



Building Community Around the Love of Ugly Food

By: Megan Myrdal
Co-Founder/Director, Ugly Food of the North

I think about food a lot. And by a lot, I mean all the time. As a food educator, community activist, farmers market organizer and avid home cook and gardener, food is pretty much at the center of my life all day every day. And that's why about a year ago, when I started exploring the issue of food waste and began to realize what a complex, troubling, and important issue it is I knew I wanted to do something.

According to the Natural Resource Defense Council, upwards of 40% of our food resources go to waste each year. This represents an economic loss of \$165 billion dollars, \$750 million of which is spent on disposing food that is never eaten. With huge issues facing our communities, country and world related to hunger, food security, and the need to be more thoughtful about our resources, most can agree something needs to change.

So, why are we wasting such a huge amount of our food? Well, it happens for a variety of reasons all along the food supply chain. This list is not exhaustive, but highlights a few reasons we see the waste we have today.

Consumers

At the consumer level we are busy and don't plan for meals and shopping. We get to the grocery store and buy foods we have good intentions of eating but don't. Refrigerators become disorganized and the bag of lettuce we bought two weeks earlier is found in the back drawer slimy, spoiled and unopened. Also, there are various dating systems (i.e. Best Buy or Sell By) that are confusing and prompt us to throw away food that might still be safe to eat. Finally, many foods today are quite cheap and therefore, it doesn't feel like a big loss to our pocketbooks when we toss food in the trash.

Restaurants and Retail

In the food industry, we see waste happening in various ways at numerous levels. Our American culture likes the idea of getting more for less. Therefore, restaurants have accommodated this desire by serving large portions that make us feel like we are getting a "bang for our buck." However, if we don't eat and don't take home 25% of our meal (the average amount people leave on their plate), it just ends up in the trash and isn't saving you any money. Also, for buffet-style restaurants, the food waste issue gets even more troubling. When consumers pay a set amount, have numerous options, plus the

opportunity to fill their plate as many times as they wish, it usually results in throwing large amounts of food. Also the food that is set out in these buffet lines cannot be donated to charitable feeding programs for health reasons.

Farms

And the farm level, one reason food is wasted is due to food grading and standards. From beef and beans, to nuts and fruit, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed grades and standards for nearly every agricultural product. According to the USDA website, “U.S. Grade Standards provide the fruit, vegetable, and specialty crop industry with a uniform language for describing the quality and condition of commodities in the market.” While these standards assure that foods that reach the marketplace are safe and of the highest quality, it also reduces the profit for lower grades of foods and results in food waste.

Farmers can lose significant value on their crop if a food drops a level in grading (i.e. A to B). And this can happen for a variety of reasons including some that are obvious like hail damage, decay, or pests. But some downgrades result from cosmetic reasons like being misshapen, blemished, sunburnt, or poorly colored. These foods can be perfect in every quality we should look for in food (flavor, nutrition, locally grown, etc.), except for the fact that they don’t look the way we have been told they should look.



This is the very issue that founded Ugly Food of the North, a Fargo-Moorhead based organization working to bring awareness to food waste and food sustainability issues in our community.

Ugly Food of the North formed in the summer of 2015 through a combined effort of a few Fargo-Moorhead residents dedicated to bringing love to ugly food and wanting to make a change on the food waste issue. Our first event was an Ugly Food Market held at the Red River Market, a new farmers market in downtown Fargo. We encouraged all the market producers to bring their “ugly” produce to market – things like 3-legged carrots, warty squash, and misshapen tomatoes. We promoted these foods and brought educational items to the market to draw attention to the issue of food waste and the value of ugly food. We encouraged people to buy these foods and to pay full price for them. After all, they are just as delicious and healthy as their perfect looking partner, and sometimes they even taste better.

This event was a smash! The community loved it, our farmers loved it and we followed the event with an Ugly Food Potluck three days later where people brought dishes made with the ugly foods they purchased at the market. With over 100 attendees and 40 plus

dishes, we knew we weren't alone in wanting to continue to bring appreciation to wasted food.

Ugly Food of the North continues to hold monthly events to bring awareness and education to food sustainability issues in our community. We are very focused on the idea of thinking global but acting local. We want to bring attention to our local farmers and the value their food and growing practices bringing to our community. We want to highlight chefs, restaurants, and grocers that are making use of local food and also being thoughtful in the way they handle food. We want to support farmers markets and other food hubs that serve not only a local market place, but also a space for people to gather around good, locally grown food. And we work to support opportunities for people to grow and produce food in our community – trying to reestablish that connection that many have lost with food and agriculture.

We're excited with what we have accomplished in our short time and look forward to the future of Ugly Food of the North. If you are interested in learning more about our organization and joining the ugly food movement, you can check us out at www.fmuglyfood.com. Or join us the conversation on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @fmuglyfood or #FMUglyFood.

