

# Europe saves 100,000 meals per day with one app. Here's how it could work in the US

Too Good To Go is a service that cuts down on food waste from supermarkets and restaurants by selling extra food at a discount.

In the US, up to 40% of all food -- much of it perfectly good -- ends up in landfills, instead of on someone's plate or in a compost bin. An app with nearly 22 million users across Europe has managed to save 100,000 meals per day from supermarkets and restaurants, radically reducing the amount of food waste in each country while providing discounted meals to millions. But can it work in the US?



The app -- called Too Good To Go -- launched in 2016 in Copenhagen. You can now use it across 13 European countries, including the UK. And the company plans to expand to both Sweden and the US before the end of the year, pending coronavirus-related delays.

"It's trying to give all this food that normally would go to waste a second chance, and creating a marketplace for consumers to buy it at a discount," says CEO Mette Lykke.

At its most basic, the app is a marketplace for surplus food. Open it and you'll see all the stores, restaurants and bakeries in your area that have extra food available that day, and what kind of food they expect to have. You can elect to purchase a meal through the app for about a third of the regular price, and pick it up around the time the stores and restaurants close for the day.

Though the US has more residents who live in food insecurity than Europe does, it also sees a higher share of food waste from restaurants and supermarkets, Lykke says. Some 37 million Americans struggle with hunger, yet food is wasted on the retail part of the chain. "There is a big problem for us to solve," she adds.

## **How technology can help prevent food waste**

To dig deeper into the problem, consider this: In the US, an estimated 63 million tons of food is wasted each year, according to Pete Pearson, senior director of food loss and waste at the World Wildlife Fund. About 80% of that is coming from consumer-facing food businesses and from homes. The majority of food waste (about 75%) goes into landfills each year, where it becomes one of the largest contributors of methane to overall US greenhouse gas emissions, Pearson says.

"The state of food waste in the US is dismal," Pearson says. Not addressing it represents an environmental problem -- we're using resources and growing food just to throw it away, we're not making food available to those in need, and we're not maximizing the potential benefits of unavoidable food waste by composting. Plus, we're creating another problem through greenhouse gas emissions, he says.

There are several apps available in the US that are trying to curtail food waste in a similar way as Too Good To Go, says Elizabeth Balkan, director of the food waste program at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Most, however, have a much more narrow focus geographically: YourLocal and goMkt operate in New York City, and Food for All operates in New York and Boston. Last Call, an app created by a student at George Washington University, aims to connect hungry students with leftover college cafeteria food, and aims to launch at five to 10 universities in the fall.

"All of these models are very locally based, and it takes working on that local level, forming that network with restaurants and retailers, to function," Pearson says. "But the local results are fantastic experiments to learn from."

Technology is critical for solving America's food waste problem, he adds -- particularly tech that helps us quantify loss and waste along the supply chain and at the consumption level, to help us find ways to intervene.

While tech in inventory management and cold storage have long helped, newer ideas such as smart labels and packaging improvements also show promise, Balkan says. "We need all kinds of solutions across the supply chain," she adds. "We also have enormous power as individuals to drive change and make meaningful reductions through incremental and easy shifts in our habits."



## Changing mindsets

Too Good To Go has 40,000 partners, ranging from major grocery stores to small, independent restaurants, bakeries and coffee shops, Lykke says. To join, the company charges an administrative fee of 39 euros (about \$42, £34 or AU\$68) per year, and a small fee per meal that it saves. If no one buys meals through the app, the restaurant is not charged.

While consumers use the app, Too Good To Go is really a complex service: When the company expands to a new country, it puts in place a team of 20 to 80 people, depending on the size of that country, to work on getting restaurants and stores signed up. There are also a significant number of word-of-mouth signups, Lykke says.

As of March, the app saw an average of 50,000 users per day, and 100,000 meals saved per day.

"It's really powerful when we can find these win-win-win concepts," Lykke says. "When there are these inefficiencies in the way we've structured our society, as is the case with food waste, technology has the power to connect the dots."

Outside of the app's service, Too Good To Go has also worked to create a movement against food waste in the industry and education systems.

"The problem is way bigger than just the restaurant business," Lykke says. "The mindset we have around food is a bit flawed, and we're trying to bring respect for food back to people's minds."

For example, the company has worked with some of the biggest food producers in Europe to change date labelling. People don't always know the difference between expiration dates and best before dates, which is responsible for 20% of all household food waste, Lykke says. "We planned with them to clarify that best before actually means you should look at it, smell it and taste it, and then make a judgement call -- there's no health risk involved in that," she adds.

The company also provides educational materials for elementary schools through universities.

"We're trying to get people to actually talk about what does the labelling really mean? For how long can I drink the milk?" Lykke says. "Just getting people to discuss those things is important for their education around food."

Being conscious about food and waste is particularly important now, Pearson says, as the world battles the coronavirus pandemic.

"Food waste is something that each of us can act on individually to add up to big impacts in the long run," Person says. "Start small by just separating out your waste to see what's winding up in the trash. Compost at home if you can. Plan more. Get more creative with what needs to be used up. There are apps and tips out there to help with all of this, including extending the shelf life of produce, using up leftover ingredients and translating confusing date labels that often have nothing to do with the quality of the food. Start with something small and see where it takes you."

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