

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT' The Proverb We All Forgot

In the wilds of Texas I once went to a restaurant called the Big Texan. Its name derives partly from the size of the waiters – you have to be at least 6ft 6in to work there – and partly from the size of the portions. The speciality of the house is a steak that weighs 72oz. That is approximately the size of the average Sunday joint, with enough left over for at least another family meal. Most people give up and what they leave is, of course, thrown away. The whole place is one great temple dedicated to the worship of waste and if you ever feel the need for a swift dose of British moral superiority, I strongly recommend a visit to the Big Texan. When it comes to waste, the Americans are the unquestioned champions of the world.

But the British are beginning to challenge them. An official report has revealed that we waste 500,000 tons of food every year. Now that is not food that has grown mould in the back of the fridge and lurks there threatening to take over the world; it is edible food that has merely passed its sell by date on the supermarket shelves.

It is worth about £400 million and it costs another £50 million just to get rid of it. Here is what happens to most of it.

When we buy our food in the supermarket we rummage around the shelves to find the product with the latest sell by date. The stuff with the earliest dates is left on the shelf and, because the barmy rules and regulations would have us believe that we shall die in agony if we eat a spoonful of yoghurt 30 seconds after the date on the carton, it ends up in the landfill site. It is shameful nonsense. Every year a typical supermarket chucks out 50 tons of perfectly good food. Still feel so smug about the wasteful Americans?

That food could be used by any number of needy people, but we throw it out. Only a fraction is handed over to charities, who are constantly begging for more. Some of us might cluck a little over the wickedness of a world in which we waste food while Ethiopian children starve, but we get over it. We smile at memories of our mothers telling us it's wrong not to eat all your dinner when children



are starving in Africa. The truth is, we only care about waste in the context of money. Our attitude seems to be, if we can afford to waste things, then why the hell shouldn't we?

I know a woman who is reasonably well off and a keen cook, who will not use a recipe calling for egg whites unless she can find use for the yolks at the same time. She would rather slit her wrists than throw out perfectly good egg yolks.

But then, she is 70 and, as she says, she came to hate waste during the war years and rationing. She thinks it is plain wrong to waste. She is right.

I am still smarting from an interview I did last year. I confessed to the interviewer that I turned off lights when I left the room and boiled only a mug-full of water if that was all I needed. Could this really be true? I'm afraid so, I said. Such ridicule was heaped on me in her article that I bought all the papers in my local shop, dumped them in the recycling bin (naturally) and went into hiding. If only I had admitted to being a serial murderer instead.

Now, if you will excuse me, I need to pop outside because a police horse has just deposited a great pile of manure in the road in front of my house. It will do wonders for my vegetables and it would be such a waste to leave it there to be squashed by a passing car. However, I shall cover my head with a balaclava just in case anybody sees me with my shovel. They would think I was crazy.

John Humphrys *The Sunday Times*, 9th April 2000