



## As food prices climb, industry ponder trash

By CHRISTOPHER LEONARD – 4 days ago

Experts in the food industry are thinking a lot about trash these days.

Food waste has been a chronic problem for restaurants and grocery stores — with millions of tons being lost along the way as crops are hauled hundreds of miles, stored for weeks in refrigerators and prepared on hectic restaurant assembly lines. But the historically high price of commodities is making it an even bigger drag on the bottom line.

Restaurants, colleges, hospitals and other institutions are compensating for the rising costs of waste in novel ways. Some are tracking their trash with software systems, making food in smaller batches or trying to compost and cut down on trash-hauling costs.

"We have all come to work with this big elephant in the middle of the kitchen, and the elephant is this 'It's okay to waste' belief system," said Andrew Shackman, president of LeanPath Inc., a company that helps restaurants cut back food waste.

"The interest level (in cutting food waste) has just skyrocketed in the last six to nine months," he said.

Roughly 30 percent of food in the U.S. goes to waste, costing some \$48 billion annually, according to a Stockholm Water Institute study released this summer. A 2004 University of Arizona study put the total higher, estimating that 40 percent to 50 percent of U.S. food is wasted.

Wholesale food costs have risen more than 8 percent this year alone, the biggest jump in decades, according to the National Restaurant Association. That comes after a 7.6 percent increase in 2007.

While that makes it more expensive to toss food out, Shackman said there's no easy answer for cutting back on waste because each kitchen is run so differently. That means institutions are devising their own solutions.

Freshman students at Virginia Tech were surprised this year when they entered two of the campus's biggest dining halls, only to find there weren't cafeteria trays. The school got rid of the trays this summer to cut down on leftovers going into the trash.

"You have to go back and get your silverware and your drink, but it's not that different," said freshman Caitlin Mewborn. "It's not a big hassle. You take less food and you don't eat more than you should."

Freshman Travis Carter said no one gripes about the extra trips to the buffet line, even though most were used to having trays in high school.

"It's easier. It's just less to fool with," Carter said.

Getting rid of trays has cut food waste by 38 percent at the cafeterias, said Denny Cochrane, manager of Virginia Tech's sustainability program. Before the program began, students often grabbed whatever looked good at the buffet, only to find at the table that their eyes were bigger than their stomachs, he said.

That same phenomenon often happens at Oregon's Portland International Airport. Busy travelers often discard half-eaten meals into trash cans, adding dozens of tons of waste that the airport must pay the city to haul away.

Now the airport is ramping up a three-year-old program to install food-only trash cans. The food waste is collected in biodegradable bags and given to the city to use as compost, said Stan Jones, aviation environmental compliance manager at the airport.

The program has had some stumbles.

The airport originally wanted travelers to compost napkins and other biodegradable goods. But confused customers put too much trash in along with the compostable material, so now the bins have signs prohibiting anything but food being tossed inside.

Besides being environmentally friendly, the changes may eventually save the airport money. It costs about \$82 to have one ton of trash hauled from the airport to the city landfill. But food waste only costs about \$48 a ton to haul away. Last year, the airport was able to divert 165 tons of food out of the trash stream, which would equal a savings of roughly \$5,600 in hauling fees alone. That's an increase from the year before, when about 157 tons were composted.

But composting remains a costly proposition, Jones said. That's because the biodegradable bags "cost a fortune." Ultimately, it's more expensive to compost the food than throw it away. But the airport is continuing the program with an eye on the future.

"When you're doing this cutting edge, ahead of everyone else, it's a laboratory," Jones said. He is trying to persuade airport restaurants to use more biodegradable plates and silverware to expand the program further.

Cutting back on the waste can require spending money on software and in training employees how to use it.

LeanPath, based in Portland, Ore., sells a software system to track food being tossed out. More than 75 institutions including hospitals, restaurants and hotels use the system, which costs roughly \$600 a month, to track waste in high-volume kitchens.

Employees put food waste on a scale and use a touch-screen computer to record what type of food it is. The system calculates the cost, and tracks what is being pitched.

The big culprits? Soup and breakfast items, according to Shackman.

Soup is often wasted because it's made in big batches and a change in the weather can determine whether a pot of chili is eaten or sits untouched. Morning goodies like doughnuts or waffles often get pitched because they can't be reused for other meals in the day, he said.

Steve Peterson, head chef at the MGM Grand hotel in Las Vegas, said he was surprised when he installed the LeanPath system and saw the value of food that was going out the back door. Much of the waste came from sauces, dressings and trimmings that weren't eaten.

"The cost of ingredients is higher, so you need to yield more with what you spend," Peterson said.

To cut costs, Peterson decided to reduce serving sizes. He said customers weren't bothered by the switch, which has helped him trim food waste by between 15 to 20 percent over 18 months.

"The reality is the consumer is more value and cost conscious, so they're not necessarily looking for more food. They're looking for food at a better value."

One of the biggest benefits of the program, Shackman said, is simply showing restaurant owners and chefs how much food gets thrown away.

"It's death by a thousand cuts," he said.

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