

In a world of waste, be thankful for the excess

Have you tried to buy a mincer lately? Know what a mincer is? Don't laugh. I would guess that half the people in New Zealand today have no idea that such a handy kitchen implement exists.

A mincer is a metal contraption that you clamp on to your kitchen bench. You feed pieces of leftover meat in one end, all the while turning a handle, and they emerge out the other end as mince.

Why would you need one if you can buy mince in the supermarket? Well, the key word in the above paragraph is leftover. When I was a kid, we ate roast hogget or mutton on Monday, had cold cuts on Tuesday and the leftovers were minced up and cooked in a shepherd's pie on Wednesday.

I don't think many people still do that. I don't. But my mother does. Her old mincer was finally worn out after 50 years, so I shopped around for another for her. It took some doing, but I finally found one at Briscoes, made in the Czech Republic, and priced at \$165.

My point is that in this modern world we don't keep leftovers, or if we do, we aren't creative with them. They sit in the fridge for a couple of days, are picked at, maybe, and are then thrown out.

I'm feeling guilty about this – and you should be, too – because by my reckoning we throw away about a quarter of our food. You mightn't waste that much, but restaurants, cafes and supermarkets do. If the food isn't eaten, it can't stay on the shelf or in the fridge. It has to go.

I get this figure by a comparison with Australia. Recent research there shows the Aussies throw away 25 per cent, or three million tonnes, of their food. That's amazing. I can't see why we're not doing the same. Australia's population is five times bigger than ours, so we must be turfing out 600,000 tonnes of leftovers each year.

Quite a bit of research has been done on this around the world lately. A report to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development links this waste in Western countries to problems in feeding the world's poor and needy.

The report, from Stockholm International Water Institute, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN and the **International Water Management Institute**, says "tremendous" quantities of food are discarded in processing, transport, supermarkets and people's kitchens. It urges governments to halve the waste by 2025.

"This wasted food is also wasted water," it continues. "In the US, for instance, as much as 30 per cent of food, worth some US \$48.3 billion [NZ\$63.5 billion], is thrown away each year. That's like leaving the tap running and pouring 40 trillion litres of water into the garbage can – enough water to meet the household needs of 500 million people."

There's no reason to think we're any different. We may even be worse. We are big meat producers – and eaters – and livestock farming has been shown to be one of the most water-intensive ways of producing food.

Another aspect is that waste food releases methane as it decays in landfills. Cutting back our leftovers will also reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

A British report says the Brits throw away 20 million tonnes of edible food each year, equivalent to half the entire food aid programme to Africa.

This research gives detailed new insights into the nature and amount of food wasted. It reveals that the average household in Britain throws out [PndStlg]420 (NZ\$1100) of good food a year. For the average family with children it's higher at [PndStlg]610 – money that could have helped to pay household bills.

Researchers found that more than half the good food thrown out, worth [PndStlg]6 billion a year, is bought and simply left unused or untouched. For example, each day 1.3 million unopened yoghurt pots, 5500 whole chickens and 440,000 ready meals are thrown away in Britain. The study revealed that [PndStlg]1 billion worth of wasted food is still within its use-by date.

All this is confirmation of the oft-repeated claim that more than enough food is produced to feed the world. We are producing enough food to feed ourselves but also to indulge our wasteful habits.

And as we do this we also waste water. This is at a time when farming's demand for water, especially in Canterbury, is exceeding the amount local government thinks it can spare.

But though I feel guilt at being a wastrel, it is assuaged by the knowledge that I am helping the economy. For a country whose wealth depends on its agricultural exports, the suggestion that we cut waste in half is unpalatable.

If Westerners waste less, then they won't buy as much of our meat and dairy foods. A 50 per cent drop in waste food could cut our export receipts by more than 10 per cent, by my rough guess.

We would have to find other markets in developing – or even undeveloped – countries, but they wouldn't pay as much as the affluent diners in the West. We could end up practically giving our food away to the starving in Africa – all very altruistic, but ultimately futile if it sends us sliding into poverty ourselves.

I'm sorry if I sound so pessimistic, but I can't see a positive side. You might think we would be better off environmentally. Fewer farm animals would mean less pollution – cleaner streams – but other ways would have to be found to bolster the economy. We might end up becoming more industrialised, with more pollution.

Then we could start manufacturing mincers. The world would need more of them.

You may not copy, republish or distribute this page or the content from it without having obtained written permission from the copyright owner. To enquire about copyright clearances contact clearance@fairfaxnz.co.nz.