

Gone to waste: Why is Safeway throwing out good produce?

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue



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It's Tuesday, and I'm making my rounds at the local Safeway, shopping for the Community Meal kitchen, sponsored by the Episcopal church I attend. I work as a cook there once a week. In my small, remote town in the Colorado mountains, Safeway is the only grocery store.

The store has forbidden me to accept food donations at the deli counter, so I speed past it, wheeling my empty cart to the back and through the double doors toward the dairy cooler. I check to see if Rickie is working because she sometimes has crates of milk, eggs and yogurt ready for the dumpster; I can have them after she scans them. Then I move on to see Kelly in the grocery department, but today she has nothing. "See Anita in bakery," she says.

While I am looking for Anita, I pass Claudia in the produce section, another place where I am forbidden to ask for food. I see two boxes heaped with fresh fruits and vegetables. I try not to let my eyes wander to them, but on top I see lettuce, green beans, oranges and cucumbers, enough for the meal I am about to make—and all headed to the trash.

Anita arrives with a cart of cupcakes. Lately we've been loaded down with cupcakes. For the second week in a row, I am picking up thousands of calories in cheap

sweets—and not a single hint of green. I stop in the produce section and stare at what's for sale. I will try to get enough for the meal for under \$20, but with the average price of produce at \$1.50 a pound, it will not be easy.

My experience at the local Safeway mirrors the perplexing problem of food and nutrition in the United States. Calories are easy to come by, but fresh produce is not. For virtually nothing, I could feed the people who come to the Community Meal cupcakes with two inches of frosting. I could buy 200 calories worth of donuts for 23 cents—but 200 calories worth of broccoli would cost \$1.97. And though Safeway throws away thousands of pounds of fresh food every year, it does not donate any.

For ten years our kitchen received boxes of fresh produce from Safeway and used them as the basis for 10,000 meals a year. Because we used donated food, we were able to serve our guests for about 75 cents per plate and offer them a rich variety of vegetables, fruits, proteins, grains and sweets. I became a master of zucchini and eggplant casseroles and a thousand and one salads. The first thing I did every morning when I came into the kitchen was peek into the vegetable boxes and make choices, letting the ingredients I saw inspire me. Was today a day for cream of broccoli soup or for green beans simmered in mint and coconut milk? Did we have cucumbers and red onions for an old-fashioned salad or apples for a Waldorf?

After we selected the fruits and vegetables for our menus, we put the remaining boxes in the hallway so that people could "shop." Over and over again, we heard people say things like, "Oh, green beans. I love fresh green beans. I never buy them for myself because they are too expensive." At the end of the day, we sent the remaining vegetables to a local farm to feed to its goats and chickens. It wasn't a perfect system; it had its share of frustrations and difficulties. But it was almost waste-free.

In January of this year a new manager at Safeway decided to adhere to district policy. While he would still donate dairy and bakery items, he would no longer give us fresh produce. We begged him to change his mind, then we wrote to the district—all to no avail. The district public relations person was relieved that we were no longer receiving the produce. "I am frankly disturbed to hear that you were receiving those items, since they are not allowed to be given away," she intoned in a voice that invited no conversation.

Nationally, food products make up 63 percent of a supermarket's disposed waste stream. That's approximately 3,000 pounds thrown away per employee every year. One day, as I was looking mournfully over another cart of donated cupcakes, the manager told me that a significant amount of waste is built into all retail systems. When new food comes in to replace the old, it often works better for him to throw the old food away rather than discount it or give it away. This way his customers are forced to buy the new items at full price. In the conflicted logic of this food system, the store can make more money by wasting quantities of food.

Of the country's top five food retailers, Safeway's policies have been rated last in responsible use of food waste by food recovery operations. The reason that the Community Meal fared so well for so long was because of the moral decisions of individual employees who were not following company policy. Says Safeway spokesperson Teena Massingill: "If a produce item is deemed unfit for sale, we do not donate it for human consumption. It may be deemed unfit because it is bruised or overripe. . . . Safeway does not donate items that are not fit for consumption or could be unfit for consumption when they reach the final recipient."

Any food recoverer knows that this is doublespeak. Prior to this year our group received many bags of lettuce that had simply passed their "best by" date but were in perfect condition. We received bunches of grapes in which only a few grapes had gone bad. We also received apples with tiny bruises and tomatoes with no visible scars. While recovered food does need to be handled properly, it is not any more "unfit for human consumption" than the lettuce in my crisper.

