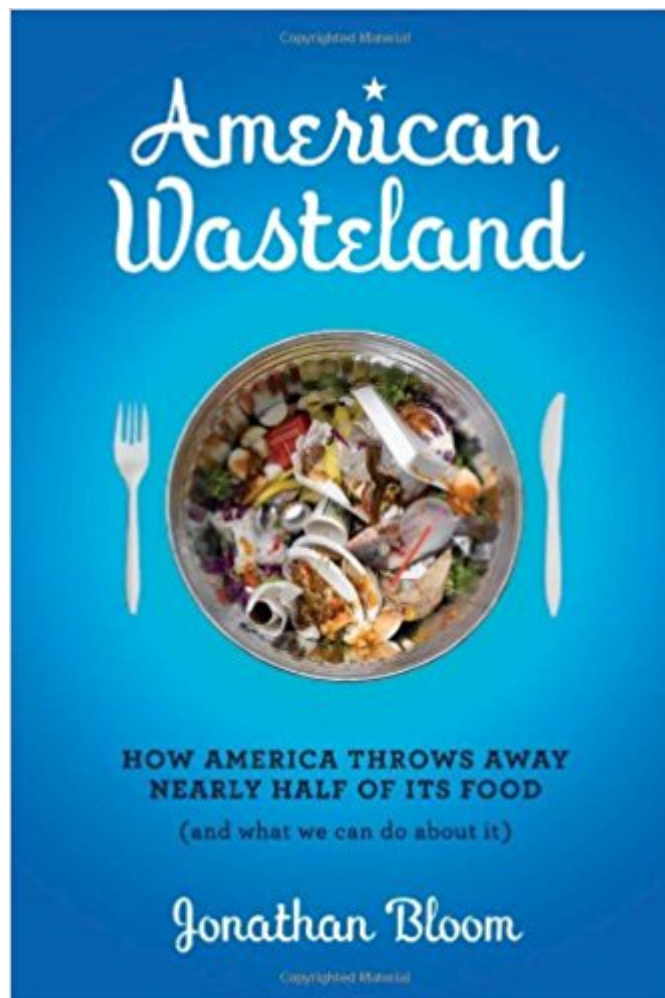




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# American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half Of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)



## Synopsis

What Tom Vanderbilt did for traffic and Brian Wansink did for mindless eating, Jonathan Bloom does for food waste. The topic couldn't be timelier: As more people are going hungry while simultaneously more people are morbidly obese, *American Wasteland* sheds light on the history, culture, and mindset of waste while exploring the parallel eco-friendly and sustainable-food movements. As the era of unprecedented prosperity comes to an end, it's time to reexamine our culture of excess. Working at both a local grocery store and a major fast food chain and volunteering with a food recovery group, Bloom also interviews experts—from Brian Wansink to Alice Waters to Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen—and digs up not only why and how we waste, but, more importantly, what we can do to change our ways.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Since the Great Depression and the world wars, the American attitude toward food has gone from a "use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without" patriotic and parsimonious duty to an orgy of "grab-and-go" where food's fetish and convenience qualities are valued above sustainability or nutrition. Journalist Bloom follows the trajectory of America's food from gathering to garbage bin in this compelling and finely reported study, examining why roughly half of our harvest ends up in landfills or rots in the field. He accounts for every source of food waste, from how it is picked, purchased, and tossed in fear of being past inscrutable "best by" dates. Bloom's most interesting point is psychological: we have trained ourselves to regard food as a symbol of American plenty that

should be available at all seasons and times, and in dizzying quantities. "Current rates of waste and population growth can't coexist much longer," he warns and makes smart suggestions on becoming individually and collectively more food conscious "to keep our Earth and its inhabitants physically and morally healthy." (Nov.) (c) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In one of the twenty-first century's most appalling ironies, developed nations throw away massive amounts of food while people in remote lands starve. Journalist Bloom documents some specifics about the nature of wasted food in the twenty-first century and calls into question both the economic efficiency and the morality of such profligacy. He finds food crops lying rotting in fields owing to intentional social policy, economic vagaries, and sheer ignorance. In restaurants, portion sizes have ballooned under the mantras "Bigger is better" and "Would you like to supersize that?" And many Americans allow food to decay on refrigerator shelves out of carelessness, lack of meal planning, and sheer ignorance. Bloom has found some hopeful signs that this trend may be waning. Many grocery stores and restaurants dispose of surplus edibles through food pantries and similar charitable outlets. Some socially conscious farmers are trying to revive the ancient practice of allowing the poor to glean. --Mark Knoblauch

