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Dumpster diving for dinner: do you have what it takes to eat 'freegan' food?

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Dumpster diving for dinner: do you have what it takes to eat 'freegan' food?

Abstract

It's a Sunday night, sometime after 9pm, I (Shady) am in my car, parked in front of Aldi in Wollongong. The lot is vacant, the sky black and threatening. I've been waiting, checking my phone, glancing up the street. A siren blares out behind me, and my heart pounds. I check the rear-view mirror: just a fire engine.

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THE CONVERSATION

Dumpster diving for dinner: do you have what it takes to eat 'freegan' food?

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A dumpster is fair game for scavenging. Russ Allison Loar/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

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It's a Sunday night, sometime after 9pm, I (Shady) am in my car, parked in front of Aldi in Wollongong. The lot is vacant, the sky black and threatening. I've been waiting, checking my phone, glancing up the street. A siren blares out behind me, and my heart pounds. I check the rear-view mirror: just a fire engine.

A car pulls into the empty lot. Then another. I turn the key and trail in behind them. We drive around to the dumpsters on the far side of the parking lot and I slide in next to the small Toyota, leaving a space between us. I crank the window down. "Anne?" I ask.

A woman in her early twenties with brown eyes and a ponytail says, "Nah, but she told us you were coming." Her friend in the passenger seat smiles.

When Anne pulls in, she's younger than I expected: probably early twenties too. We've connected through Facebook – friends of friends. I'm researching dumpster diving for a novel I'm writing and am keen to get an insider perspective. Another car joins us and now there are about six of us. The dress code seems to be scrubby flannel shirts and lots of black. One of them is wearing a headlamp.

"Is it always women?" I ask.

"Heaps easier with security guards. Better for getting into dumpsters, too."

I'm surprised. Ethnographic research from the United States says dumpster diving is predominantly male, and I'm overcome with love for the tough Aussie woman who's not afraid to climb into a garbage bin.

While we introduce ourselves, the woman with the headlamp has checked out the dumpsters and shakes her head. "Rancid meat." Anne asks if it's OK for her dog, but after another bin check the consensus is no.

The women are careful, respectful of the premises. They tell me the rules: you never mess with locks and only check out dumpsters on the periphery of parking lots because you don't want to inadvertently trespass. You're looking at stuff that's deemed to be in the public domain and there's a code: don't make a mess, don't take more than you need, and don't stay if you're asked to leave.

Anne gets her phone out, and scrolls through photos from recent hauls: stacks of fresh produce; biscuits and bread; even cartons of beer. The woman from the Toyota says she's found brand-new coffee machines in dumpsters, thrown away because of damaged packaging. Frequently they get lots of one thing, like 40 punnets of blueberries that need to be eaten straight away – it's not uncommon to be making jam until 3 am after a diving excursion.

They talk too about the politics of consumption, about how modern living is just not sustainable and if they can take a little bit out of landfill then that's got to be a good thing.

Later that night, at a supermarket in the next suburb, I find five beautifully ripe tomatoes, protected in a plastic bag. My new friend with the headlamp unearths a kilo of broccolini, maybe more. It couldn't be in better condition and this worries me. "Why's it being thrown out?" I whisper.

"Sometimes they just don't have room on the shelves. It's crazy."

And this is the question: why should dumpster diving in Wollongong feel covert when I'm saving perfectly edible produce from becoming landfill? New York City, where I went dumpster diving in the following months, is much more open about it. In fact, there were garbage tours held by freegan.info where we dug through trash in front of police officers, and passers-by joined in.

Of course there are risks with consuming food that has been discarded. An estimated 5.4 million Australians each year are affected by food poisoning. Particular risk is linked to high-protein foods, such as meat and seafood, that are not stored below 5C, which carry a risk of bacterial contamination with Salmonella, Campylobacter, E. coli and Listeria. All of the divers I've come across stress the importance of cleaning food thoroughly before it's eaten and few of them eat meat from dumpsters.

Freegan or scavenger?

The term "freegan" is used in the United States and other developed countries to describe "people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources".

That is, freegans make a conscious choice to limit their consumption – they aren't necessarily food insecure. In developing countries the term of "scavenger" is often applied to those searching through rubbish and it's important to acknowledge the difference between people who dumpster dive through choice rather than necessity.

In my (Shady's) experience, freegans around the globe were generous with food: they only took what they could use in case someone else raided the same bin, and they always shared with each other. The folks at freegan.info weren't about creating a dependency on the dumpster. In fact, they campaigned stores to rethink how much waste was thrown away, even if it impacted their dumpster haul: "Freegans envision a future based on self-sufficient, sustainable communities."

Formal outlets for food recycling

To be fair, many supermarkets and chains are concerned with reducing their waste, and in Australia, there are several charity organisations that rescue and redistribute fresh surplus food to people in need.

For example, SecondBite, set up in 2005, accepts food donations from farmers, wholesalers, markets, major supermarkets, caterers and events for redistribution to community food programs that support homeless people, women and families in crisis, youth at risk, indigenous communities, asylum seekers and new arrivals.

But these organisations can't keep up with the magnitude of fresh produce that is being dumped daily. This seems particularly worrying when 1.2 billion people worldwide live in extreme poverty and about 870 million are undernourished.

Yet, while millions starve, nutritious food is destroyed rather than being given away to hungry families. And those who do wish to avail themselves of this nutritious food need to do it under the cover of darkness.

Regardless of motivation, both freegans and scavengers can be seen as critical to the recycling movement. For instance, in the area surrounding the final disposal site for municipal solid waste in Jakarta, Indonesia, waste pickers collect about 100 kg per day per household, which represents between 2.8% and 7.5% of all solid waste transported to the site.

In developing countries, it has been recognised for some time that rather than being stigmatised, the informal recycling sector should be recognised as an important element of sustainable waste management.

In Australia, greater attention to ways in which households, food outlets and supermarkets dispose of food waste is needed to arm policy makers with evidence to target individual behaviour change and challenge social norms, for overall positive environmental outcomes.

On an individual level this is about questioning what constitutes waste. Just because someone has called this beautiful tomato "garbage" by throwing it in a dumpster, it doesn't mean we have to agree. We get to make that choice.



Sustainability

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food waste

Food sustainability