

The Meteoric Rise of Food Waste – A Modern Phenomenon?

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Abundance, noticeable in the endless choices available in supermarkets or hotel buffets, where the only limit is your stomach, has become an expectation. However, abundance, coupled with our demands for fresher, crispier, and perfectly shaped food, has brought about a wastefulness never experienced before. According to Eurostat, the global average food waste per capita has increased from 177kg in 1961 to around 240kg in 2011, depending on the region. Hall et al. note that American per-capita food waste grew by about 50% between 1973 and 2003, while the United Nations Environmental Programme estimates that, in 2019, food waste reached 931 million tonnes. 569 million tonnes of this waste originated from households (61%), while 244 million tonnes is attributed to food service and the remaining 118 million tonnes originated from the retail sector.

WHAT HAS BROUGHT ON THESE CHANGES?

The frugality of the past, even at the industrial level, seems to have disappeared. Once, industries and cultural practices considered food byproducts as opportunities. For instance, grape must, a byproduct of winemaking, was converted into animal feed or even distilled into other alcoholic beverages such as grappa. The same used to go for Maltese and Mediterranean households, where stale

bread was transformed into tasty pudina and fish bones into aljotta. These practices have fallen out of fashion in today's fast-paced culture, where cooking has shifted towards easy-to-prepare foods that require minimal effort.

Contemporary production practices now focus on maintaining scarcity and profitability. Agricultural produce, for example, is destroyed to keep prices stable, while items that are close to expiry are simply discarded. Therefore, if the opportunity cost of keeping a commodity on shelves is higher than the cost of discarding it, it is simply thrown away since the price of the product has been outweighed by the value of the new stock. The consumer also plays a role. Reynolds et al. indicate that post-war generations have been marked by consumerism fuelled by industrial capitalism, which creates value by mass-producing goods and producing demand itself. In turn, this demand is reflected in increased consumption and an ever-increasing ease to discarding items.

Fortunately, counter-revolution movements are also on the rise. The contemporary slow food movement, often associated with Italian culture and food systems, is a case in point, where notions of zero-kilometre foods, seasonality, holistic eating, fresh food, and traditional communal meals take centre stage. The impact on the environment, our social wellbeing, and our health is a positive consequence of these choices. ▶