As someone who manages my family's food inventory and stash of leftovers with an ardent zeal usually reserved for much more glamorous pursuits, I am so glad that Jonathan Bloom wrote this book! This book is a must-read if you want to understand the sources and effects of food waste--and what you can do to reduce food waste in your life and community. Bloom extensively researched every aspect of food waste, from California lettuce fields to school lunches to the back rooms and dumpsters of supermarkets. He discusses existing solutions such as higher rates of composting and increased opportunities for gleaning (harvesting left-behind produce) from farms. His combination of journalistic research and first-hand experiences makes for convincing arguments. His sense of humor helps to make a potentially heavy and depressing topic accessible and readable. If you're trying to reduce food waste in your own home, you'll find plenty of practical tips and advice throughout the book but especially in Chapter 8, Home Is Where the Waste Is. My family is committed to keeping our own food waste to a minimum--and I think we actually succeed--but I still found so much useful information in this book, particularly on what I can do beyond my own kitchen. Bloom's exploration of the broader social and environmental effects of food waste were especially enlightening and add an important dimension to something you might already be doing simply for

budget reasons. While controlling your food budget can be an important reason for avoiding food waste and a sufficient motivation in itself, you'll find the wider ethical and environmental reasons both compelling and inspiring. I wish everyone would read this book so that we can see a meaningful reduction in food waste. It's a big problem that is actually pretty easy to address--a rare combination and a great opportunity to make a difference!

Bloom addresses an issue of incredible importance that most Americans rarely consider - food waste - and shows how we can impact this problem with relative ease. He covers key aspects of the food waste problem, including our culture of abundance, our obsession with perfect produce, and the ease of discarding food as trash - all of which lead to what he refers to as the "coexistence of hunger and food waste" - leading the U.S. to waste \$160 billion in food annually while roughly 50 million Americans are food insecure. He also notes the environmental problems associated with food waste - greenhouse gas emissions from decaying food, consumption of limited landfill space, negative impact on groundwater, and fossil fuel consumption in the transport of food waste. Bloom reveals a dangerous cycle regarding food: We're wasting resources by growing too much, and in the process depleting our soils, using too much fertilizer with negative environmental effects, and depleting our water supplies while we then use additional resources to haul the excess to landfills where it causes further harm to the environment while millions remain hungry. It's a cycle that we need to break - and to do so we need a change of mindset. Bloom notes that we should think of food waste as an opportunity - and we should take action to harness food waste to feed the hungry while also improving the environment and the economy. He points out that we "devalue" food by providing large quantities of cheap, unhealthy food to our kids - thereby reinforcing the ease of discarding food and perpetuating the cycle noted above. He also shows that with our culture of excessive choice, and with supermarkets dedicated to having fully stocked produce departments at all hours - the result is excessive waste - and this problem is exacerbated by our demand for perfection and uniformity in our produce. It is therefore not surprising to learn that just ten minutes into his first day of work at a supermarket he was tasked with throwing away food. The key message for readers: We need to step back and consider how we can create so much waste when tens of millions of Americans, and hundreds of millions around the globe, are hungry. Bloom suggests a new normal in which supermarkets aren't stocked as fully a few minutes before closing time while offering some additional sound advice: "Stop baking so much stuff." He closes with a list of recommendations on what he would do in an ideal world to reduce food waste, such as establishing a national food-recovery coordinator, creating a national public service campaign, and banning food waste

from landfills (which I agree would have a prompt and significant impact on reducing food waste). Bloom's book is extremely readable, and it makes the problem of food waste personal. It is a "must read" for those looking to gain knowledge of the tremendous problem of global food waste. It will inspire readers not only to think differently about food waste, but to act, and in so doing hopefully spur others to do the same to break the cycle of excessive waste which harms the environment while hindering our ability to help the needy. In short, Bloom provides insight into the need for culture change regarding the way we think about food and how much we waste - and we should embrace that change to help the needy, the environment, and ourselves.

Want to know more about where all your food waste is going and why you waste so much? Jonathan Bloom explains the where's, how's, and why's of food waste in America. Although somewhat repetitive throughout the book, Bloom does a thorough job of uncovering why Americans are wasting food, how much we are wasting, and why we should stop wasting all this food. I heard about Bloom from a documentary called "Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story" of which Bloom directed. There are a lot of similarities in the documentary and the book. The documentary does a great job of demonstrating the levels of waste in the United States (and other first world countries). However, the book goes into much more detail about what you can do as an average American citizen to decrease your levels of food waste and to help your community. At the end of reading this book, your appreciation for food will increase and you will start to see food for what it is: a precious commodity that cannot and should not be wasted when there are plenty of hungry people in need of food (even right in your own community).

I have been trying to organize a non-profit corporation for the re-distribution of unused food in the St. Louis area. I intend to use this corporation as a vehicle to create an "after school" club for high school students. The idea is to teach them to learn to think through and create a business plan, learn to determine what resources they need to run such a company, source the necessary network of people and materials, and then launch the company, with a keen eye on steering it once it has left port. This book provides a very organized justification for this project, and it nicely referenced. It will be a required "read" for any student who wishes to participate in this project. It is refreshing to learn that there are like-minded people in the world, and the resources found in this wonderful book will be helpful to anyone interested in moving the ball forward. Thank you, Mr. Bloom.

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