Food for thought: a case study of eating from dumpsters

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Abstract

At least 40% of food is wasted in the USA and comprises a significant portion of landfills. That wasting food is accepted practice in 2014 contrasts with changes since 1900 and during both world wars when the US government enacted hygiene standards but also encouraged elimination of waste. Bellingham is a city in northwestern Washington in which many businesses recover and redistribute “wasted” food. There are substantial donations to the local food bank of foods that cannot be sold and foods are also gleaned from local farms. Additional recoverable nutrition is in trash dumpsters. Recently published literature on “dumpster divers” describe who participates but there is little on the types and quantities of foods recovered. The goal here is to determine who participates and what kinds and quantities of foods are recovered. Flyers describing the research and requesting volunteers were distributed at the local “Alternate Library”. Snowball sampling was attempted. Data were collected by personal observation and for participants by survey, journal and dietary recalls. Few provided detailed data. Participants were almost exclusively middle class males, often students between ages 18 and 30 years, aligning with “freegan” traits. Eaten foods still reflect cultural norms for what is edible. Dumpster diving may be stigmatized due to hygiene norms for all but young males who view it as adventure and protest. People most in need of caloric supplementation may not want to risk the negative attention.

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Dumpster diving (a/k/a “urban foraging”), while still looked upon with bemusement—and sometimes disgust—by some, is celebrating a recent popularity as the freegan movement takes hold. The act of finding treasure (or furniture or even perfectly edible food) in another man’s trash is a very frugal and eco-friendly product hobby. It’s also great for those who like a good deal. How much better can you get than free? If you want to try to make this your new hobby, I’ll give you a couple of pointers: wear good gloves (in case of sharp, unsanitary objects), and try apartment complex dumpsters first. Whatever your thoughts on skipping, it’s something that more people are becoming involved in and something that can help the state of our food wastage around the world. What are your thoughts on eating from dumpsters? Would you or have you tried it? Posted In: Sustainability. More on Sustainability. Outdoor. 5 sustainable mezcals you can feel good about drinking.