

Final Report

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Humanities

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Dinner leader at Taste Before You Waste, Amsterdam

Luana Carretto

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Janna Shroenberg

Fall 2015

Dear Ydwine Zanstra,

Over the past 16 weeks of the first semester of my second year at AUC, I have been undertaking the completion of my community project at Taste Before You Waste, with Luana Carreto as my supervisor. In this report I wish to give you an idea of why I was drawn to this project, convey to you the different aspects of my role within the organization during this period, what I learned throughout the process (and how this relates to my growth as a student, but also as a person and citizen of the modern world), how I see my own performance in retrospect, and what I would do things differently given the chance in the future.

About Taste Before You Waste

Taste Before You Waste is an Amsterdam-based initiative founded by Luana Carreto (my project supervisor) over three years ago. Its main goal is to raise awareness and combat food waste around the neighborhood of Amsterdam East and beyond. In practice, a huge part of the resources and volunteers are put to work on one of the two carrier cycles: biking around the neighborhood of Java Plein, collecting unwanted, but often very usable produce from small businesses and bringing them back to the dorms where they are given a different fate each day. On some days the food is given away to charities, others to free-food markets, and finally to the Meevaart Kitchen, where it is transformed into a meal once a week. The food that is collected, usually mainly comprised of vegetables, is different each day and the quantity of "waste" also varies.

Why Taste Before You Waste?

The first time I recall being in contact with the fruits of this organization (no pun intended) is through a facebook post advertizing a free food market in the dorms. I walked down the street and in front of Luana's dorm room, and picked from a selection of tomatoes, red bell peppers, cucumbers and bread. At first I was simply excited that I didn't have to go grocery shopping or spend money in order to cook myself a fresh meal that day. For a year I benefited from the free food markets without taking a true interest in involving myself personally in the organization. I chose to involve myself in more creatively oriented extracurricular activities at AUC and beyond, like theater and photography. I was drawn to the philosophy behind Taste Before You Waste, but I felt like I needed to spend as much of my time outside of the academic curriculum tending to my more artistic interests (which I felt the classes I was taking did not fulfill enough for me).

Additionally, I think I was able to justify my original lack of interest in becoming a part of the organization with the idea I was combatting food waste on a small scale with my diet. I had been a vegetarian for 3 years and a vegan for 2 years at the time; coming to AUC, sharing meals with other students as a means to save money and to socialize was a huge part of my life. The topic of veganism thus came up again and again, and I was often confronted with questions from curious fellow students who had not yet come to the same realization I had about food waste in relation to the (over)consumption of animals and animal products. I felt that I was combating food waste in my own way on a personal scale by engaging with my friends in debates surrounding this topic.

As my social life started to settle at AUC, these opportunities for discussion became rarer and rarer. My friend group cristalized, and the people I shared dinners with on a regular basis grew used to my lifestyle; most of them even modified their own lifestyle. The topic of food waste and all the other negative impacts of the animal-based diet faded to the background.

I felt a strong need to participate in the fight against animal exploitation, among other things, as means to combat food waste, so I applied to an internship as an educational adviser at a farm sanctuary in California for the summer of 2016. The organization (Animal Place) seemed interested in my application, but they were concerned for my safety on the sanctuary because of my disability (I am legally blind). Since I was applying so far in advance, they told me they would give me an answer in 9 months time.

It wasn't until the end of the summer vacation 2015 that I decided to integrate this interest into my student life. I saw a post on facebook that Tate Before You Waste was looking for a new dinner leader to replace Heleen (the previous dinner leader). By that time I had some background in cooking, both as a personal interest I had been more or less obliged to develop when I went vegan -- it was a way of meeting my parents half way when it came to making meals that suited my constraints -- and on a larger scale through my involvement with Joe's Garage (a local vounteer based kitchen which produces two vegan meals a week).

I had been to several dinners at the Meevaart, and so I saw this opening as an opportunity to finally incorporate combating food waste into my daily life, in a way which would engage my creativity as a chef.

My Role within the Organization

The most visible of the activities I have been responsible for during my community project is the planning and creation of fresh vegan (or, more precisely "freegan"--I will elaborate more on the meaning of this later) meals, in collaboration with a team of volunteers. Every Wednesday at the Meevaart community kitchen in Amsterdam Oost, from 15h00 to 18h00, I would supervise the first shift in the conception of a meal. At 15h00 the produce would already have been gathered from the Javastraat and delivered on the counters of the kitchen. The produce usually consisted of fruits and/or veggies, and a bag of breads and pastries. The other volunteers would systematically begin picking out moldy fruit and cutting off uneatable pieces while I took stock of what ingredients we would be working with that day. I would make a list on a white board and begin looking up recipes for inspiration, matching the different ingredients together to finally make up the day's menu. Typically, we tried to include a raw salad, one or more warm dishes (from soup, to vegetable stews or sauces), a form of starch (either grain based -- like pasta or rice -- or bread based), and a fruit based dessert. Additionally, sometimes we also made mint tea and fruit drinks. The dinner would then begin to be served at 18h00 in a dining room adjacent to the kitchen, where anyone is welcome to eat. The meals would be paid for based on free donations, so that the guests paid according to personal resources and what they felt the meal had been worth.

