

Andrew Zimmern's Latest Culinary Endeavor: Tackling Food Waste in America

By Stefanie A. Valentic

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Andrew Zimmern has traveled the world, observing the rich and varied traditions of tribal Africa to the modern Italian kitchen. In his journeys, he has experienced the exotic, the unknown and the desolate.

The accomplished culinary expert, James Beard Award winner and social justice advocate is now fighting food waste at home in a partnership with Germany-based supermarket chain ALDI.

When it comes to the United States, Zimmern says Americans need to take an introspective look at their "convenience-driven" society and drastically adjust their habits and behaviors around food consumption.

In a recent conversation with *Waste360*, Zimmern discussed the proliferation of food waste in America, his observations while traveling and some tips about how to reduce food waste at home.

Waste360: You've had the opportunity to travel to many countries. How has this shaped your perception of food waste?

Zimmern: Food waste was talked about in some circles and not a lot of others over the course of my lifetime. It's never been talked about more than it is today. I would go to other countries as a young child with my parents, or as a teenager with my friends or as a professional in my 20s and 30s when I was cooking and traveling to learn and expose myself to other cultures, and then in my 40s and 50s, at a very accelerated level, you know, really exploring the world in a way that only a handful of people are ever afforded the opportunity to. I saw a shocking disparity between the shameless sort of convenience-driven wasteful culture that we have in here in America and

cultures overseas, where the lessons of our collective grandparents and great grandparents are still observed.

I can tell you fantastical stories about tribal Africa, where people literally eat with the seasons - day to day and week to week - in a way that no other people I've ever seen in my life have done so. Or the first people of North America who practice those same things where they're in harmony with nature, and people would not scoff at it, but they say, "well, yeah, but that's the tribal world."

How about going into a kitchen in a modern Italian city? There's not an Italian cook, male or female - I'm not talking about professional, someone in their home - who would ever throw away the end of the heel of a wedge of Parmesan cheese. They would throw it into a super stew to season that super stew. The ends of vegetables in any European household would always be kept to make stocks or soups or broth. Some of those little tips and tricks I saw and was just stunned because it reminded me of being in my grandmother's kitchen in the 60s and I realized that wisdom is just wisdom. It doesn't matter where you're finding it and that we had forsaken wisdom in favor of selfishness.

Waste360: We saw the pandemic last year shut down restaurants. The supply chain was disrupted and food wasn't getting to where it needed to go. From your perspective, how did the coronavirus pandemic accelerate food waste?

Zimmern: This last year, I've been at the tip of the spear on all those issues, whether it's traveling early on in the pandemic to farms and fields to see tens of thousands of pounds of vegetables plowed under or left to rot in a parking lot simply because there were no trucks to come and get them. I've been fighting for the remaking of our distribution systems. All of the 70% of fish that's caught in America and goes to restaurants. Well, what happens when restaurants are closed? That fish has to go somewhere.

I've been front and center, with my shoulder pads on those issues eight hours a day, seven days a week, since beginning of March of last year, and it's horrifying. And there are those of us who were not surprised by it. There were those of us who found that sometimes the solutions were very easy to get those vegetables picked up and taken somewhere else other than restaurants, and restaurants themselves pivoted and became distribution hubs, both for those that were hungry or for first responders.

I think that emergencies and disasters of all types teach us where weaknesses in our systems are. I think we have very short memories. I think that the bigger play here is while we have everyone's attention, while it's fresh in their memories, we need to make sure that we beat back some of the extremes in behavior that we see in our convenience culture and start to teach people about the true nature of food waste and why it's interrelated with our climate crisis, with our personal health crisis, with our hunger crisis and with our immigration crisis here in America. Because there are those for whom food on the table is something that they do not know where their next meals are coming from. But for those that have a good life, we need to be able to do what we can to take some of the pressure off factory farming, to improve our health and wellness to make sure there's more food for the hungry and so on.

Waste360: How will this partnership with ALDI help you educate others about food waste? What do you hope to achieve from an educational and actionable standpoint?

Zimmern: Well, I have to be honest with you, it's very rare that I have been able to find a partner who's actually truly committed to helping solve the problem. This is not a marketing scheme. This is not a PR move. This is a real commitment by this company to make sure that they stand up for the right things. I am so impressed with ALDI's positions on these issues. There are so many companies out there have said oh, we're going to switch to organic eggs by 2050 for our breakfast sandwiches. It takes you 30 years to do that? How about three years, right?

We know that (food) waste in America is 40% and that the majority of food waste in America is pre-consumer contact. To have a major food player like ALDI commit to reducing their own food waste at a corporate level in store by 2030 is a very ambitious goal. It's the right goal and it's an accurate timeframe. I am so delighted to have a partner that understands that. Together we can amplify the real issues here. Imagine what it would take for a company whose business is selling food to allow someone like me to tell people to buy less.

