Jonathan Bloom, journalist and author of ‘American Wasteland’

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While researching one of our 2012 trends, Food as the New Eco-Issue—the idea that the environmental impact of our food choices will become a more prominent concern—we interviewed Jonathan Bloom, a journalist and author (American Wasteland) who is an advocate for curbing food waste. He describes himself as an “accomplished eater and mediocre composter” who covers both serious and quirky topics related to food and the environment. Bloom, who lives in Durham, N.C., also writes a blog, Wasted Food. He talked with us about how to engage consumers and brands on the issue of food waste and why it will become a bigger concern (we agree with him, and put food-waste awareness on our list of things to watch in 2012). For more on trends in food, also see our new report, “What’s Cooking?”

How did you become interested in the topic of food waste?

I grew up interested in food as something that united our family. We would always have dinner together each night. I viewed food as something to be enjoyed, but I was also taught to value that food. We always saved our leftovers and took leftovers home from restaurants. Later on I had a volunteer experience at DC Central Kitchen, which is a food recovery group in our nation’s capital. “Food recovery” is the practice of going out to restaurants, supermarkets, caterers, etc., and rescuing edible but unsellable food and then getting it to people who need it.

I was stunned by the quantity and quality of rescued food I saw. The epiphany I had that day was, ‘Well, what happens in cities and towns that don’t have that kind of food recovery operation? And how much food is slipping between the cracks.’ That’s the experience that propelled me to research this issue further.

What’s the ultimate goal you’re trying to achieve through your research and writing on food waste?

My goal is to have people think of food as the precious resource it is and to value it instead of squandering it freely, as most of us do today. We’ve reached a point where Americans are pretty good at conserving some of our natural resources. Unfortunately, we’re not quite there yet with food. I’m hoping to raise awareness for food waste as an issue and to get people to think about the consequences of their cavalier approach to food.

How would you rank consumer awareness of the relationship between the environment and our food choices?

There isn’t a great awareness. I’d say there’s a much more developed awareness of how food impacts our health and how organic food might be better for us to consume than conventional. But there aren’t too many people thinking about the impact on the soil and the pesticides that end up going into the water runoff, ending up in streams, and those kinds of impacts. And certainly an even lower percentage of
Americans are aware of the consequences of squandering so much food—all the natural resources that go into growing that food that we then render wasted by throwing out so much.

*Do you think people will start to become more aware of this issue in the next three to five years?*

I think it will change. Awareness is on the rise, and it will only be helped by increased food prices. So as our foods become more expensive, we will value them more, and we will waste less. Our approach to food should change for that reason alone, if not for environmental reasons as well.

*How can consumers be educated about the impact of wasted food?*

That’s the really important thing I’m trying to figure out now. There is a green fatigue that sets in to a certain extent, where we’re asking consumers to consider so many issues. People are reaching a point where it’s almost paralyzing. The issue of waste is a pretty simple one in that we’re simply buying too much food and stuffing our refrigerators to the point where we couldn’t possibly use all that food.

In terms of behavior change, which I realize is a difficult task, what I’m hoping to do is just to get people to become smarter shoppers. There are a number of ways that could happen. If people like shopping, maybe it means going to the store more often and buying less each time. If you’re someone who lives far away from the store or doesn’t really like to shop, then you have to plan out meals, make a detailed shopping list and try to stick to that list in the store.

So, however shoppers do it, the main goal is to just buy less food. The average house throws out or doesn’t use about 25% of what they bring home. The simple bit of advice I’d have is to try to buy about a quarter less food.

*To play devil’s advocate, people aren’t necessarily going to do that. Do you think governments or corporations have a responsibility to educate people?*

I’d love to see that kind of campaign. There are changes we as individuals can make at the same time businesses can change some of their practices, and there’s certainly a place for policy changes and some messaging coming from the government, at the policymaking level.

We have a history of pretty successful public service campaigns that get people to think about issues and change their behaviors. Right now very few Americans realize there’s an environmental impact to throwing food away. There’s this common misconception that when we throw away organic items, they meet a benign end in the landfill. And that’s just not true. When food decomposes without air, it produces methane—a harmful greenhouse gas. We definitely need to increase awareness for the environmental impact of our waste.

*Have you seen examples of businesses or corporations that are doing a good job reducing food waste and have taken up this cause?*

There are plenty of examples in Europe, and the U.K. in particular, where supermarkets have made it part of their mission to reduce waste, and it falls under the corporate social responsibility category. It’s a way to court goodwill among shoppers. There’s been much more of an emphasis on reducing waste, partly
due to government involvement and sponsoring of research, and then those somewhat shocking research findings being echoed in the media.

In the U.S., we’re not quite there yet in terms of government involvement, media attention or even new research. The one example I would point to is, somewhat surprisingly, Walmart, which has made an effort to reduce waste of all sorts, including food waste. They’ve created a store-by-store approach to try and reduce the waste created and to donate, in many cases, the excess food they have. They also compost their food waste instead of throwing it into the landfill.

You know the U.K. recently announced plans to eliminate the sell by date on packaged goods?

I’d say that with the elimination of the sell-by date, it can’t hurt. There’s a real confusion among consumers on what the different terms mean. So eliminating one, the sell-by date, will help us not throw out food that’s perfectly edible just because of an often arbitrary date label. And the sell-by date is definitely the right term to eliminate, because it’s aimed at the retailer to let them know how long to display an item, but it has nothing to do with whether or not that item’s good.

I was speaking to an executive for a major food producer in the U.S., and they said their sell-by date was roughly nine months before the goods would be bad. It makes you wonder why there’s any need for that kind of control. Certainly stores need to know how long they can display something. So that’s where “closed dating,” which is the term for when consumers can’t really see it or it’s coded in a way, makes a lot more sense than having sell-by dating.

