



# FED UP

Food waste's contribution to climate change imperils future generations. These innovators are working to transform the food system—and consumers' wasteful ways.

WORDS | Rachel B. Levin

During the eight years that chef Kristina Ramos cooked in top fine-dining restaurants in New York and France, she worked within the industry's rigorous standards of perfection for each ingredient. Every piece of produce "needs to be pristine," she says. "If it doesn't make the cut, it just goes straight in the garbage." She witnessed the disposal of hundreds upon hundreds of pounds of edible food.

Ramos's experience is just one small window into the global problem of food waste. Every year in the US, 35 percent of all food goes unsold or uneaten. It's hardly just high-end restaurants that are to blame. Food waste occurs at every step of our food system, from unharvested crops to byproducts generated by food manufacturing (think: potato peels tossed out in order to make chips) to safe foods dumped by retailers to meet customer expectations of freshness.

But to contend with the biggest driver of food waste, we may have to look in the mirror: Consumers generate 37 percent of all wasted food annually.

"You throw away food almost guilt-free because you just assume it kind of goes away," says Jackie Suggitt, the capital, innovation, and engagement director at ReFED, a national nonprofit that focuses exclusively on reducing food waste.

The reality is that wasted food has a massive environmental impact. Food production, transportation, and refrigeration generate carbon emissions, whether or not the food ultimately gets eaten. Food waste in landfills emits methane as it decomposes. All told, food waste produces roughly eight percent of global greenhouse gases.

As those gases contribute to a warming planet, food waste is a troubling part of the climate legacy being handed to future generations. Ramos—who last year left fine dining to become an educator and coordinator for the New York-based food-education program Chefs for Kids—and Suggitt both play key roles in organizations that are leading the way towards a less wasteful tomorrow.

CHEF KRISTINA RAMOS



### Seeding new attitudes

ReFED is working towards the ambitious goal of cutting US food waste in half by 2030, based on 2015 baselines. If that goal is met, greenhouse gases will be reduced by 75 million tons every year. Achieving it will require large-scale changes in agriculture, manufacturing, restaurants, retail, and policy, to the tune of \$14 billion of investment annually. Changing consumer behavior may be the most important task of all, though far from the easiest.

"Food is something that the large majority of our developed world takes for granted," says Suggitt—a piercing irony given that roughly 10 percent of American households struggle with food insecurity. It's often grown and processed far away, leaving people disconnected from the labor and resources utilized to get food onto their plates. That can translate into "easy come, easy go" attitudes toward food that encourage wasteful behavior.

Suggitt points out that recent global events—including inflation and food shortages linked to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine—have elevated awareness of how valuable food is. But she suggests that substantially reducing consumer food waste will require a generational shift in attitudes. "Teaching our kids the value of food, teaching them where it comes from, how hard people are working to get it to you ... that's setting them up for a lot of success," she says. >

JACKIE SUGGITT



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## THE CLING-WRAP CONUNDRUM

Plastic bags, wraps, and containers may help reduce food waste by extending the freshness of some foods and allowing you to portion out foods bought in bulk. The catch? Plastic creates greenhouse gas emissions.

There's no clear-cut answer as to which is the lesser of two evils: using more plastic or tossing more food. Suggitt points to emissions comparisons that suggest preventing food waste should generally be prioritized over minimizing plastic. But she also hopes that innovations, such as edible produce coatings that extend food freshness without packaging, will ease this dilemma.



Fostering a generational shift is precisely Ramos's goal at Chefs for Kids, which is one of the many programs spearheaded by the eco-conscious New York-based nonprofit Chefs for Impact. In school-based, after-school, and summer classes, Ramos and the expert partners she coordinates—ranging from celebrated chefs to beekeepers and farmers—teach kids as young as four about where and how food is grown and the environmentally costly trip it often takes to get to them. The children also get to grow and cook some of their own food.

This spring, at the program's rooftop garden space in New York's Flatiron District, Ramos's students planted radishes, strawberries, cucumbers, peppers, and more. When Ramos told them it would take a month before they could enjoy the fruits of their labor, they were shocked. "They're like, 'a month?!' They're realizing how long it takes in order to grow [food]," she says. "I'm definitely waiting for the moment where they eat one strawberry and they see how much work actually had to go into that one strawberry."

### No-trash zone

Ramos tackles the issue of food waste head-on with lessons about what she calls "whole cooking": using every part of every ingredient. When she demonstrates how to butcher a chicken, she uses the carcass for chicken stock. When she chops up a cauliflower, she shows that the leaves, which are typically discarded, can be fried, dehydrated, or pickled. Ramos also teaches the kids how to compost food scraps and why composting benefits the soil.

She notes that no-waste cooking and composting aren't just food trends. "These are things that people for centuries and centuries and centuries have been practicing, and we forgot about them or we walked away from them," Ramos says.

Composting food waste instead of sending it to the landfill significantly reduces methane emissions, so it's an important step in the right direction. But Suggitt points out that by the time food gets composted, it's already made its way through the entire food supply chain, racking up emissions along the way. "The earlier in the supply chain we can stop that waste, the better the benefit from a greenhouse gas and climate perspective," she says.

To that end, ReFED has devised a detailed plan called the *Roadmap to 2030*, which identifies key areas of the food system where waste prevention efforts are most needed. Suggitt is helping to leverage data and rally a wide array of food businesses to drive meaningful action.

## Room for optimism

Moving the needle on food waste from the farm to the factory to the fridge is undoubtedly a tall order, especially given that two in 10 Americans believe that human activity plays little to no role in climate change. But even skeptics can concede that reducing food waste makes for more efficient business. “Waste is a cost,” says Suggitt.

She points to hopeful signs that the status quo is shifting. Many companies are reporting double-digit reductions in their food waste, cities and states are passing laws to keep organic waste out of landfills, and more capital is flowing into food waste-reduction innovation than ever before.

Suggitt cautions that progress isn’t yet happening at a fast enough pace to meet the 2030 goal, but that hasn’t dimmed her motivation. “There’s a sense of stewardship and responsibility that I have to my children,” says Suggitt, a mother of three. “You want to leave life better for them than you had for yourself.” ▲

## WASTE NOT

Here are Ramos’s and Suggitt’s top tips for reducing food waste at home.

- > Don’t go to the grocery store hungry.
- > Plan your meals in advance.
- > Turn core ingredients into secondary meals (e.g., BBQ chicken one night becomes chicken tacos the next).
- > Have a weekly “eat-down night,” where you pull together a meal from leftovers.
- > Freeze any food you can’t use before it goes bad.
- > Do a one-week food-waste inventory to discover what you’re throwing away.
- > Get to know date labels—many foods can be eaten well past the “best by” date.



PHOTO | CHEFS FOR IMPACT

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