That in and of itself tells you everything you need to know about ALDI's position now. I happen to think that, you know, for everyone in their 20s and 30s, statistically, polling shows that transparency is the number one desire they have for any place that wants their money. [ALDI] understands it's about relationships. They understand that the next generation of consumers care more about right-sized corporate policy than anything else. They believe in transparency. And I believe that ALDI is well positioned by taking this very, very extreme stance that we need to combat food waste. They've spent many years combating hunger, donating tens of millions of pounds of food to feed in America, and now they're turning your attention to waste. And I think it's going to be a huge win for them. And it's the right thing to do. And it's so rare that you get to say that about a big company, I couldn't be happier and prouder to be associated with them.

Waste360: Let's talk about reducing food waste. Please provide some tips about how a person can help with reducing the amount of food that goes to our landfills each year.

Zimmern: My seven tips - I did narrow it down from 14 - I would have preferred to give 300 tips. I think that the big seven are really important and they all work in concert together. That being said, I do have two that I think are a great place for people to start.

Number one: you have to shrink the size of your refrigerator. And the easiest way to do that is to remove a shelf and a bin. American refrigerators are just build too big. The idea was let's have a family be able to shop once a week and stuff that refrigerator and freezer with everything you could possibly imagine. Well, that contributes to food waste, because we all have changeable schedules, things get buried in the backs of bins. We need smaller refrigerators.

In my house, we have a European refrigerator and all my friends, when they come over, are shocked at how small my refrigerator is. But we have the time - we're not time poor - to shop more. I would never tell someone to go out and buy a new refrigerator. But what you can do is take a shelf or a bin out, shrink it and that way you have less space to fill. And you can start to force yourself to shop smarter, use meal plans, use shopping lists better and try to figure out a way to get to a grocery store and extra time a week. I think that puts a huge dent in the amount of food that we waste.

The second thing that we need to do is when you write something down, you have a commitment. And most people don't have a commitment to reduce food waste. My tip for everyone is wherever

your garbage can is - drawer, basket, your cupboard wherever you keep that bin - put a notepad and a pencil right next to that garbage area. Write down everything that you throw away whether it's freezer burn meats, spoiled leftovers, fruit, veggies, milk, dairy, whatever it is. Write it down. Because once you write it down, you'll start to see the individual patterns in your own home. If it's primarily vegetables, you can intervene and grab a couple vegetable soup recipes and start to process your foods before they go bad. Another big group of foods that people traditionally tend to have to throw away are the last five strawberries in the container, the last bottom 20% of blueberries, mushy peaches, things like that. If you see that you're throwing away fruit, you can go online and learn techniques and tips. Number one, you can buy less, but you can also go online and learn 100 different ways that you can take bruised and battered fruit and turn it into freezer jams and jellies, fillings for pies, natural desserts, smoothies, and so on.

I had a friend who had a really curious problem when they were writing down their waste, and it was salad. And I said, "oh, you mean like the lettuce in your refrigerator?" And he's like, "no, I mean, after dinner when we clear away everything. If there's leftover chicken or pork chops, they go in a container, and we use those the next day for breakfast or lunch. But, we have this big salad bowl, we want to eat healthy. So, we make a big salad every night. And half the salad goes to waste. It's a gloppy mess at the bottom of the salad bowl." I said, "What do you mean?" He goes, "well, you know, the salad dressing, the oil and vinegar and the lemon juice and the salt." And I'm like, "oh, I get it." It just sort of breaks down in the salad bowl once it's dressed. And he said, "Yeah, and we throw it out." I said, "well, don't throw it out. Put it in a Ziploc bag or some kind of reusable container and puree it the next day and have a vegetable shake in the morning instead of a fruit and honey or other kind of breakfast high in glycemic value." If you do that, you're not only you're using reducing the waste, where you're actually going to be eating healthier, we shouldn't be having so much sugar and added sugars in our early morning meals. Those kind of things, those kind of learnings only come about when you write things down.

Waste360: Do you have any final thoughts or things you would like people to know about food waste?

Zimmern: I would just love them to know that it truly is an ecosystem. There's no one solution. If you're working on hunger issues and climate issues, you're helping with food waste. If you're working on food waste, and health and wellness issues, you're helping with our climate crisis and our hunger issues. Those four big tent poles, along with the fifth being our immigration problem and workers' rights, are all intertwined and part of our food ecosystem that is all inextricably linked. I would tell people that food awareness is one of the most valuable pieces of education we can provide ourselves with because it touches so many other tent poles. Sadly, eating well and eating right in America has become a class privilege, which is another reason I applaud ALDI's mission statement to make sustainability more affordable for Americans. Remember, the type of shopping experience you have at ALDI is designed to save people money. Their business plan is designed around a different shopping experience. That in and of itself is something that supports all of those totems. So, you know, once again, an educated consumer is the best customer.

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