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A season of feasting... and wasting

Waste collector sees up to 30% spike in dumped food during festive period

By Victoria Vaughan and Kim Spykerman

Tips on saving

CHRISTMAS is over, but there is still the New Year and Chinese New Year to come. Here are some ways to cut down on waste and give the planet a break during the festive seasons.

- Use leftover meat to create new dishes such as turkey curry or porridge. Boil the carcass to create stock for soups and stews.
- For leftover vegetables (must include potatoes): combine in a pan with a chopped fried onion to create potato and vegetable cakes to serve with cold turkey. This is known as Bubble and Squeak in Britain.
- Take leftover cakes to work to share with your colleagues and avoid throwing them away.
- Make sure any guests staying with you know where the recycling bins are so they can sort the rubbish correctly.
- Open presents carefully and iron the paper (not foil wrap) on a low heat to use again. Or use material which can be easily reused to wrap presents such as net or silk.

Singapore's waste in numbers

5.97m tonnes

Amount of waste generated in Singapore last year, an increase from 5.6 million tonnes in 2007

1.26m tonnes

Amount of waste generated in the form of paper and cardboard - the main culprits - with 48 per cent being recycled

0.68m tonnes

Amount of waste generated in the form of plastics, with 8 per cent being recycled

30 per cent for food and 35 per cent for plastic by 2012

Target recycling rates set out under the Singapore Green Plan 2012

0.57m tonnes

Amount of food waste generated, with 12 per cent being recycled

56% (2008) to 65% (2020) to 70% (2030)

Target recycling rate set earlier this year The Government hopes to achieve this by providing more recycling facilities and introducing new measures, such as incentives, to increase recycling.



The festivities leading up to Christmas and New Year add an extra 187 tonnes to Singapore's daily average of 7,000 tonnes of waste collected. -- ST PHOTO: TERENCE TAN

CHRISTMAS is a time of excess - excess spending, excess eating and drinking, and excess waste. From discarded wrapping paper to leftover turkey, Singapore's waste levels rise during the festive season - despite the fact that many have left the country to go on vacation.

Data recorded since 2005 shows Singapore generates an average of 7,000 tonnes of waste daily, which is equivalent to the combined weight of about 950 full-grown elephants. During December, the figure goes up by a further 187 tonnes daily or about the weight of 25 elephants.

A National Environment Agency spokesman said: 'The festivities and celebrations leading up to Christmas and New Year could result in more waste being disposed in the month of December.'

There are four public waste collectors in Singapore charged with collecting domestic waste along with recyclables. One such company, SembWaste, which collects waste from Woodlands-Yishun, Hougang-Punggol, Clementi and the city area, said that there is about a 20 per cent to 30 per cent increase in food waste during the festive season, so much so that it deploys an additional truck to cart away all the waste from the shopping malls and major restaurants.

Typically, there is a 5 per cent increase in the total amount of waste generated from November all the way through to the Chinese New Year period, SembWaste added. Chinese New Year is the busiest time for public waste collectors. SembWaste alone deploys 13 extra trucks during that period.

A spokesman for Veolia ES Singapore, which collects waste from Tanglin-Bukit Merah, Bedok and Pasir Ris-Tampines, added: 'During the Chinese New Year period, we will need to increase our collection frequency to twice or thrice a day for certain locations where the waste generation is higher than on normal days. This is due to the tradition of spring cleaning.'

Keeping wastage to a minimum has been a priority for the 30-member extended Tan family this year. Said 24-year-old teacher Karol-Ann Tan: 'Every year, we always have quite a lot of food left over, enough for lunch the next day!'

To make sure more was consumed during Christmas dinner, the family chose to forgo the traditional roast turkey.

This year, with a large turkey out of the way, most of the dishes were empty by the end of the night. Hotels and supermarkets order extra food in preparation for the festive season and have different ways of dealing with the surplus, if any.

The Swissotel Merchant Court saw an increase of between 10 per cent and 12 per cent for its Christmas orders this year. Senior marketing communications manager Koo Sok Hoon said: 'For Christmas takeaways, we do not have a situation of leftovers as orders are placed three days in advance and we cook to order.'

'For the Christmas items served at the buffet, we usually have minimal leftovers. As we specialise in buffets, we are able to estimate the amount of food to serve based on the actual reservations.'

A similar practice is followed at the Sheraton Towers in Scotts Road where orders are placed based on the previous year's consumption so as to avoid wastage, said a spokesman, adding that any leftovers will be thrown away.

At the Goodwood Park Hotel, leftover cakes and puddings are sold at the staff canteen until the end of the Christmas season on Jan 5.

The Grand Hyatt, too, prepares take-away food based on orders. The hotel also gives daily leftover bread to charity Food From The Heart, a voluntary food distribution programme. Founded in 2003 by Mrs Christine Laimer and her husband Henry, the charity delivers food to 120 welfare homes and more than 5,500 needy individuals directly through its 24 distribution centres.

Mrs Laimer, 48, said that although there has not been a spike in the amount of leftover food they receive from their partners, the type of food changes.

'We collect about 21,000kg of bread every month but at Christmas we get log cakes and seasonal goodies from places such as Delifrance and Bengawan Solo, just as at Chinese New Year we get cookies and mooncakes,' she said.

Food From The Heart can help companies with surplus party goodies - if given a day's notice, a volunteer from the charity can collect leftovers.

Supermarkets Sheng Siong and NTUC FairPrice offer an order service for Christmas goodies to avoid waste.

FairPrice sells leftover cakes and pastries at discounted prices, which usually sees most food cleared, and anything left will be thrown away.

'It's important when thinking about the 3Rs - Reduce, Reuse and Recycle - that the order is recognised. Reduce comes first,' said Mr Eugene Tay, 32, director of Green Future Solutions, which runs the website Zero Waste Singapore.

'If people are holding a party, they should cook 10 per cent to 20 per cent less food than they think they need as people are more interested in socialising than eating at a party,' he added.

Mr Tay also noted that wrapping paper should be kept for use again or material like cloth could replace paper.

Singapore Environment Council projects manager Uma Sachidhanandam said: 'Pack up leftovers from a party for guests to take home or use them in the next day's meals.'

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