American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)
Jonathan Bloom
Cambridge, Ma: Da Capo Press, 2010
xvi + 340 pp. Photos. $26.00 (cloth)

Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal
Tristram Stuart
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I Toss Out Fistfuls of Feta, disappointed with myself for not having used it all quickly enough, before it gets moldy. I throw out cooked green beans left over from the weekend’s stir-fry after catching a nasty whiff of them in the Rubbermaid container.

That ten-pound bag of potatoes worries me, too. I had plans—big plans—when I initially bought it at the grocery store. Life unfortunately got in the way of those plans. Truth be told, I have yet to peel even a pound of potatoes.

And though I know the amount of food I put into the compost bin at the side of the house every week pales in comparison to the great amount people everywhere just pitch carelessly and casually into landfills and dumpsters every day, I still feel bad. We all need to watch our waste lines.

In American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It), Jonathan Bloom looks at food waste in this country. With a journalist’s attention to research and observation, and a do-gooder’s sense of urgency, he tackles the issue from different perspectives, examining links along our national food chain, including farms, supermarkets, restaurants, and individual kitchens. He shows us how and why most of our waste gets generated, and suggests ways in which we can bring about relevant change.

Bloom differentiates between food loss and food waste. It is a necessary, albeit slim, distinction. “Certainly, some food loss is unavoidable,” he writes. “For example, there are many potential pitfalls, such as harsh weather, disease, and insects invading the farmer’s fields, that are outside of our control. And then there’s storage loss, spoilage, and mechanical malfunctions” (p.xii).

On the other hand, food is “wasted when an edible item goes unconsumed as a result of human action or inaction.” I think of my feta cheese and green beans. “There is culpability in waste. Whether it’s from an individual’s choice, a business mistake, or a government policy, most food waste stems from decisions made somewhere from farm to fork. A grower doesn’t harvest a field in response to a crop’s lowered price. Grocers throw away imperfect produce to satisfy their (and, as consumers, our) obsession with freshness. We allow groceries to rot in our refrigerators while we eat out…” (pp.xi–xiii).

In other words, there are factors beyond much of our control. But there are also plenty of factors we can control.

The author takes us to Salinas, California, for instance, where the majority of America’s lettuce is grown, packed, and shipped. Dubbed the “Salad Bowl to the World,” the agricultural town along Highway 101 is home to large-scale producers such as Taylor Farms, Fresh Express, and River Ranch Fresh Foods.

He brings us to nearby Crazy Horse Canyon Landfill, too. There, Bloom sees lettuce that is “still perfectly good—crisp, even—(thrown) away for various reasons. It may have been damaged in the warehouse, or maybe it sat for too long to withstand shipping” (p.2). It is an eye-popping fieldtrip. Until it closed in 2009, Crazy Horse handled two hundred tons of excess, rejected, or misbagged produce every day. It closed because it was full, “an outcome hastened by that ceaseless supply of green waste” (p.2).

When we throw away food in such high volume, we also throw away the natural resources that go into growing, harvesting, processing, transporting, and cooking that food. “Wasting that food squanders our supply of water, depletes nutrients in the soil, and wastes the fossil fuels that are used throughout the food chain” (p.19). The choices we make matter.
Supermarkets present a similar set of challenges. Hoping for further behind-the-scenes glimpses at waste in this country, beyond what executives told him their companies did, Bloom applied for a position in the produce department of a regional grocery chain and worked there for three months. Ten minutes into his first day on the job, he says, he was discarding decent food. Instructed by his supervisor to cull out-of-code products, Bloom picked through shelves of prewashed, precut packages of fruits and vegetables, and removed anything with an imminent expiration date.

“I collected sliced mushrooms, cut peppers, and diced onions. I pulled seven varieties of bagged salads and veggie trays of crudité with dip included…I tossed (twenty-four) pounds of packaged watermelon, pineapple, and cantaloupe chunks that first morning” (p.148). All of it was still edible. All of it went out back to the dumpster.

This is a situation with which Tristram Stuart is familiar. In Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal, the British author talks at length about purchasing dates and deadlines. He clears up some of the confusion on the other side of the Atlantic regarding labeling laws and food-safety policies. In the European Union, for example, prepacked products are required to carry either a “use-by” date or a “best-before” date, he explains. Grocery stores and manufacturers, however, often also stamp merchandise with “sell-by” or “display-until” dates. These primarily “help shop staff manage stock, and should be completely ignored by consumers” (p.60).

Like Bloom, who touches on the topic in the United States, Stuart discusses recovery efforts in the United
Kingdom as well—or, sometimes, the lack thereof. He commends Fareshare, a charity that contracts with supermarkets such as Sainsbury’s, Marks & Spencer, and Waitrose to deliver pallets of excess food—everything from apples and broccoli to boxes of cereal and loaves of bread—to community centers and homeless shelters across Great Britain. “In 2008, it redistributed (three thousand) tons of food to (twenty-five thousand) people in (five hundred) different community centers and other organizations, with a further (five thousand) tons that either ended up being diverted into animal feed, anaerobic-digestion plants, composting, or other waste-recycling routes” (p.221). That said, “the amount the supermarkets donate still represents only a tiny fraction of their overall waste; the trend is promising but movement is still far too slow” (p.222). Manufacturers like Kraft in the United States and Kellogg’s in the United Kingdom also cooperate with Feeding America and Fareshare, respectively, providing them truckloads of surplus on a regular basis. “These companies are beginning to do what all of them ought to do,” Stuart says (p.222).

Unlike Bloom, who focuses primarily on waste in this country, Stuart takes a geographically broader approach. He expands his narrative beyond North America and Europe to include Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.

He describes a brief, serendipitous visit with a traditional family, the Kawasakis, in Hakata in southwest Japan. Over dinner one night, they talked about growing food for sustenance—the father, Jingo Kawasaki, farmed the same fields his father and grandfather did before him—and the concept of mottainai. It “cannot be translated, but it indicates a condemnation of wastefulness and squandering, and implies an endorsement of thrift and frugality. The word is used for anything from darning socks to scraping the last grains of rice from the bottom of a bowl” (p.262).

Given its prosperity in recent decades, however, Japan in general has not been immune to the problem of waste. In fact, Stuart says, “the Japanese predilection for high-quality, extremely fresh food results in enormous levels of waste,” approximately nineteen million tons a year (pp.265–266). Of that, six million tons come from supermarkets and convenience stores, where lunch-box meals are easily and widely available. There are cooked noodles with vegetables, for example, trays of sushi, and meat-filled dumplings, all of which stay on the shelves for only a few days. What does not get sold gets thrown away.

Significant change can only come through concerted effort. The American government, Bloom says, should provide incentives to farmers to harvest all that they grow, leaving as little as possible in the fields. It should encourage donations and work more effectively with gleaning organizations to redistribute excess.

In an ideal world, Stuart says, we would learn to respect the food in our refrigerators, to buy what we eat and eat what we buy. “All unavoidable organic waste would go to feed either animals or the soil” (p.287). These and other actions might not completely solve the current food waste situation. But they certainly would help.