

## Making a Difference Starts in the Kitchen

**D**id you know that the greatest percentage of food waste — 37 percent — happens at the household level? According to ReFED, a national nonprofit working to end food loss and waste, about 30 million tons of food went uneaten at the household level in 2019.

Food waste is a complicated issue up and down the supply chain, but consumers can step up and make a difference. "Many consumers lack the knowledge of how to repurpose ingredients and store food properly," says Dana Gunders, executive director of ReFED and author of *Waste Free Kitchen Handbook*. "But some of this is changing due to the pandemic, which has driven consumers to prepare more meals at home, thereby helping to improve their food management and kitchen skills."

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) makes several tools to help combat food waste available at [SaveTheFood.com](http://SaveTheFood.com), and experts offer useful tips for consumers:

### ► Take stock of what you already have.

Before you head to the grocery store, first shop your own refrigerator, freezer and pantry, suggests Yvette Cabrera, director of NRDC's Food Waste, Healthy People & Thriving Communities program. "Start here first and then fill in the gaps," she says.

► **Plan your meals.** "Have a weekly shopping list, understand your schedule for the week, then plan accordingly," advises Abhi Ramesh, CEO and founder of Misfits Market, a direct-to-consumer online value grocer focused on sustainability, affordability and accessibility. Gunders suggests recipe trios — cook a roast chicken one night, make chicken tacos the next night and prepare chicken salad for lunch the following day.

► **Buy only what you need.** "At the household level, once you have too much in your fridge, it's an uphill battle to process and store it," Ramesh says. Highly perishable foods only last a few days, so make sure you only bring the right amount into your home each week.

► **Store food properly.** "The difference between storing fresh produce effectively and ineffectively could double ... shelf life," says Ramesh. Foods such as apples and bananas produce ethylene gas, which can make nearby foods ripen faster, so they need to be stored separately. Gunders suggests storing fresh herbs upright in a glass of water and wrapping bread in plastic or aluminum foil to retain moisture.

► **Organize by the FIFO method.** The first-in, first-out (FIFO) approach is the key to an efficient fridge, freezer and pantry. Cabrera suggests pulling older food to the front so you're continually rotating what needs to be eaten first, making it front and center rather than hidden and forgotten. Ramesh suggests splitting fridge contents, with older foods on one side and newer items on the other.

► **Repurpose excess produce.** Many people waste different parts of food because they don't know how to use it. "A food's second life might not be apparent, like turning carrot

tops into carrot-top pesto," says Cabrera, who makes stir-fries and veggie sautés with various produce parts. "My go-to is usually in liquid form — a fruit smoothie," says Ramesh. "It's always good to have a few use-it-up recipes," advises Gunders. "Soups, frittatas and tacos are all good ones. I personally roast just about anything and it seems to always work out."

► **Understand date labels.** Cabrera acknowledges that the current food labeling system is confusing. "Understand that the date label typically indicates peak quality, not safety," she says. Except for highly perishable items, most food is generally safe to eat beyond label dates within a reasonable amount of time.

► **Trust your senses.** While the date label does help you make an initial judgment call, Cabrera says to smell, feel, taste and look at foods to determine freshness. "Your senses will be your first line of defense if it's safe to eat. Trust yourself," she says.

— Lisa A. Beach

