

HOUSEHOLD WASTE CAUSES

Waste produced by families are mostly ascribable to excessive grocery shopping.

For a long time we thought that this behaviour was caused by “impulsive buying” that assume a lack of rationality on the consumer’s side who buys a product following his emotions. Recent studies have, on the other hand, proven that “impulsive buying” is just one of the causes of excessive buying and it mainly concerns well presented and attractive products, those with successful ads or that are trendy.

The consumer’s rationality is instead challenged, and often eluded, especially by the packaging system and by the promotions. It is difficult for the consumer to establish quickly, both at the supermarket and in the traditional shop, which quantity and at what prices the different produces will satisfy his/her needs without producing waste.

Food has small weight on a family’s budget and therefore it isn’t worth it to spend a lot of effort figuring it out. It is much easier to opt for simple plans: big packs are cheaper compared to small packs (if, as it often happens with vegetables, fruit, dairy and cold cuts not everything is used on time, you can throw away that in excess); promotions (get three and pay two, everything for 1 euro a kilo) follow the same logic and are profitable for hard discount stores; expiry date makes the “fresher” produce preferable (and that is found at the bottom of the shelves, as we all know), irrespective of the fact if it’ll be eaten immediately or forgotten in the fridge or the larder.

The westerner consumer is not an innocent victim inside a perverse system: “more is better” works at home, but also in distribution and hospitality. First of all, the westerner consumer wants to immediately find, anytime and anywhere, whatever quantity of any mass consumer goods. Food is among those. So in developing countries household waste is contained (unacceptable because of low income), whereas in developed countries waste is very high.

Results from a study conducted in Great Britain show that there are two major causes for household waste:

1. Too much food is cooked, prepared and served and so leftovers are produced. Among those also food damaged while cooking (burnt for example).
2. Food is not consumed in time: food and drinks are thrown away because they reached their expiry date, or they don’t look edible any more.

Going into more detail on household waste we can also mention:

- The interpretation of the expiry date on the labels. For many consumers it is especially complicated to understand the difference in meaning between “use preferably by” (linked to evaluations inherent to the food) and “use by” (linked to the food security), which influences the way they buy.
- Lack of or wrong planning when shopping, which can cause excessive buying.
- A limited knowledge of the ways to store food (correct use of container and materials) and to cook it, to reduce waste (for example, how to preserve and use leftovers creatively).
- Little awareness of how much each of us is wasting and waste impact on the economy and the environment.