

We are what we waste, and America has a lot to answer for

BY TOM WATSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

We all occasionally find leftovers in the back of our refrigerator, turned into a hideous-looking science project. We order too much at a restaurant and it gets tossed. We host a dinner party and don't put the leftovers away quickly enough, and they spoil. Food waste is as American as that apple pie you couldn't finish.

The beauty of Jonathan Bloom's new book, "American Wasteland," is that he takes this common experience of wasting food and he expands it, showing us how the problem is much larger and more pervasive than we

realize. Sure, our wasted food at home squanders resources and costs us plenty, with an average American family of four wasting more than \$2,200 worth of food each year, according to Bloom. But the food lost at home is dwarfed by all the food wasted at supermarkets, restaurants, institutional cafeterias and on farms.

One of the first mainstream books to tackle this topic, "American Wasteland" is impressively comprehensive.

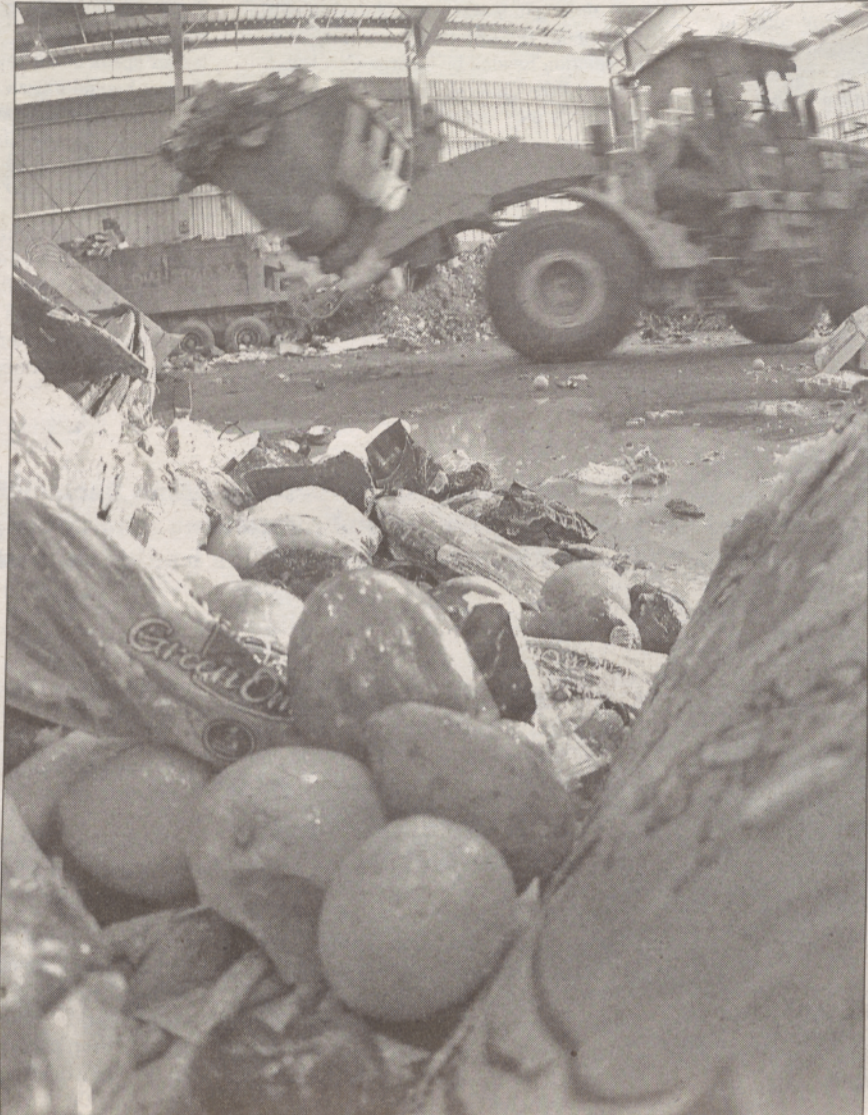


American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It) by Jonathan Bloom

Bloom, a freelance journalist based in North Carolina, has specialized in food waste since 2005, and this exhaustively researched book grew out of his influential blog Wasted Food. He has worked for a nonprofit food distribution program, at a supermarket in the produce section and even briefly at a McDonald's, going behind the scenes to observe firsthand the trail of food waste.

Bloom explains that food waste occurs "when an edible item goes unconsumed as a result of human action or inaction." Food waste, as he considers it, does not include inedible discards such as peelings and bones.

"There is culpability in waste," he says. "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." For Bloom, food waste has a moral component, and his clear-headed discussion of food ethics makes



Expired fruits from a supermarket sit on the sorting floor.

REUTERS/TIM SHAFFER

compelling reading.

Most religions strongly disapprove of food waste, he points out, illustrated by this line from the Koran: "Eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters."

The moral implications of food waste become most apparent when Bloom methodically describes the grim reality of hunger in America. "Today, more than 49 million Americans don't get enough to eat. ... A 2009 study found that half of American

youth will live in a household that uses food stamps at some point during their childhood." He contrasts this hunger, and the continuing struggle of food banks to feed the hungry, with the observation that America is still "the wealthiest nation in the history of the world."

This may all sound depressing, but Bloom maintains an upbeat, optimistic tone throughout the book as he takes us from orchards to food banks to suburban kitchens to college cafeterias. In one of the most memorable sections, Bloom describes the

Bloom describes the singular tradition of "scrounging" at Reed College in Portland. It involves a school tradition where some students save money by eating people's leftovers in the cafeteria, even food with bites out of it. Bloom journeyed to Portland to join Reed students and try it himself: "After about 10 minutes of scrounging, it feels completely normal."

singular tradition of "scrounging" at Reed College in Portland. Although this seems exceedingly gross to many of us, it involves a school tradition where some students save money by eating people's leftovers in the cafeteria, even food with bites out of it.

Bloom journeyed to Portland to join Reed students and try it himself: "After about 10 minutes of scrounging, it feels completely normal. It's like asking your family member, 'Are you gonna finish that?' - only with a family of, say, 1,500." Because of potential health concerns and especially the societal taboos about this and other forms of scrounging (including "Dumpster diving"), Bloom says he doesn't plan to continue the practice himself. But he doesn't judge people who do partake, and he found the scrounging at Reed useful in reminding us that Americans "have a very narrow definition of what is and isn't fit to eat."

All his research and obsession with the topic helped Bloom develop practical, concrete ideas for how to combat food waste in America. He wraps up the book with three main proposals: Establish a national food-recovery coordinator or "food-waste czar," create a national public-service campaign to raise awareness about food waste and ban food from landfills. Making a strong case for all three, he adds a menu of complementary suggestions as well, ending on a positive note.

This is the rare book about a social and environmental issue that hits all the policy bases while entertaining and rewarding the reader. It deserves to be read by a wide spectrum of Americans, from ordinary folks to decision makers. We can all relate to it because we all eat and we all waste food.



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