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What a waste

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Four years ago, North America's potato growers formed a cartel. By managing supply, and keeping demand—and prices—high, the United Potato Growers of America, which later helped found a Canadian counterpart, aims to be the OPEC of spuds. Within a year of forming, however, United was facing public revulsion: the consortium, it turned out, was asking farmers to destroy crops to boost prices. In a single year, the Idaho chapter took roughly four million 100-lb. bags of already harvested, perfectly good potatoes and plowed them right back into the ground—a legal, if disgusting, measure. It took one farmer three days to bury his share: \$100,000 worth. In 2006 alone, United helped erase 6.8 million hundredweight potato sacks from the U.S. and Canadian markets. Farmers' open-market returns soared—up 49 per cent over the previous year.

Response to this news was uniformly horrified, but the truth is, in much of the West, produce is destroyed every day of every week, on a much larger scale, and for a reason even more offensive than profit: aesthetics. We've grown accustomed in North America to fancy supermarkets with shiny, unblemished fruits and vegetables. But it's no accident that all that perfect produce lines the shelves: fruits and veggies are culled to ensure that only those with the right size, shape, style or colour end up for sale. A hint of wear is fatal for an otherwise perfectly edible apple, which then winds up in the trash.

Between 25 and 40 per cent of most fruit and vegetable crops are in fact rejected by Western supermarkets. One British supermarket insists that all carrots be perfectly straight—"so customers can peel the full length in one easy stroke," a store manager explained to Tristram Stuart, author of a new book, *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal*. A farmer, meanwhile, estimated that fully one-third of his crop is out-graded for cosmetic reasons, creating mountains of reject potatoes: oversized, double-lobed, too big, too small, too wonky, with eyes, not perfectly smooth, not perfectly rounded—all, of course, perfectly edible. In Britain, government law actually makes it illegal to sell carrots of less than one centimetre in diameter, and those with a fork, or secondary branch—all naturally occurring features. Globally, banana producers are among the worst offenders: waste is estimated at between 20 and 40 per cent.

Supermarket waste is just one part of a colossal and growing environmental problem: food waste. And consumers share the blame. The way food is produced in the West has changed more in the past 50 years than in the previous 10,000. The agricultural industry can now produce unlimited quantities of meat and grains at remarkably cheap prices, creating an abundance of food, and profits. Consumers, lulled by cheap prices, are unaware of the hidden costs of producing so much, or the staggering waste required to stock the supermarket machine.

The story begins in the supermarket, which, in the U.K., generates an estimated 1.6 million tonnes of food waste per year. Waste, in fact, is so much a part of that industry worldwide that it has spawned a euphemism: *shrink*, that is, food sent to landfill because it didn't sell. In Japan that figure is 2.6 million tonnes. In Canada, nearly 40 per cent of all food produced is wasted (in the U.S., the figure nears 50 per cent). And in fact, those numbers could be even higher: Christopher Haskins, formerly the chairman of Northern Foods, one of Britain's food-processing firms, estimates that 70 per cent of all food produced in Britain is being wasted. Stuart, who writes with the seething anger of a modern Upton Sinclair, blames sloppy management, historic neglect of environmental and social responsibilities, and slowness to adopt more efficient technologies. Then, of course, there's cosmetics. "Supermarkets say consumers won't buy wonky produce," Stuart explains. But when in 2007, Britain's potato crop failed and retailers were forced to sell knobby, natural-looking potatoes, "no one batted an eyelid": sales were not affected, nor did consumers log any complaints.

Rather, these strict aesthetic standards are being fuelled by supermarkets' own desire for uniformity and picture-perfect displays, says Jonathan Bloom, author of the forthcoming book, *American Wasteland*. "Appearance has trumped taste, and nutrition," says Bloom, who, in researching the book, took a job in the produce department of a North Carolina grocery store to see what was happening behind closed doors. There, one of his primary roles was culling and chucking "questionable" produce. ("There's no grey area in retail," he adds with a rueful chuckle.)

Laws, perversely, seem to bolster food waste. In the Europe, apples under 50 mm in diameter or 70 grams in weight have been banned. (Those too red or not red enough, meanwhile, have been rejected by supermarkets.) To the absurdity, add European "uniformity rules." Yes, bureaucrats in Brussels have cooked up laws to ensure that all EU citizens are eating fruit and veggies of the same shape and size. In 2008, one British wholesaler was forced to chuck 5,000 kiwis for being four grams lighter than the 62 gram cut-off—"the equivalent of being one millimeter too thin," says Stuart.

That raises the obvious question: why wouldn't growers and supermarkets give away the food instead of throwing it out? "Inertia," Bloom explains, is part of it. The effort required to bag up waste produce instead of just chucking it in a dumpster with the rest is "all the barrier some people need," he says. In the U.S. at least, liability used to be an issue, though it is no longer. To encourage supermarkets to donate excess food, Congress enacted the Good Samaritan act, which protects supermarkets from legal liability if they donate in good faith. But other legal disincentives remain. The kiwi owner, for instance, could have been fined up to \$9,000 had he given away the fruit (government officials say such rules are in place to ensure quality and uniformity).

That said, most supermarkets proudly insist they *do* donate surplus food to charity. Safeway, one of Western Canada's dominant supermarket chains, for example, told *Macleans* it donates \$10 million per year in food and "in kind donations"—though it didn't say whether any of that food was diverted from waste. And in 2007, Sainsbury's claimed to have given away 6,680 tonnes of food, an admirable sum—unless you consider that this represented 10 per cent of its annual discard, a figure typical of the industry in Britain. The reality, according to Stuart, is that most waste goes straight to the landfill.