Is part of the issue the fact that we’re so disconnected from the entire process of creating food in this country and other developed countries?

Bingo. That’s exactly it. It’s as if we have lost some of those food ways, and we’re not quite sure even when things are good or not because, like you said, we’re so disconnected from our food—where it comes from and how it’s prepared. We’ve fallen into relying on the expiration dates that are so ubiquitous, and so we end up tossing out so much more food than we need to. There’s this attitude of “When in doubt, throw it out.” Because people are not entirely sure whether they can scrape the mold off the top of the pasta sauce jar and use the rest, they’re going to throw it out. But a little bit of common sense or inherited wisdom would eliminate that problem.

How would you define sustainability in terms of food waste?

Sustainability implies we can continue farming and growing food as we do. The current situation is not sustainable, because we’re using natural resources at a much faster rate than we’re replenishing them. And that applies to oil, to water and even to our soil, where we are really depleting the soil of its nutrients and not giving it time to regenerate. So that’s where the idea of producing twice the amount of food we need, which comes at a pretty heavy cost, in terms of how we grow things today. And then on a human scale, given how much hunger exists, the idea of wasting so much isn’t exactly sustainable either.

Do you think consumers will start to demand more transparency as far as how food is handled in its lifecycle?
I’m a little cynical on this point. I think consumers are primarily driven by cost. The nice thing here is that these ideas can go in hand in hand, where less waste can mean lower prices. With current practices, the cost of all that wasted food is built into the price. So if, say, one supermarket chain decided to trim waste by 25%, there should be real savings there to pass along to the consumer. If it’s in the same ballpark pricewise, then shoppers will want to do the green and socially conscious thing as well.

We could see consumers gravitate toward stores that make an effort to cut waste or to donate excess edibles. But the main grabber is going to be the price.

_Do you think it’s going to be the retailers, the restaurants or the manufacturers that make the most impact as far as driving awareness around waste?_

It is the retail level where there is the most room for improvement and space to receive positive publicity for doing so. That’s the model we’ve seen in the U.K., where supermarket chains have essentially been trying to one-up each other by how much they can push waste reduction. It’s reached the point where you’ll have some stores handing out recipe cards to try and get people thinking about how they can use old bananas or products that might not be perfect.

In the U.S., by contrast, we have stores that don’t even want to have a discount produce rack because they don’t want shoppers to get the image that their store has anything but the utmost fresh food available. The other part of that, too, is that supermarkets have conducted studies and found that opinions of the store are based largely upon the produce department, so there’s a real emphasis on freshness there, and that leads to the culling of the displays where an apple with a slight bruise or blemish is pulled off the shelf immediately. You’d like to see the more progressive stores finding another use for that apple, in their prepared foods section or the deli. The truth is, the majority of stores don’t have that practice built into how they do things.

_Do you think austerity will eventually trickle into the supermarket?_

Thrift is becoming increasingly popular. It remains to be seen whether that’ll catch on in the food realm. A nice bellwether for that would be the Meatless Monday campaign. If we can get people to give up meat one day a week, that bodes well for the idea of people being more efficient with their food, just that slight change of behavior, it could lead to so much good.

The rising cost of foods will get people to really value that idea of not throwing away so much. I do see the topic as fitting in with the general thrifty, crafty movement. Our wasting of food fits in with our overall behavior, where we live in a throwaway society. Things aren’t made as well, they don’t last as long, we don’t repair things—we just discard them and buy new ones. And it’s partly because we’re incentivized to do it with price, where it’ll cost the same amount to fix something as it would to buy a new one. But there’s the lost knowledge: Just as we don’t really know how to transition leftover chicken into a casserole, for example, we don’t know as many people who know how to fix televisions or radios.

I think the farther away we get from World War II, where there was rationing, or the Depression, and the fewer people who have grandparents telling them what it was like to see so much of society unemployed and standing in line for food, that kind of thing, the easier it is to throw out food. Food is just so much cheaper these days, too. It’s an artificial cheapness—we’re mortgaging the future of our environment and
our health, just for today’s food to be less expensive.

Arguably your campaign is starting to get the conversation going on this issue.

It’s a matter of getting the ball rolling and then getting out of the way. Because what homemaker wouldn’t want to increase her savings by 25 percent by not throwing away so much food? It seems like enlightened self-interest to try to reduce your household food waste. I guess the flip side of that coin is you’re asking people to change their behavior even a tiny bit, and that can be difficult, but I’m optimistic that we can make tackling food waste the next big green thing. You’re not asking consumers to go to their store and ask where this meat came from and whether growth hormones were used. It’s very firmly in shoppers’ hands to reduce their waste or to cook a nonmeat meal on a Monday.

From my perspective, there are three main factors when you look at food waste. There’s the environmental, ethical and economic impact. So, for the homemaker to be able to boost their home budget, to do the right thing ethically and to not cause environmental ills, I think that’s a pretty convincing argument.

Lastly, what’s on your personal “things to watch” list in the area of food waste?

I’m waiting to see what the Environmental Protection Agency is going to do. They’re increasingly paying attention to food waste, and I think they should have a real role in raising awareness of the environmental impacts of our food waste. I’m also hoping the U.S. Department of Agriculture returns to the topic. They haven’t done a full food-chain-wide study of how much food is wasted since 1997.

Then in the retail segment, there’s a real opportunity for a supermarket chain to garner positive publicity and good feelings from shoppers just by going out and starting a campaign to reduce food waste in-store and to help shoppers do the same in their homes.

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