



Letting it all go to waste

Choosy Singaporeans mean less-than-perfect produce is thrown out

ONG DAI LIN

dailin@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — Some people press and squeeze fruits when choosing what to buy, while some food retailers keep food solely for display, and throw them out at closing time.

These are some practices that result in good food going to waste in Singapore, according to an eight-month investigative study by a group of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students.

And in a country that imports more than 95 per cent of its food, the conclusion is that more can be done to minimise such wastage.

The students, who focussed on business practices, discovered that supermarkets and vegetable sellers at Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market, for example, practice “cosmetic filtering”. This means that less than perfect-looking produce is culled or thrown away. Customers also contribute to the amount of spoilt produce by handling fruits, and by expecting only the best fresh produce.

In response to MediaCorp’s queries, supermarkets said that their practices are in accordance with consumer behaviour.

Cold Storage said it is “the usual practice for produce sellers to ensure that they sell only fresh fruits and vegetables as this is expected by the consumers” and its staff try to minimise wastage when

they cull defective produce.

NTUC FairPrice, which complies with international food safety and management standards, said the measures taken “may result in a small proportion of products being discarded”.

Added its food safety and quality director, Ms Chong Nyet Chin, said: “We strive as far as possible to minimise this amount through proper shipping, storage and handling, without compromising the interests of our customers, whose safety will always come first.”

Mr Samuel Tan, course manager of retail management at Temasek Polytechnic, agreed that the logistics process was an important area to look at to minimise wastage.

Supermarkets also put defective fruits to good use. At Carrefour, apples and oranges are used to make juice, while bananas are used to make in-store cakes. Other supermarkets, such as Sheng Siong and Giant, clear the fruits by selling them at reduced prices.

The NTU students also reported that food and beverage businesses waste food when staff do not maximise the use of ingredients and over-produce because they want to ensure there is a good variety for selection near closing time.

They observed that the display shelves of most bakeries and cafes are still fully stocked an hour before

closing time and that the unsold food is thrown away after closing.

They also quoted a waiter from an outlet of The Coffee Club as saying that his manager told him that the cake fridge cannot look “empty” as presentation is important.

While some bakeries donate their leftover bread to the needy, others, such as Breadtalk, do not. It prefers to bake fresh bread for the needy, according to the report. Breadtalk and The Coffee Club did not reply to MediaCorp’s queries.

While the students felt that food was wasted when F&B staff are not allowed to take leftovers home, a spokeswoman for Crystal Jade My Bread said this was meant to prevent pilfering and bad habits, such as selling the leftovers elsewhere or keeping the best food products to take home. She said that a staff member had once set aside a cake to bring home after the restaurant closed, for his son’s birthday.

And Singaporeans are not recycling as fast as they are producing food waste. An NEA spokeswoman told MediaCorp that about 606 million kg of food waste was generated in Singapore last year — about 7 per cent more than 2008. But only 13 per cent of the waste was recycled, compared to 12 per cent in 2008.

Mr Tan suggested companies can set a minimal wastage level in their sales target to motivate staff.



(From left) Mr Chen Wei Li, Ms Miak Aw and Ms Estelle Low, the three NTU students who took a closer look at food wastage (above) in Singapore.

PHOTOS COURTESY CHEN WEI LI

■ UNDERGRADUATE FOODIES WENT UNDERCOVER

The three foodies knew they wanted to do a final-year project on the subject of food, but didn’t know what to focus on.

Inspiration struck when they met at a fast food outlet and saw leftovers being discarded. The three journalism students from Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information decided then that more could be done to address the problem of food waste in Singapore.

The project got off to a rocky start, though, when many companies declined to be interviewed.

One of the students, Ms Estelle Low, said: “Getting them to tell us their food wastage figures is like getting them to tell us their profits. It’s very confidential.”

To get the information they needed, Ms Low, 22, and another team member, Ms Miak Aw, 22, worked undercover at hotel banquets. Another team member, Mr Chen Wei Li, 26, was in charge of photography for the project.

In the eight months they have worked on the project since last August, the team have spoken to more than 200 people and collected food waste from 150 households. For more information about the project, visit www.foodwasterepublic.com. **ONG DAI LIN**