

PHOTOS | ESTELLE LOW & MIAK AW

From stash to trash? With more homes looking like this, managing the kitchen inventory becomes crucial in reducing household food waste.

HOME, my minimart

A waste collection from 150 families reveals their shopping and eating habits

ESTELLE LOW
MIAK AW

RESTAURANT CONSULTANT and food writer Guy Hoh, 37, shops once a week to make sure there is sufficient food at home in case of emergencies like a quarantine.

His stock includes three kilos of pasta, 10 kilos of rice, 10 tins of fish and meat, 15 to 30 portions of dried and frozen vegetables and fruits, 10 litres of juice and 10 litres of soya milk – enough

to last his family of six for two weeks.

And if that is not enough, he has a good range of dark chocolate, cheeses and 70 types of wine that will put liquor sellers to shame.

To prevent his food from turning bad, he makes sure the food is finished before replenishing the inventory. Unfortunately, few people practise that.

Overstocking often leads to food wastage when we forget about the can

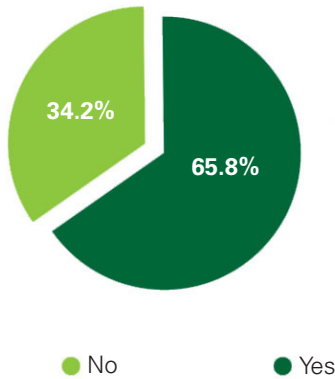
of baked beans we bought last year.

In the UK, a comprehensive household food waste study by the Waste and Resource Action Programme showed that the bulk of food waste in the country was generated by households.

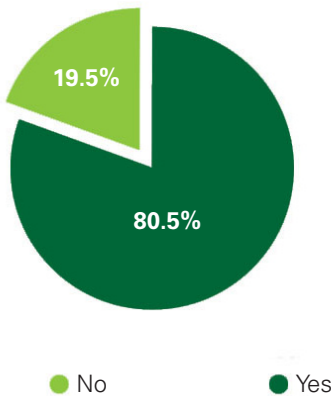
The report revealed that 90 per cent of UK consumers are unaware of the food they throw. Individuals who believed their household had no food

SURVEY FINDINGS

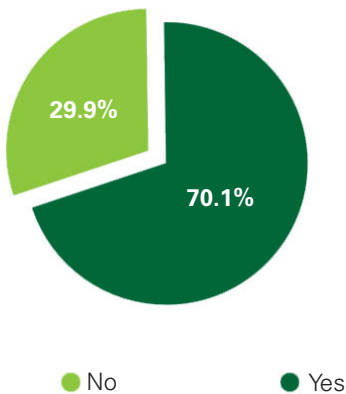
1. When grocery shopping, do you usually buy more items than you need?



2. At home, do you and/or your family consume leftovers?



3. Would you consume some food that is slightly expired (by one to three days)?



INFOGRAPHIC | GAVIN CHAN

This paper-and-pen and online survey was held among 174 Singapore residents (74 and 100 respectively) in December 2009.



Check out the trash Main components of households' food waste were unwanted food parts like fruit peels, vegetable stems, eggshells, bones, as well as leftovers like gravy and rice.

waste were found to be tossing away 240 grammes of food every day, amounting to 88 kilos a year.

Unfortunately, there are no studies on household food waste in Singapore.

To get an inkling of it, we collected a day's worth of food waste from 150 families last December.

Over two weeks, we trawled Housing Development Board flats, condominiums and landed property houses at Serangoon and Sembawang in property agent-style to get families to separate their food waste for our analysis.

There, we handed each family a red plastic bag (the standard size given out by supermarkets) to keep their food trash for our collection the next evening.

That must be tough, collecting waste from door to door, some said in mock sympathy. Others rose in defense to assert that they harbour almost zero food waste at home.

"We're eating out almost every other day this week. Perhaps you could come back next Wednesday," said teacher Audrey Gan, 40.

In an information sheet given to participating families, we stated: some examples of food waste include leftovers, inedible or unwanted food parts (vegetable stems, fruit skins, seeds, meat fat and bones etc.) and expired products.

Unwanted food parts such as fruit peels, vegetable parts, eggshells, bones

and leftovers like rice and gravy formed the bulk of the waste.

Taking the average weight of food waste collected from each family divided by the average household size, the average household food waste per individual was 126 grammes.

Figures from the National Environment Agency showed that food waste totalled 570 million kilos in 2008.

Assuming Singapore's 2008 population to be 4.9 million and the food waste collected from the 150 families to be representative, this would mean household waste had comprised 36 per cent, or one-third, of the average food waste accumulated by an individual in Singapore.

Hey, big spender

GOING BY AN INFORMAL SURVEY OF 174 Singapore residents, six in ten would buy more than what they need when shopping at supermarkets, citing reasons like promotion, good packaging and attractiveness of the food.

"Sometimes I forget and buy a few more packets of frozen dumplings when they're on offer," says manager Michelle Lee, 35, who shops on weekends and has hardly enough time to take stock of her inventory.

