spreco* (One year against waste), a European campaign to raise awareness of the public and institutions on issues related to food waste. The project was conceived and launched in 2010 by Last Minute Market, a spin off of the University of Bologna, sponsored by the European Parliament (Agriculture and Rural Development Committee), and dedicated to various themes (2010 food waste, 2011 water, and energy waste in 2012). In 2013, the campaign was renamed "Spreco Zero" (Zero Waste): the aim being to create an understanding of sustainability through awareness and adoption of best practices, also in everyday life.





*Eccedenze agricole*

There is also PINPAS, the National Plan for the Prevention of Food Waste, which was launched by the Italian Ministry of the Environment at the end of 2013, with the objective to outline in detail the aspects related to food waste prevention, and to reduce the amount of foods intended for human consumption that end up being thrown away.

In Switzerland, a project falling under the federal office for Agriculture, Environment, Health and Food Safety is developing awareness-raising activities aimed at promoting conscientious food management, by creating an informative and well-structured website ([www.foodwaste.ch](http://www.foodwaste.ch)) as well as an exhibition organized by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation entitled "Waste. What stupidity".

But can these initiatives reduce and prevent food waste? Yes, but only if we manage to change the system at the base in the way we produce and consume, meaning the way we eat. Therefore, the starting point must be food education. It's from here that we need to (re) start.



## **Try it yourself!** **How do you avoid waste?** **How can you reduce household waste?**

### **1 Food shopping**

The fight against food waste begins with the selection and planning of purchases and meals. One of the most common causes of food waste is making bad, hasty and excessive purchases. Before you go shopping, double check what you need and what you already have. Making a list of things to buy, based on your actual needs, can help you avoid unnecessary purchases, and future waste. It's also useful to plan the meals of the week.

### **2 Seasonality**

Follow the season and origin of the product, especially for fruit and vegetables.

### **3 The refrigerator**

The next step, after the food shopping, is to remove the packaging and place food items in the refrigerator, paying attention to use the right shelf, as the temperature is not the same everywhere. For example, raw fruits and vegetables should be kept lower (6°C), while fish and raw meat should be placed higher (0/2°C). In addition, it's useful to rotate the products, placing the most perishable items and those about to expire, towards the front.

### **4 The freezer**

Many foods can be frozen to prolong their duration and maintain their freshness.

### **5 The pantry or food cupboard**

Often you have to throw away products such as flour, pasta, legumes, and cereals, in some cases, still unopened. Prevention is possible, by keeping the pantry or food cupboard clean and storing these products in rigid containers (e.g. glass or plastic).

### **6 Labels**

These should always be read as they are the food's "identity card". Pay particular attention to expiry dates and their true meaning. "Use by ..." means that the food is fit for consumption only until the indicated date (such as milk, yogurt), taking into account that for all products there is a small degree of tolerance. While "best before ..." is the date until which the food retains its specific qualities. In this case, the foods are fit for consumption even after the day or month indicated.

## 7 The kitchen

Cooking too much often leads to having leftovers that we're not able or willing to eat in the following days and that end up the bin. Always pay attention to the quantities when cooking.

## 8 Maintenance

Fridge and stove should not only be located in the right place in the kitchen, but also need to be cleaned and maintained on a regular basis.

## 9 Recipes

By now there is a wealth of "literature" on how to reuse leftovers and food scraps. In this area there is nothing to invent, only to try.

## 10 Sharing

If there is too much and you cannot freeze or recycle, food can be immediately shared with friends and neighbors (*foodsharing*).

# Questions and new challenges

In fact even food waste has a "value" that goes beyond the economic, environmental and social estimates, and it's a value which we have not yet completely "discovered". To understand this we have to ask the key question: what does eating mean in relation to waste? To waste means throwing food in the bin, but it also means eating junk food or eating poorly.

Waste is food in the garbage. Junk food or food in the garbage: which is worse? It's a difficult question to answer. It can be said that the first is bad for your health, the second is bad for the environment. However, the two terms actually have something in common: waste. In both cases something is being wasted: one's health, the environment, natural resources, labor. It's an absurd vicious cycle, that should be broken as soon as possible. The only way to do this is to (re) value food, which should not be junk or end up as junk. This is the value of waste. Not to waste means giving value to that which is not wasted: food in this case, but equally true for all other goods.



Let's feed ourselves with values, even that of waste, if it teaches us to value food. And if it is true that we are what we eat, but also what we do not eat, let's try - now more than ever - not to be wasteful. In this way a negative factor becomes a positive catalyst, the paradigm of a new society free from the falsehood of more and the truth about less: a more just, equitable, fair and sustainable society.

## Bibliography

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Andrea Segrè, *Spreco (Waste)*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2014.

Michel Pollan, *In difesa del cibo (In Defense of Food)*, Adelphi, Milano 2009.

## Suggested Reading

[www.lastminutemarket.it](http://www.lastminutemarket.it)

[www.stopwaste.eu](http://www.stopwaste.eu)

<http://www.admin.ch/aktuell/00089/index.html?lang=it&msg-id=51815>