

Let's Talk Food Waste in Austria - Impact Hub Vienna

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Austrians throw away one-fifth of all food they buy ([Source](#)), of which 14.5% is avoidable or partly avoidable and amounts to 1 billion Euro per year ([Source](#)). Austrian consumers are responsible for almost half of the total waste, while agricultural production generates around 30 per cent of the total food waste. Farmers, manufacturers, retailers, and foodservice operators (e.g. hotels, restaurants, caterers) in Austria either produce too much food, which never reaches consumers, or experience food losses through inefficient storage, transportation, or demand planning.

Local food loss and waste are never local – they cause ripples impacting market food prices and also contribute to global carbon dioxide emissions. Countries such as Austria, with its developed infrastructure and available economic and social resources, need to lead the way in creating solutions to systematic food waste.

Understanding Food Waste

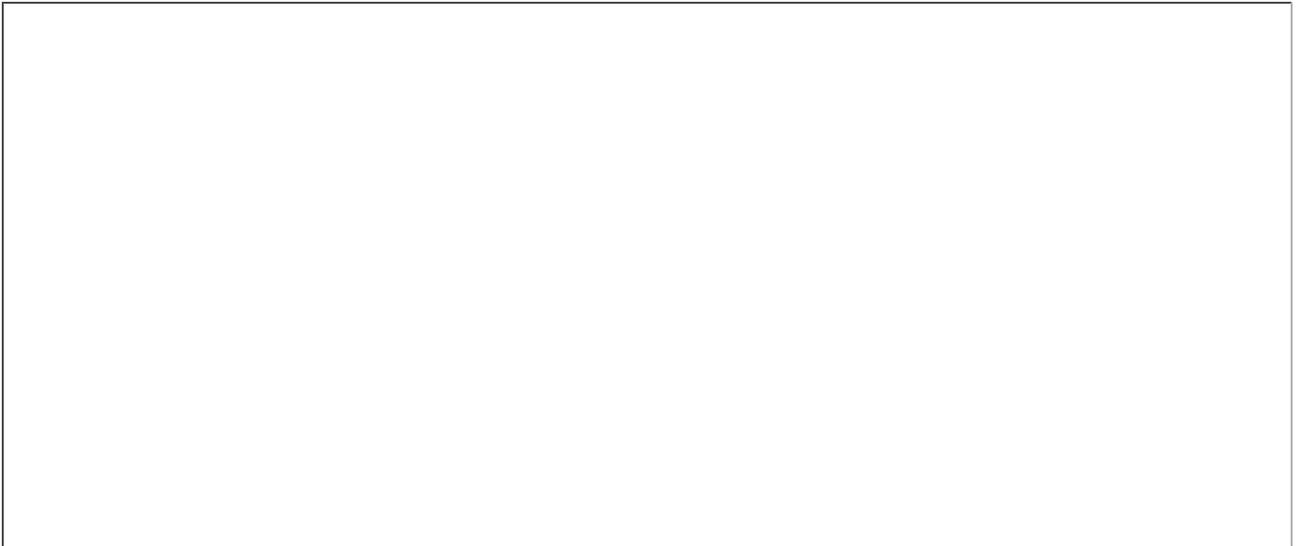
First, a simple distinction: food loss vs food waste, **as defined by FAO**. **Food loss** refers to any food that is lost in the supply chain between the producer and the market. This may be the result of pre-harvest problems, such as pest infestations, or problems in harvesting, handling, storage, packing or transportation. Some of the underlying causes of food loss include the inadequacy of infrastructure, markets, price mechanisms or even the lack of legal frameworks. **Food waste**, on the other hand, refers to the discarding or alternative (non-food) use of food that is safe and nutritious for human consumption.

In developed countries, at the retail level, large quantities of food are wasted due to quality standards that over-emphasize appearance. In developing countries, the problem is essentially due to inadequate harvest techniques, poor post-harvest management, lack of suitable infrastructure, processing and packaging, and a lack of marketing information ([Source](#)).

Impact of Food Waste on Resources

Globally, the blue water footprint (i.e. the consumption of surface and groundwater resources) of food waste is about 250 km³, which is equivalent to three times the volume of Lake Geneva. Produced but uneaten food occupies almost 1.4 billion hectares of land; this represents close to 30% of the world's agricultural land area. While it is difficult to estimate the impact on biodiversity at a global level, food waste is indirectly linked to such practices as monocropping and agriculture expansion into wild areas. These practices result in significant biodiversity loss, including mammals, birds, fish and amphibians ([Source](#)).

