

Food waste a low priority for restaurants

By Eliza Barclay, NPR

A row of restaurants in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C., looks tantalizing – there are Vietnamese, Italian, New American.

But if you walk around to the alley at the back of this row you might gag.

Dumpsters packed with trash are lined up, and they get emptied only twice a week. Which means a lot of food sits here, filling the block with a deep, rank odor.

Some of the Dumpsters aren't properly sealed, so there are grease and putrid juices pooling beneath them. They may attract pigeons, rats, cockroaches, ants or flies, says Robert Corrigan, who runs the New York Rodent Control Academy. The academy trains restaurant workers on how to keep pests away. He says Dumpsters filled with restaurant garbage are one of the main reasons pests are multiplying across the country.

“Even a half a lemon that drops off a Dumpster and rolls underneath a stairwell – tiny flies will lay hundreds of thousands of eggs on that half a lemon,” says Corrigan.

Even when the Dumpsters are emptied, the problem of food waste is just moved somewhere else. Dump trucks transport thousands of tons of food waste every day to landfills. That's where food waste becomes Jean Schwab's problem.

“Food waste is huge,” says Schwab, a senior analyst in the waste division at the Environmental Protection Agency. “Food waste is now the No. 1 material that goes into landfills and incinerators.”

Schwab says food waste from restaurants makes up 15 percent of all the food that ends up in landfills. And all that food doesn't just take up space and attract pests – it's also changing the climate.

“Because it rots so fast, basically it starts to generate methane really quickly,” says Schwab.

Methane is a greenhouse gas that's 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. And reducing methane emissions from sources like landfills is one of the Environmental Protection Agency's biggest priorities in the fight against climate change.

But in spite of the fact that as much as 10 percent of the food a restaurant buys ends up in landfills, hardly anyone in the restaurant industry gives it a second thought.

“It's just another thing we're used to as a restaurant professional ... the amount of garbage that's thrown out on a nightly basis,” says Cruz Goler, head chef at Lupa, an Italian restaurant owned by Mario Batali in New York City. “It can be a little staggering, I guess, but that's just what happens.”

Back in Cleveland Park, Logan Cox, executive chef of Ripple restaurant, says chefs obsess over the quality of their vegetables and their technique. They want to make sure everything looks and tastes just right. But food waste comes in low on the long list of priorities.

“I've never taken the time to weigh or measure how much we do throw away,” says Cox.

According to Jonathan Bloom, who wrote a book last year called *American Wasteland*, consumers are part of the problem, too. “There's about a half-pound of food waste created per meal served,” says Bloom. “That's taking into account both back-and front-of-the-house waste. So restaurants and the customers are both joining forces to waste a whole lot of food.”

About three cents of every dollar consumers spend on food away from home ends up in the trash. And that doesn't even include the food left on your plate or the slimy lettuce forgotten in the fridge.

Chris Moyer of the National Restaurant Association says getting restaurants to focus on food waste is a big challenge. Food scraps, of course, are inevitable, but a lot of food waste is still edible.

The hardest part for many restaurants may just be getting the workers to become aware of how much edible food they waste every day. A few years ago, when Moyer was managing a big chain restaurant, he wanted to show his cooks there were plenty of opportunities to reduce waste. So he took away the garbage can.

"You'd be surprised, once you take away the garbage cans, if people have to ask permission to throw something away how little you throw away," says Moyer. "It was really quite amazing."

But Moyer says getting the whole industry to take on food waste is going to take a lot of training and education – that's what the NRA is trying to do with its ConServe program. And as we've reported, Unilever's food division now has a program called United Against Waste.

But habits are harder to change than the menu.

"The hardest part about doing anything to benefit the planet, benefit your bottom line is behavioral change," says Moyer. "Because that's really what we're talking about – changing mindsets, changing behaviors."