

FINAL REPORT

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Community Project

Taste Before You Waste, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Taste Before You Waste main mission is to make people aware of the huge amount of food that goes to waste, in the hope of tackling the root causes of the problem: our mentality towards all the natural resources of our planet and, more specifically, food. Because we think of these resource as illimited we take them for granted and waste them mindlessly. What we haven't fully realized yet is that natural resources are actually limited and we should cherish them as precious. On top of the finity problem, we also have to take into account the reality that waste itself also damages the environment. In order to achieve this change in mentality, Taste Before You Waste acts on two levels: stimulating the minds of the people by cooking and serving, giving away, work with perfectly good food that would have gone to waste; interacting with them by explaining all the problems in the way our society relates to food and suggesting practical ways to solve them at the individual level. This is seen as the first step to change the system and, possibly, achieve in the future results also on the bigger scale.

The "rescued" food is picked up 6 times per week by some volunteers and comes mainly from local food shops, turkish shops, small supermarkets and bakeries. This food would be thrown away just because it isn't acceptable for the shelves anymore. It doesn't fulfil the strict aesthetic standards of our society and it doesn't matter that there is nothing wrong with it health wise and at a nutritional level because it is not going to be sold. On top of that we have a cooperation with an organic farm from which we also receive ad hoc donations. Most of the food is used in the weekly activities, however sometimes it is donated to charity.

Taste Before You Waste offers a large range of activities among which you can choose when you sign up as a volunteer. The main tasks available are: taking care of the PR; writing in the blog; participating at the food markets; volunteering at the community dinners, either cooking in the first shift or serving in the second shift; working behind the bar during the dinners, doing the pick-ups of the food; helping with the catering event; volunteering at the educational workshops, both for adults and children. Among all these options I knew immediately I wanted to do something that would allow me to be in direct contact with the people and be able to interact with them.

When I first started volunteering in September, it was outside of the community project and I initially only volunteered at the second shift of the weekly community dinner on

Wednesdays, which entails serving, cleaning and talking to guests. These are No-Waste dinners, where we serve tasty, healthy, vegetarian food coming mostly from the donations, even though sometimes it is necessary to buy some extra ingredients. However we try to keep them cost zero and they are free. The participants are still welcome to donate, for all the hard work and energy of many people that goes into it. Usually the wednesday routine is: I go there at 5 to help Zoe, the coordinator of the second shift and host of the evening, to prepare the eating area and settle everything to be ready to start serving, then we seat down with all the other volunteers at 6 to eat and coordinate the group for the serving and cleaning turns, after that we welcome the people and start serving them, we walk around talking to people and when they are finished eating we clean up. This activity is very enjoyable, I like interacting with the other volunteers and guests, talking to them and explaining what they are eating and why, a.k.a our mission, and answering any question or listening to any suggesting they might have, but also listening to enthusiastic and appreciative comments.

After the first week I decided to get more engaged. During one of the weekly meetings, the idea of creating a new weekly event, namely another food market on top of the ones already taking places every saturday, came up I proposed myself as coordinator. The new initiative takes place at the Dokhuis, Taste Before You Waste head quarter, and is the Cycle-Food Market on Tuesdays. This event took inspiration from a similar one that Taste Before You Waste used to host before moving at the Dokhuis, but even if the core concept was the same, we made some innovations. It consists in a market where we are giving away food that has been picked up earlier that day or the day before so that people can get delicious ingredients for their dinners. Moreover the initiative included an important feature: when coming to pick up the food, people can also leave long-life products that they maybe don't like or won't be able to consume. These products are then available for others or can be used in the weekly dinners. There is also a possibility to donate freely. Another addition we made is the selection and hand out of species that are possibly a good match with the veggies and fruits available that day, giving suggestions to make the best of of them. So, together with volunteering at the weekly dinners, I was in charge of setting up the market and selecting the food that will be available to the people and through away what is really not good anymore, welcoming the people and, if they are not familiar with it,

explain them who we are, what are mission is and how the market works, cleaning up at the end and storage the leftovers, if any, that can be used on the following day for the community dinner.

This is by far my favourite activity, it generates a lot of curiosity and enthusiastic responses, they are here stimulated to ask questions on and discuss about food waste. I like the idea of leaving the chance to the people to get creative with the food and pick up the challenge of cooking with food waste. It combines very well with the initiative of the dinners: as I see it ,on Wednesdays we prepare for them a gourmet meal and all they have to do is seat back and enjoy it, on Tuesdays, by leaving them complete freedom, we stimulate not only to follow our steps but also to find their personal ways to interact with waste food. I think it is a bit like saying “This is how we do it, now it is your turn”, because ultimately it is important that they take something home with them from these experiences and I believe this is a stimulating way to change their everyday habits.

I also volunteered during ad hoc events. I participated at the art exhibition that took place on the 17th and 18th of January, on Tuesday I performed my usual task of the food-cycle market as a part of the exhibition and on Wednesday I helped with the cooking shift and substituted Zoe as host of the dinner. I also took part at an educational workshop with kids, as kids represent the future and educating them on the problem of food waste and demonstrating them ways to avoid it at home is fundamental. It was very interesting to see how the younger generations relate to food waste and, even though it was not always easy to get them to listen, it was a very positive experience overall and their enthusiasm gives hope for the future. Additionally I participated to some special cooking shifts for catering events, which are important not only because Taste Before You Waste is a self-sustaining organization but it is yet another opportunity to reach out to new people we might not interact with normally and sharing our message by serving them food made with “waste”.