The second shift, also known as the cleaning shift, began at 18h00. For the first part of the project, I would diligently contribute to the cleaning of the kitchen, in collaboration with the second team of

volunteers. However, I soon realized that this kept me from actually sharing the values and philosophy behind the "no-food-waste" dinners with the people enjoying the meals. Since many people came to me asking how they could be involved in the organization, there was no shortage of volunteers. Luana and I decided to "hire" some extra hands for the second shift so that the cleaning wouldn't depend so heavily on me anymore. This gave me the freedom to go out and have dinner with the guests, engage in conversation about how the food was prepared, where the ingredients came from etc. Additionally, it was truly refreshing to directly witness the impact of our work as I observed people eating and complimenting the cooks for the meal we had created.

Nevertheless, I was always responsible for ensuring that the kitchen be as clean when we left it as it was when we found it. Upon arrival, I would let the front desk know I had arrived and they would bring me a form where I had to describe the cleanliness of the kitchen before using it. After the dinner was over and the kitchen cleaned, one of the volunteers from the front desk would check the state of the kitchen with me in order to make sure nothing had been overlooked.

I was also responsible for bringing Taste Before You Waste's materials such as knives, cutting board, aprons etc. to and from the Meevaart on one of the carrier cycles. Moreover, the left overs from the meal were poured into recycled Tupperware and I would be responsible for bringing them back to the dorms to give away there or to be taken away the next day to a charity. Sometimes, there would be left over fruits and vegetables which were also given a second chance to become food the next day.

Aside from the regular weekly cooking sessions, I was also involved in several cooking workshops. For instance, at the beginning of the semester, together with Luana, Dennis and Lilly, I set up a stand at a festival for local start up companies and taught people how to convert stale bread into fresh, flavorful bread balls. These workshops were a way of passing on practical knowledge on how on a personal scale.

One other aspect of my project involved collaborating with other food waste related organizations by using our dinners as a platform to raise awareness about other environmental issues.

The Learning Experience at Taste Before You Waste

One of the most enjoyable dimensions of this project for me was the conception of dishes. Since the ingredients available changed each week with no predictability, there was a need for me to be quick on my feet in the formulation of a menu. I was forced to cook with ingredients I was not familiar with, that I would not normally have purchased for myself. The kitchen created an environment where experimentation was welcome, and we learned from trial and error. Thankfully, the meals turned out tasty most of the time, but the spirit of the dinners was also forgiving toward unusual food combinations which truly gave us the space to have fun and develop a gastronomical intuition by doing, rather than closely following a recipe. Indeed, letting go of my perfectionist tendencies was an important exercise throughout the project. Although the meals weren't entirely vegan (sometimes the pastries coming in would contain butter) I made sure that the supplements we purchased were. I thus had to use and expand my knowledge on the physics and chemistry of food in order to properly substitute animal products in recipes that weren't originally vegan.

Another crucial skill that I have taken away from this experience is leaning to be comfortable in a managerial position of authority. I think I noticeably improved on this aspect of myself. In the beginning, I felt very uncomfortable telling people what to do, I wanted the menu to be formulated together with the rest of the cooks with everyone's ideas carrying equal weight. This ended up leading to very chaotic afternoons and I soon realized that my role was to be a guide for the rest of the team. Although I should always welcome contributions and ideas from the rest of the team, it was up to me to make sure people were doing what needed to be done in order for the dinner to be ready on time. I think that this realization ultimately made the kitchen more organized and everything ran smoother from then on.

Self-Evaluation and Reflection of my Work

In retrospect, I wish I had allocated more time and energy to the promotion of the dinners. I noticed the number of people coming to the dinners decreasing as time went by. I think this was partly due to the fact that the facebook events were advertized differently than the previous years. Instead of making one event that recurred each week, we started going back to the old system where a new unique event was created each week.

I wish I had also been more diligent about keeping records of the volunteers who didn't show up, the number of guests and the amount of donations. Sending the menus out to the public relations manager more consistently, in order to let people know what they could expect if they came to the dinner that day.

Taking more initiative to promote the dinner outside of AUC. Although I did welcome every opportunity I had to speak to people who were curious about the event and just sending an afternoon in the Meevaart, I could have made sure that the events were promoted around the neighborhood through posters or the use of a sign up sheet to add people to the Taste Before You Waste facebook page.

In conclusion, this community project was my first experience working as the head of a team, in a friendly setting, promoting values that I hold dear while sharing our creations with hungry guests. Since I haven't managed to complete the hours in the given time, I will also be cooking with Luana and Lilly during the month of January with the aim of creating a portfolio of pictures to promote the organization. I hope this report has given you a clear and well-rounded idea of what I have been doing for the past 16 weeks.

Very best,

Jenna Palmerio