

Hong Kong's food waste levels are hard to stomach when a billion people go hungry on the planet

Does food have an important place in Hong Kong society? October 16 is World Food Day, celebrating the founding of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. Although the theme this year focuses on climate change, the core concept still revolves around the importance of food.

When we are happy, we eat. When we are sad, we also eat. To some, eating is a form of entertainment. How many of us follow TV series, channels or blogs dedicated to showing off “food porn” and interesting dishes? There is certainly quite a big foodie scene in Hong Kong.

The variety of our dishes and how they are prepared reflect the identity and history of our cultures. What, then, does it say about today's society when the world wastes 1.3 billion tonnes, or

US\$1 trillion worth, of food every year? Although we produce enough to feed a population of 10 billion, we still have almost a billion who go hungry.

In Hong Kong, almost half of low-income families are food insecure, that is, they lack reliable access to sufficient affordable, nutritious food; and yet we throw out over 3,600 tonnes of food waste every day. Too often, we only consider what goes on our plates, not what goes into the bin. It is ironic that we love food so much that we also throw away so much.

Take social and business functions, for example. Whether it is for celebrations, gatherings or networking, food plays a central role in our activities. Sometimes it is part of the event, at other times just an excuse to meet up. Regardless, we are taught that, as good hosts, we should always order more than we can finish. This holds true at home as well. We often buy and prepare too much to make sure our family is well fed. In both cases, much of what is served usually ends up unfinished and in the trash – wasting money, love and food.

Our food waste goes beyond what is visible. In supermarkets, we rarely see russet apples, bent cucumbers or forked carrots. They are culled before even leaving the farm gate. The UN Environmental Programme estimates that farms discard between 20 and 40 per cent of produce because they don't meet the high cosmetic standards set by retailers. Although such crops can be used as animal feed or compost, this still represents a loss of income, time and resources to farms.

In a sense, we are to blame. We are so used to seeing idealised fruits and vegetables that we automatically equate blemishes to being bad – even if these flaws do not affect the taste in any noticeable way.

As individuals, we should always plan our meals and prepare a shopping list. Although this sounds very simple, having a plan stops us from making frivolous food purchases that will not be eaten.

We should also only order what we can finish. Not only would we avoid waste, those who always have to clean up the leftovers would be really thankful.

Businesses should remember that the purpose of a function isn't to eat, but to network. They need to avoid falling into the trap of “an empty plate equals a bad host”, work with the caterer to avoid serving too much, and collaborate with food redistribution organisations to ensure good food isn't wasted.

To many of us, food is more than just sustenance. It is also an experience to be enjoyed and shared. But how can we say we love food if we don't even appreciate how it is produced?

Some of my generation – let alone others – are so thoroughly disconnected from our food system that they think all cows are black and white. Although there are more young people looking into farming instead of banking, our government must do more – through education and outreach – to reconnect both our younger and older generations with where our food comes from. This way, we can truly treasure food.

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