

by Paul van der Werf

"The key reasons given for disposing avoidable food include over-purchasing resulting in spoilage and overcooking and over-serving."



Overcoming Indigestion

Food for thought from our organics columnist, who tracks Metro Vancouver's version of the "Love Food Hate Waste" program, and a new food exhibit at southwestern Ontario's Museum London

Food is political. Food is a human right. People are full. People are hungry. Food is a fight. One of Museum London's latest exhibits is thematically concerned with food, highlighting its history in London, as well as posing the serious questions artists ask.

London, Ont. artist Ron Benner is a food politician, although I suspect he would hate that term. Bespectacled, hair slightly askew and with a little orange NDP button on his suede vest, he cuts a professor-meets-craftsman figure. An artist for more than 40 years, he draws from a deep well of activism to make his point. His 1990s installation piece "In Digestion" is a feature at these exhibits until the end of January 2016. It follows the journey of two boxes of bell peppers to London from the fields of Mexico. Much of the inspiration and ideas for this piece were collected in Mexico, where he has visited many times, looking at food production and following it from field to the point of ingestion.

As Museum London's literature puts it, In Digestion "[...] began with a series of simple questions about the food we consume: who grows it, where is it grown, how is it processed and shipped?"

The installation represents the inside of a transport trailer with brightly-coloured produce boxes at its entrance, the shredded tire ephemera of long-haul transportation and 200 photographs "that contrast contemporary transportation systems with the ancient trade routes of the Americas." Inside the trailer, our artist Benner highlights how little we know about the food we eat with such zest and skill, identifying our disconnection, without directly saying so.

Urbanization and increased leisure time to entertain ourselves is what has created this disconnection from the production of food. We watch *Big Bang Theory* reruns in place of our former hunter-gatherer lives, trying to coax the land to give us enough food to last us through winter. This needs to be bridged. Waste diversion only provides a bandage for what should not have been wasted in the first place. Even mathematically understanding the nature of food waste does not provide us with the answers as to why so much of it is wasted, while at the same time so many seem not to have adequate access to it. There is, of course, no shortage of food, just inadequate distribution systems, which could fulfill this human right. And this is the underpinning of much greater social issues.

There are efforts afoot

Metro Vancouver launched its version of the "Love Food Hate Waste" program in May 2015 with a goal to reduce avoidable food and liquid waste by 10 per cent by 2018. They banned food waste from their landfills at the start of 2015. Prior to its program launch, they collected background data, a summary of which will be included in the soon-to-be-released slick education piece "*Broccoli Lovers Hate Waste*".

For one week, in November 2014, Vancouver tracked the food waste

habits (how much and where did it go) of 500 households. This included having these households maintain a diary of food waste generation, as well as surveying them. When extrapolated, this and other research showed that of the 190,000 tonnes per year of food waste generated, 100,000 tonnes per year of this waste was avoidable (i.e. could have been eaten). This wasted food is costing Metro Vancouver households about \$700/year, the study found. About 40 per cent of this food waste consists of vegetables and leftovers. The key reasons given for disposing avoidable food include over-purchasing (resulting in spoilage), overcooking, and over-serving. Other reasons include children not finishing meals or thinking food waste reduction unnecessary because there are waste diversion opportunities.

"Many people appear to be unaware of the amount of food waste they generate and that is an important first plank of action. You can't change behavior if you are not self-aware.

The better news is that overall about 55% of this food is diverted through the green bin, backyard composting or animals feed. That still means, however, that every week households throw out \$7.50 of food. About 30%, or another \$4 per week goes to the waste stream with about 15% or another \$2 per week literally down the drain.

An important and interesting contradiction is that, on the one hand, people generate food waste because they perceive food and drink costs as minimal, while on the other hand, many people indicate that the high price of food means they did not buy the food they actually wanted.



Love Food Hate Waste campaigns, such as this UK-based program, are popping up all over the world
Graphic courtesy of Somerset Waste Partnership, U.K.



The "In Digestion" exhibit runs Sept. 12, 2015 to Jan. 31, 2016, Interior Gallery.
 Photo Courtesy of Museum London.

Love Food Hate Waste, in addition to creating accessible awareness about the problem, tries to establish a value proposition that reducing food waste will leave you with money to buy higher quality ingredients. This feeds directly into the quality over quantity adage.

While I think this program is fantastic, I am left with the lingering notion that we, as a society, are still just scratching at the symptoms of the food waste problem, not bothering to try and figure out the overarching root cause in terms of overall food distribution. What if we thought about Metro Vancouver's 100,000 tonnes/year of food waste? If we assume that every meal consists of a hypothetical 500 grams of food, this means that this food waste consists of more than 200 million meals annually. Put another way, that is more than 500,000 meals per day and could feed over 150,000 people. Of course, there is no linear relationship between avoiding food waste at home and feeding someone that is hungry, but, there is a compelling argument that there is

**FOOD POLITICIAN,
 RON BENNER**



Born in London, Ont., in 1949, Ron Benner has been working as an artist since 1971, after having briefly studied agricultural engineering at the University of Guelph from 1969 to 1970.

Since the early 1970s the study of indigenous cultures and frequent travel in Central and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia have inspired his work.

Photo Courtesy of Museum London.

enough food to feed everyone. Somehow there must be a way — as part of the value proposition to reduce food waste — that we work to match up people with food. This is not a romantic or nostalgic notion, but an area of real potential progress. I think that efforts to reduce food waste have a very real opportunity to dig a bit deeper and connect both sides of this loop: To move beyond the symptoms and cure the disease. ♻️

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