Safeway repeatedly tells us that the reason it no longer donates produce to us is the risk of litigation. "We're a litigious society," the manager told me. "I don't care how many waivers you sign saying you won't sue, if someone gets sick, you'll find a way to sue." A federal law called the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, enacted in 1996, prevents such lawsuits, but Safeway contends that this law provides insufficient protection.

Not all grocery stores calculate the risks and benefits in the same way, and many give away fresh produce to ever increasing and more sophisticated food rescue organizations across the country. The Society of St. Andrew, a nationwide food recovery organization, estimates that it has rescued 3 million pounds of food this year alone. A smaller organization in northwest Michigan recently celebrated having recovered its millionth pound of food after only two years in operation. Food rescue

organizations work with grocery stores, restaurants, farmers' markets and dozens of other retail establishments.

But in our small town such rescue operations are almost irrelevant. Safeway is the only grocery store here, so while there are other grocery stores in the area with other policies, we have to drive a considerable distance to pick up food from them. We live at an altitude of 10,200 feet with a very short growing season, so producing all of our own fruits and vegetables is difficult if not impossible. For the time being, we are buying vegetables from Safeway. If it is true that we vote for the food system that we want with every dollar that we spend, then I'm voting for Safeway's system every week. It's a huge waste, and produce is expensive due to the number of trucking miles that lie behind every leaf of lettuce.

Our Community Meal kitchen built relationships with local food retailers and carefully cultivated them over time. It is no accident that I know the names of all of the local Safeway employees; we instituted the Community Meal undertaking on the basis of the idea that a community is a place where people are mutually sustained. When a Safeway employee named Sue was going through a hard time, we fed her at the Community Meal. When George was fired from the meat department, he knew he could come to us and tell his story in safety. When Cliff was having a manic episode, our priest made sure he got something to eat, took him for a walk, talked to him about counseling and tried to help him keep his job. These relationships had many different dimensions, and we were committed to helping one another. But the relationships did not ultimately help us trump corporate policy.

The context in which this dispute with the local Safeway is happening is the extensive and ironic system of food production and distribution. Food waste expert Jonathan Bloom estimates that 40 percent of the food produced in America is thrown away, and much of that never reaches a person's refrigerator. It is dumped at the production site or dumped by the government or dumped by the grocery store. When food reaches the landfill, its rot contributes to the production of dangerous methane gases; landfills are the no. 2 source of human-created emissions.

To put this into perspective locally: Safeway used to give the Community Meal about 200 pounds of food per week. We used it in an almost waste-free system, thus saving the landfill from adding 10,000 pounds of wasted food per year and producing thousands of pounds of methane gas. Pretty remarkable for such a small operation.

Deepening the irony is the cost and difficulty of delivering proper nutrition to the people we serve. Studies show that the less money a person makes, the higher the percentage of income that person spends on food. Cheaper calories mean less healthy food, higher health-care costs, lower quality of life and earlier deaths.

The United States imports 80 percent of its food while wasting 40 percent of what it produces. Items like spinach and lettuce are trucked 1,000 miles from California only to have much of it thrown away. When the United States removes food it does not need from the global markets, it raises the food prices for nations that desperately need food. Some of these countries end up growing nonnutritive crops like sugar beets and coffee for the United States.

The unfortunate irony that we are facing at the Community Meal—and in school classrooms, supermarkets and McDonalds restaurants across the country—is that in a time when one in four American families has too little money to buy the food it needs, one in three Americans is obese.

Recently our priest drove over a mountain pass and brought back fruit, mushrooms, green and red peppers, onions, zucchini and potatoes from a market 40 miles away. Food Bank of the Rockies, a large regional food rescue organization, arrived later that week with dozens of boxes of organic spinach. For the meal that day we served quiche, chicken noodle soup, Spanish rice, pinto beans, roasted vegetables and ham with pineapple salsa. We also had fruit and vegetable salads—in other words, abundance. We celebrated as if we were at a banquet.

But I was left with questions. What is the best way for our local project to be a steward of our resources? Do we continue to lobby Safeway for a change in policy? Do we throw our efforts into establishing a year-round greenhouse? Do we try to make the most of a wasteful system or try to create a better one? Finally, how can we, as activists Frances and Anna Lappé have asked, "build communities in tune with nature's wisdom in which no one anywhere has to worry about putting food—safe, healthy food—on the table?"