Retail expert Lynda Wee, 46, notes that families who do marketing less frequently are more susceptible to impulsive buying due to bulk purchases

and promotions.

Housewife Helen Yeo, 60, snubs the idea of succumbing to discounts as “supermarkets have promotions almost every day”.

“If you buy, keep the item, don’t check its expiry date and it becomes spoil when you want to consume it, it’s a total waste of money,” she says.

To maximise her purchases and reduce wastage, Madam Yeo checks her refrigerator and shelves regularly to make sure canned and dried products, which tend to be forgotten, are consumed before their expiry dates.

Editor of website Zero Waste Singapore, Eugene Tay, 32, reminds us to practise the three ‘R’s we were taught in primary school – Reduce, Reuse and Recycle – in order of sequence.

“Reduce by buying only what you need. Prevent food wastage through proper storage and good cooking habits,” he advises.

Another form of household waste comes when we discard last night’s leftovers, which one in five survey respondents admit to.

Auditor Darrell Chia, 27, avoids eating leftovers as he believes microwaved or reheated food is “harmful to health”.

“I always tell my parents not to eat overnight food as it’s not fresh. But my mum will tell my family to be thrifty,” he says.

Just follow law

IT’S TIME TO CHECK OUT THAT pretty tin of butter cookies sitting on your shelf since Chinese New Year.

Whether or not they were bought on impulse or received as a gift from your relative, chances are it is nearing its expiry date.

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA), which governs the safety of our food imports, requires most pre-packed food to be permanently date-marked with words like ‘use by’, ‘best before’ and ‘sell by’.

These dates determine the shelf life, or expiry date, of a product. But they could lead us to discard food indiscriminately. If the informal survey is representative of our eating habits, most of us – 70 per cent – condemn food that has been slightly expired by one to three days.

Bank analyst Amy Shang, 26, will never think twice about throwing away expired food, regardless whether it is dried or canned. “All expired food should not be eaten because it is bad for health,” she reasons.

Nichol Ng, 32, managing director of food distribution company FoodServices, finds that this form of date-marking leads to food wastage inevitably. “A ‘use by’ date doesn’t mean the product has expired. The quality may be poorer, but it doesn’t mean the food is totally inedible,” she says.

Though foods that have past their expiry date should not be consumed, chief dietitian at Changi General Hospital Magdalin Cheong says dried products are generally “safer” as they have lower moisture content.

Another catch in expiry dates is that labels differ across countries, blurring the lines of to-eat and not-to-eat.

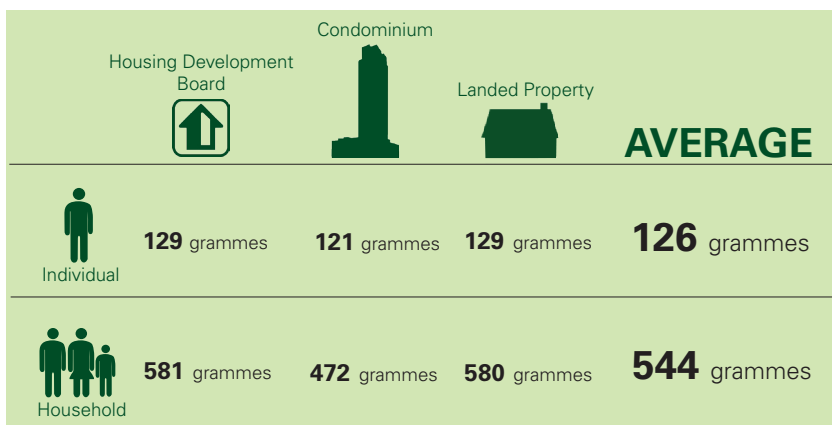
“It’s the same product in the same tin and the same technology. If you give a tin of tomatoes that’s one year expired to people in Africa, they will definitely be able to eat it without a problem,” adds Ms Ng.

Heather Chi, 22, founder and directive director of anti-hunger youth collective Food For All agrees. One way is to have a policy change or clarification on expiry dates, ideally spearheaded by AVA and the Health Promotion Board, she says.

“It is to let consumers know that expired food is safe within certain boundaries, and let distributors and retailers know that they will not be liable for selling or redistributing food to food ration programmes.”

Being savvy about expiry date labels can save us from throwing away perfectly edible food. But until a top-down approach is implemented, reducing waste starts from curbing shopaholic instincts at the supermarket. 🍌

DAILY HOUSEHOLD WASTE



INFOGRAPHIC | GAVIN CHAN & CHEN WEI LI

Based on food waste collected from 150 households at Serangoon and Sembawang in December 2009.

KNOW YOUR EXPIRY DATES

> BEST BEFORE

Recommended for best flavour or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date.

> USE BY

The last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. This date has been determined by the manufacturer of the product.

> SELL BY

Tells the store how long to display the product for sale. You should buy the product before the date expires.

According to Magdalin Cheong, chief dietitian at Changi General Hospital.