Some waste is inevitable, but the trouble is how much of this has been built into the manufacturing process. Marks & Spencer, for example, insists its sandwich suppliers pitch four slices of bread from each loaf they produce—the crust and the first slice at either end—amounting to 13,000 slices of fresh bread a day. Another

example of systemic wastage has been dubbed “overproduction waste.” That is, manufacturers will make more of a product than supermarkets can actually sell; in the convenience-food sector (supplying ready-made meals and sandwiches) overproduction waste levels reach 56 per cent of a company’s total output, meaning that, yes, more food is being wasted than sold.

And as if diners needed any more reason to feel guilty about the grilled salmon or sushi dinner on their plates, it is the global fisheries, an industry plagued by greed, ignorance, corruption and terminal shortsightedness, that are responsible for some of the most stomach-turning examples of waste. The European Commission estimates that 40 to 60 per cent of all fish caught by European fleets are thrown back to sea because they are too small, or the wrong species (Greenpeace puts the figure even higher, suggesting that 117 million of the 186 million fish caught in U.K. waters are tossed back to sea). Indeed, the biggest waste, and source of guilt, isn’t even about the fish we actually eat: the UN Environmental Programme estimates that humans eat barely half of all fish caught. (When waste from scraps, rot, fishmeal and inedible matter are taken into account, the amount of fish-based protein actually consumed amounts to just 10 per cent of the marine animals removed annually from the oceans, according to Charles Clover, author of *The End of the Line*.) The world’s top marine scientists, meanwhile, continue to warn that the global fishery will collapse within 30 years if trends continue (for some species, it may be too late: the journal *Nature* estimates that the oceans have already lost more than 90 per cent of large predatory fishes, like cod, salmon and tuna).

Consumers do not escape blame for the mammoth waste problem: the average American throws away 96 kg of edible food each year. In Britain 58 per cent of all the carrots grown currently went in the trash. That is, Stuart says, “for every carrot you eat, you have paid for at least one more to be thrown away.” Lettuce is even worse: for every serving of fresh salad eaten in the U.K., another two have been thrown away. In all, Britons, who have had their trash examined with near-forensic precision, toss an average of 70 kg, totalling \$16.5 billion, including 484 million containers of unopened yogurt, 27 apples per person and 2.6 billion slices of bread a year—enough to sate the hunger of more than 30 million people, Stuart adds.

So how did we get here? Government largesse, and the industrialization of agriculture, have brought food prices to historic lows: between 1974 and 2005, food prices on world markets fell by fully 75 per cent in real terms. Until 1952, Americans spent more than 20 per cent of their incomes on food. Last year that portion hit an all-time low of 5.6 per cent—even as the average number of calories available per person per day *rose* by nine per cent. (In Pakistan, by comparison, the percentage of spending on food can reach 75 per cent of income.) Waste and the amount of food available per person have risen inexorably in tandem. One British study from 1938 put food waste at two to three per cent; U.S. studies from the 1960s and ’70s put wastage levels at seven per cent. Now rich countries, which produce up to 200 per cent more food than needed to satisfy their population requirements, waste more than 25 per cent of household food (the increasing food supply and steep drop in prices are also strongly correlated with the rise in obesity: currently, two-thirds of Americans are overweight, half of those are obese, and it is believed that one-third of those born after 2000 will develop diabetes, a related condition).

Then there is the staggering cost of disposing of all of that waste food, paid for by taxes, and of leaving it to rot in landfills. Canada’s landfills are responsible for up to 38 per cent of human-made methane, a greenhouse gas. Bacteria that breaks down rotting waste produce acids that, when they make it into groundwater or nearby water bodies, can poison fish and amphibians, render water undrinkable, or enter the food chain. In cities, even recycling and composting generate greenhouse gases: they require someone to pick up waste and distribute it. And despite the significant growth of waste-diversion programs we’re *still* generating more and more garbage every year, says waste management expert Paul van der Werf, noting that Torontonians generated 70 kg more waste per person last year than just 10 years ago. Indeed, from 1990 to 2005, we increased our municipal waste by 24 per cent, compared to the OECD average increase of just five per cent. Currently, Canada produces 791 kg per capita of municipal waste each year, placing us dead last among the 17 OECD countries surveyed by the Conference Board of Canada.

All of which matters most when you consider the massive environmental trade-off that comes with buying a third more food than we actually eat. The environmental fallout goes far beyond the wasted food. To the discard heap, add the resources spent to grow the food: fertilizers, pesticides, oil for the tractor and for transport. In the U.S., the energy-intensive food system uses 19 per cent of fossil fuels—more than any other sector of the economy. Although experts quibble over the precise figure, modern farming is thought to contribute more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than anything else North Americans do: 37 percent, according to one study. Factory farms have become one of the biggest sources of pollution on the continent. So when we waste from the industrial food system, we are also wasting oil, releasing greenhouse gases, polluting waterways and hastening global warming.

Even worse, many of the environmental costs of creating, then wasting, so much food—such as deforestation, water depletion and soil erosion—are being foisted on developing countries, where increasing amounts of cereals, grains and produce are being grown to sate the West's growing appetite. When we pay Brazil to chop down the rainforest to grow soy, or have Kenya drain the Tana River delta to make sugar, we of course also hasten the never-ending extension of the agricultural frontier into the world's last, remaining forests and wetlands.

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