Finally, I participated to the core team meetings every Tuesday and occasionally take minutes and make sure to make them available to the rest of the team. In this session each one of us reports on the outcome of his/her activity from the previous week and together we brainstorm on how to improve it for the next time. For example the Cycle-Market was initially from 5 until 7, but after noticing that the majority of people tend to come in the first hour, we are now starting

an hour earlier. We also took into consideration the idea of making it 1 hour twice per week, as we noticed a continuation in the trend of presence only in the first our, however this trend was not constant and sometimes people would come even at the last minute, so we decided to wait and see until the end of my mandate to decide. It appears now that people come spread over the two hours, so we are going to keep it as it is.

Taste Before You Waste has been teaching me so much. Not only in terms of knowledge regarding food and food waste but also skills useful for my future. By taking part in distinct type of activities requiring different sets of skills, I noticed an improvement in both sets. Flying solo during the markets implemented my ability of being in charge and independent. I had to decide alone what to do and when to do it, selecting the food and getting creative with presentation of the food and posters, choosing the species and so on. Even if it felt a bit scary the first times and I was afraid of making a mistake, with time I became more self sufficient. On top of that I was also challenged to interact with people myself, improving my communication skills. By discussing food waste and promoting Taste Before You Waste mission made me I felt a sense of responsibility and learned how to speak in behalf of the organization behind me and be able to express a message and deliver it efficiently to people.

On the other hand, working with the other volunteers at the dinners definitely helped me enhancing my teamwork. It allowed me to implement my creativity and develop my organizational skills as we have to coordinate with a big team of volunteers and organize weekly, often on the spot and with little notification. Unforeseen events are always around the corner, and when things don't go like you planned you must be ready to come up with efficient alternatives in little time. Working both at the market and at the dinners got me in contact with interesting people with different backgrounds, cultures and traditions, but all united in the same cause, sharing opinions and experiences with all of them was truly invaluable.

In regard to practical things I have learned about food, these information range from tips on how to converse veggies and fruits in the best way, how not so fresh fruits are actually preferable for some particular recipes, how to reuse still bred, and how to tell when something has really gone bad. I learned that expire date are merely a guess of the factory and they are quite extreme in this guessing as they don't want to risk. However the most efficient way to tell if

something is not edible anymore is to trust your senses. This is to say, not only your eyes, which sometimes might trick you when you see something that looks a bit different than the image in your head of unrealistically perfect fruits or vegetables, but also your smell, your taste and even your touch. These senses all together can give you a complete idea of where the food you are examining is in its life cycle.

I also learned a lot about food waste. Waste occurs on many different levels, the producer, the distributor and the consumer. Waste begins at the producers when food gets picked up unripe, to respond to the insanely high demand, and only the “good looking” food makes it to the distributor, as those products that look differently than the standard, certain color shape and size, are not wanted by the various shops. Another problem is the drastic quantity of food produced, we got this habit from the past, when any unforeseen event could cause scarcity and surplus food was necessary. However in current time this is not the case anymore and most of the surplus food simply gets wasted. Then the waste continues at the distribution level, such as shops, supermarkets, markets, etc. where all the food as long as it doesn't look absolutely fresh anymore or gets damaged gets thrown away. What shocked me the most was discovering that the final stage, the consumer, is the one at which the biggest waste occurs. We, the people, indeed generate the majority of the waste, not finishing our plate, forgetting to consume products and then let them rot, or simply throwing away food so liberally.

With these initiative we try to make a difference, in our capabilities, by diminishing the waste at the distributor level and saving food from going from the shelves directly to the garbage. But we also operate on the consumer level through good examples and presentations. Since there are many actors involved in food waste one might think that it is a lost cause, as the actors at the higher level, such as government, supermarkets and big cooperation, will never change things as they have too many interests at stake. However what Taste Before You Waste is showing me is that all the individual efforts matter and difference can be made person by person. Because every revolution starts from the people, and it is indeed the individual that has the power to change things on a higher level. The big corporations and supermarkets actually responds to the demand of the consumer, and if the “little” consumers, all together, demand for

different standards of production and selection of food, a new food system, replacing the old failing one, can actually be set.

When I first started this project I was very enthusiastic but maybe a little bit inexperienced. In the beginning I was guided closely by our two coordinators, Sophia and Luana, they showed me what I was supposed to do and thought me how to move around, Zoe also explained me closely how the dinners works and gave me instructions. However after the first period I became more confident and got independent, I started thinking on my own and contributing to the brainstorm with idea and suggestions. I initially intended this project to be simple volunteering, and the enthusiasm of this attitude continued throughout the month, I never felt obligated to go and I always worked with energy. It was nice to be surrounded by people who believe in a cause and work hard to achieve their goals. I appreciated the liberty I was given by my coordinators, and I like to believe I bring something to the table. I knew from the beginning it was a big commitment and I was concerned it would be tiring, however the energetic environment and the lovely people I was surrounded by made it very easy, even when I was tired and maybe stressed for other things. I did not expect to be so influenced by this experience, I was always a food lover, now I can call myself a food waste hater. I noticed it in the small things, just giving a chance to the wrinkly zucchini that has been forgotten in the fridge for couple of weeks, or smelling the milk before throwing it away, finishing that last bite even if I am quite full and pick the weird looking vegetables when grocery shopping.