Dumping food that's still good enough to eat?
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Food wastage here hit 558,900 tonnes last year, even as people complain of steadily climbing prices and people elsewhere suffer food shortages

Undergraduate Low Qiong Xia, 21, reckons that her family of four tosses out about half a kilogram of food each day, wasting about $56 of their $210 weekly food budget.

For instance, their weekly disposal of leftover oranges has become a routine.

'Nobody in my family likes oranges, which we buy for religious offerings. We tend to keep them in the fridge till they get bad, then start throwing them away,' she said.

The Low family's food practices are not uncommon. Across the island, food wastage added up to 558,900 tonnes last year, said the National Environment Agency. Such wastage has grown by 6.2 per cent since 2002, perhaps the result of a more affluent and expanding population.

But at a time of rising food prices and shortages elsewhere, throwing out good food is a waste of money, said Mr Seah Seng Choon, executive director of the Consumers Association of Singapore.

'Such wastage can be reduced or even prevented. Simple measures will help consumers save in this time of high inflation,' he added.

Agreeing, Dr Teo Ho Pin, Mayor of North West District and MP for Bukit Panjang, felt that people should buy only what they need.

Referring to the Green Movement's 'Three Rs' - reduce, recycle and re-use - he said the first applies to food. 'We should make an effort to reduce consumption. Not only does this help the environment, but it also helps people to stretch their dollar when prices are rising,' he said.

A Sunday Times check of 60 businesses here, from hawker and market stalls to restaurants and hotels, found much evidence of wastage. Eight of the 12 hawkers interviewed said they frequently ended up with unused food portions at the end of the day.

'Up to 1kg of meat and vegetables are left over and thrown away every day,' said Mr Lok Kok Heng, 32, supervisor of a mixed rice stall at the High Inn Coffeeshop in Clementi.

A drinks and snacks stall owner in Bedok, who wanted to be known only as Mr Murthy, 53, said that he often throws away 10 to 20 pieces of unconsumed vadai, which are Indian savoury fritters.

'Sometimes, at closing time, I will give them out for free, but people don't even want them,' he said.

In the restaurants, up to 5 per cent of the food ends up as waste because it is no longer fresh enough to be sold.

Food celebrity Devagi Sanmugam, owner of Devagi's Restaurant in Upper Thomson Road, said 2 or 3kg of cooked food go into the bins on some days.

'Good restaurants serve only fresh food. We don't keep cooked food in the fridge for the next day,' she explained.

Over at Vietnamese restaurant Pho Hoa, which has outlets in Suntec City and Holland Village, up to 36kg of unwanted beef parts and 91/2 kg of vegetables are tossed out every week.

'Even if they are still edible, we cannot serve them if they are not fresh,' a spokesman said.

Wholesale centres also have a wastage problem.

Mr Ong Shuh Chuang, a vegetable wholesaler at Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market, typically finds himself left with about 20 baskets of vegetables at the end of each weekday. Each basket, if sold, can fetch about $20 to $40. 'Turnips and sweet potatoes can be sold the next day, but perishable ones have to be thrown away,' he said.

While most food waste ends up incinerated, a growing amount is recycled now at IUT Singapore, which turns food waste into bio-gas and soil compost. For example, since October last year, about 2 tonnes of food waste collected daily from five canteens at the National University of Singapore are being recycled.

Meanwhile, items like unsold bread are still good for consumption. Food from the Heart, which runs a voluntary food distribution programme, collects about 20,000kg of unsold bread monthly, worth about $150,000, from various hotels and bakeries.

Said its event executive, Ms Nurul Ain Hamzah: 'It will otherwise go to waste.'

Rising food prices have led to a change in behaviour in some businesses. Since the middle of last year, McDonald's has been reducing wastage by assembling food only when an order is placed, and installing condiment dispensers instead of giving out packets of sauce.

Its restaurant managers now do projections of customer flow to avoid excess food preparation. The changes will be made to all McDonald's outlets by year end.

Families, too, now monitor food use.

Ms Low's family has started making a shopping list to avoid overbuying.

Housewife Lynn Puyo, 30, has also started cutting down on waste. 'I used to throw away rice that we did not finish. Now, we eat every last bit,' she said.

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much waste

In the past week, two overseas reports tallied up the cost of wasted food.

>Britain

A study by the Waste and Resources Action Programme, a private company, said Britons were throwing away staggering amounts of good food.

Over half of the 6.7 million tonnes of food discarded by about 26 million households each year was still edible, it noted.

The waste from over 2,100 of those households was analysed: Some 1.3 million unopened yogurt cartons and 5,500 whole chickens were tossed out every day.

The amount of food wasted added up to £10 billion (S$26.7 billion) a year.

United States

A report called 'Saving Water: From Field to Fork - Curbing Losses and Wastage in the Food Chain' by the Stockholm International Water Institute, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Water Management Institute, pointed to the same problem in the US.

There, as much as 30 per cent of food, worth some US$48.3 billion (S$66.3 billion), was thrown away each year.

The report also pointed out that even though enough food was produced globally to feed the world's population, overeating was common among some people while others did not have access to food.

waste not, want not

Consumers can do their part to cut down on food waste. Here are some tips:

When purchasing

Plan your meals for the week. This will help you avoid buying excess food that might go to waste.

Check the expiry date of food products before purchase and ensure that the food items can be consumed before that date.

Opt for frozen meat if you need to store it for a long time. If you buy a lot of fresh produce, try buying in smaller-than-usual quantities.

At home

Keep perishable goods at the correct temperature. For instance, chilled meat should be kept in a freezer at between 0 and 4 deg C.

Look out for near-expired food products periodically in your cupboard so that they can be consumed before they expire.

Use waste food as fertiliser. Things like vegetable scraps, coffee grounds and fruit peels can be used as fertiliser for your garden.

Plan simple meals on the days that you will be home late - for example, have a leftover meal.

Information from Consumers Association of Singapore, www.wasteawarelovefood.org [http://www.wasteawarelovefood.org] and www.swansea.gov.uk [http://www.swansea.gov.uk]

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