

OVERCONSUMPTION

HELLO GOOD

FOOD – GOODBYE

WASTE



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

HELLO GOOD FOOD – GOODBYE WASTE



How people learned to love food and cut waste during the pandemic, and how it revealed the need to reshape the food system for resilience and meeting human needs

From field to plate, around one third of food is wasted creating a huge impact on nature and the climate. But during the pandemic there is evidence that people relearned food skills and that led to a drop in waste and unlocked a variety of other benefits. Now new initiatives are growing to reverse the problem of food waste. Can we now grow a better, less wasteful relationship with food from these signs of progress?

Food, and the industries that grow it and get it to our plates, suffered widespread disruption during the global pandemic. As the virus spread and governments responded by sealing borders, food and agricultural supply chains were disrupted, **shipping containers of food were left to rot at borders**¹, and restaurants were forced to close, putting the livelihoods of millions into doubt overnight. Against a backdrop of the increasingly centralised logistics of the food industry, it highlighted the **neglected importance and potential of local food chains**². Consumers responded initially to the vulnerabilities revealed in the food system with panic buying in supermarkets, seen from **England**³ to **India**⁴.

But, in spite of the rush on supermarket shelves, the amount of food wasted actually declined during the pandemic. And, this decline wasn't concentrated in just a few countries: it happened around the world. In Italy, one of the nations hit hardest by the first wave of the virus, **food waste fell despite vast increases in the purchase of foods**⁵. As well as being more careful, some other attitudes were shifting too. Germany saw sharp falls in food waste and, at the height of the pandemic, **91% of Germans were checking food after its sell-by date and not automatically throwing it away** compared



to **only 76% in 2016**⁶. In the UK, where **59% purchased more food than usual**⁷, food waste also dropped significantly. In November 2020, food waste in the UK was **22% lower than the previous year**⁸. These trends show promise, but the challenge will be how to lock them into daily lives as memories of the lockdowns fade.

“Food waste isn't just a massive problem, it's also a vital part of the solution. Preventing food waste is considered one of the single most effective ways to counter the climate crisis. Preventive measures are relatively fast to implement and as food actively engages citizens up to three times a day, it can build actionable awareness to start producing, selling, buying and eating food in healthier and more sustainable ways, including a serious reduction of meat.”

David Kat, Vice President Business Development at Wasteless,

an EIT Food RisingFoodStar



Before the pandemic, food waste was at unacceptably high levels, especially considering that **11% of humanity suffers from undernourishment**⁹. Roughly one third of all the food produced in a year is wasted. This is approximately **1.3 billion tonnes**¹⁰ of food and costs the global economy **\$2.6 trillion every year**¹¹. The amount of food we waste every year is enough to feed the **815 million hungry people around the globe four times over**¹².

Alongside these figures is the environmental imperative for cutting food waste. **Food waste is a climate emergency issue**¹³. Rotting food in landfill accounts for around **8% of global greenhouse gas emissions**¹⁴, which is only slightly less than the amount of emissions created by road transport¹⁵. In just the US, the **production of food that gets wasted generates the equivalent of 32.6 million cars**¹⁶ worth of greenhouse gas emissions. If food waste was included in a list of countries ranked according to their greenhouse emissions, **food waste would come in the third spot, right after the USA and China, due to the natural resources expended in producing, processing, transporting, storing and cooking food around the world**¹⁷.

Emissions, however, are only one part of the picture. **With agriculture using up roughly 70% of the world's fresh water**¹⁸, food waste represents an enormous misuse of both freshwater and groundwater. Just to produce food that is never eaten, the global food industry wastes a volume of water that is approximately **three times the amount of water contained in Lake Geneva**¹⁹. For every kilogram of beef wasted, **15,500 litres of water are wasted too**²⁰. There's the issue of land-use too: **one-third of the world's total agricultural land is used to grow food that will never be eaten**²¹, needlessly creating monocultures and clearing wild lands that are vital for maintaining biodiversity.

It will be possible to feed the global population if it nears 10 billion by the middle of the century, but waste and inequality will make it far more difficult. They also make it harder to find ways to do so without worsening the climate crisis. But, as the pandemic brought into focus, there are models, methods and initiatives being rolled out and experimented with to help cut food waste and enjoy nourishing diets without costing the earth.

Milan's Food Waste Hub programme²², which was one of the first winners of the **Earthshot Prize**²³, is case in point. Through this programme, dedicated food waste hubs collect unwanted food from supermarkets and restaurants and redistribute it to citizens in need. In the middle of the pandemic, in 2021, **Milan had three food waste hubs that recovered 130 tonnes of food per year, equivalent to 260,000 meals**²⁴.

A diversity of community kitchens and food and cooking initiatives popped-up to help those suffering from both the economic impacts of the global pandemic and the isolation that many felt during the lockdowns. The **Wivey Food Project**²⁵, launched by a chef under local charity Wivey Cares, created a space where the community could come together to cook and serve nutritious food, cooked from surplus food collected by FareShare and local growers. Running on a 'pay as you feel' basis, Wivey Food Project managed to feed hundreds of people in the south west of England with over 30,000 meals, while cutting food waste and connecting communities through food.



“We are all about cutting waste – we use in-date foods that would otherwise go to landfill. And by getting together to make and deliver high quality, tasty dishes, we are also joining up people from across our community. I thought we would lose all the volunteers once the pandemic ended, but everyone who can has stayed. The social aspect is also important – people have made new friends and really look forward to the weekly ‘chop and chat’”.

Rosie Boylan, Founding Member, Wivey Food Project

The power of food to transform lives and bring us joy was better appreciated as lockdowns forced many to stay at home with more free time. Greater knowledge about food and its preparation is key to cutting waste. As more people cooked at home rather than eating out, preparing fresh produce and baking more, there was a rapid reskilling in the kitchen. According to YouGov, **91% of British people**²⁶ want to cook as much or more than they did during the 2021 lockdowns, with **71% of people saying that they enjoyed home cooking during the pandemic**²⁷. Bain & Co. estimate that **60% of meals were cooked at home before the pandemic, but this has now increased to 72%**²⁸. This increasing trend in home cooking was visible **across Europe, with France, Italy, Sweden and Germany**²⁹ all reporting higher rates of home cooked meals. In the same vein, **mealtimes became more of an occasion**³⁰, bringing families and friends together against a backdrop of uncertainty and suffering.



Leveraging the positive attitudes and associations that many hold towards food could help stimulate sustainable and rapid transitions across the food and agricultural sectors. Polling in the UK shows that **64% of people**³¹ regard food as a source of comfort, while **62%**³² note its foundational role in family time. Similar polling suggests that when given more free time, people made healthier food choices, with **82% of those who cooked more due to free time expecting these habits to continue long after the world emerged from the pandemic**³³.

Cutting food waste is ultimately about developing our appreciation of food – what we eat, where it comes from, and how we prepare it. The pandemic offered an opportunity to think differently about food, the habits we have around it, and how food can provide sustenance and joy. From the global **army of new bakers**³⁴ to **the growing ranks of pandemic vegans**³⁵, COVID-19 reminded us of the importance of food and its transformative potential. This rejuvenated appreciation, and the proliferation of new and exciting models to provide people with the food they need while cutting waste, is here to stay and could help rewire the global food system.



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