In 2011, FAO estimated that each year one-third of all food produced in the world for human consumption never reached the consumer's table, but still generated 4.4 carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO₂-eq), or about 8% of total anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions annually. This means that the contribution of food waste emissions to global warming is almost equivalent (87%) to **global road transport emissions**.



Source: Food wastage footprint & Climate Change <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bb144e.pdf>

When considering food waste and food loss, we also need to look closer at the social and economic impact. According to FAO, in addition to the \$1 trillion of direct economic costs per year, the environmental costs of food waste reach around \$700 billion and social costs reach around \$900 billion ([Source](#)).

The costs associated with food waste for EU-28 in 2012 are estimated at around 143 billion euros. Two-thirds of the costs are associated with food waste from households (around 98 billion euros). This is due to households a) having more edible food waste than any other sector and b) the costs associated with a tonne of food accumulating along the supply chain (e.g. processing, packaging, retailing costs) ([Source](#)).

Food Waste As a Byproduct of a Poor System

It is true that, in Austria, consumers can significantly contribute to minimising food waste by changing their habits. However, the issue of food waste cannot be solved solely at the consumer level. Food waste needs to be tackled at policy and infrastructure level to prevent the loss of valuable resources even before they reach consumers' houses. Raising awareness alone will not work if the evidence-based policies preventing food waste are not implemented to transform systems and processes.

One of Vienna's startups, [Paradeisa- Der Online Hofladen](#), currently participating in [RE:WIEN](#) 2019 accelerator program, approached the issue of food waste by changing the way consumers in Vienna shop for local products. Austria is an agricultural country with an abundance of locally produced vegetables and fruits. But access to these products is limited – either because of availability in local stores or pricing.

Paradeisa, run by Markus Sitek (Management), Isabella Schieszler-Lotschak (Market Development), Michael Apostol, and Vinzenz Schwarz (both Software Development), wants to close the distance between consumers wanting seasonal, regional food at fair prices, and the producers, who want to sell their goods. The direct selling method prevents food loss occurring through traditional retail channels. Paradeisa works together with small-scale enterprises in the region.

“In Austria, we are lucky to still have a lot of small farmers who produce excellent food in our vicinity. Unfortunately, it is difficult for consumers – especially in urban areas – to easily get this delicious food. This is why I created Paradeisa. My vision is to make local and seasonal food easily accessible to a large number of people – at a fair price,” explains Markus Sitek, founder of Paradeisa

Sustainable production methods and animal welfare play an essential role in the selection of producers. By reducing transport distance and avoiding unnecessary packaging, the carbon footprint of the company is significantly reduced.

Becoming a Conscious Buyer

Combating food waste in a country such as Austria heavily relies on raising awareness of what the food waste means to us and the actions an individual can take to reduce their waste.

One of the ways to mitigate food loss at your own house is to become more aware of how much perishable food you buy and how fast you actually consume it. There is a financial incentive too: Austrian households could save up to €300 annually by planning what and how much food they buy ([Source](#)).

“At Paradeisa the food producers only deliver what our customers ordered and paid for in advance. So they do not have to return home from the market with unsold goods. Furthermore, our clients consume more consciously. They only buy what they really need and are not tempted by big size offers and special quantity discounts”, commented Markus.

Aside from controlling how much to buy, we also need to change our perception of food quality labels and how they dictate food purchases and consumption. The countless number of quality labels and marks confuse consumers and lead to uncertainty on how to make purchase decisions. A homepage specifically set up by [“Verein zur Förderung von Lebensmitteln mit erhöhter Qualität”](#) (Association for the Promotion of Foods of Higher Quality, VQL) provides a good overview of the recognised national quality labels and EU marks for foods.

The ominous “Best Before” stamp is a particularly problematic label. A recent study carried out by the European Commission, published in February 2018, estimates that up to 10% of the 88 million tonnes of food waste generated annually in the EU are linked to date marking ([Source](#)).

The food expiration date does not actually indicate the timeframe for food being edible – the dates solely indicate freshness and are used by manufacturers to convey when the product is at its peak. Therefore, “Best Before” date should not be used as an indicator of when food should be thrown away.

And let’s not forget about the infamous vegetable and fruit “beauty standards” enforced by big retailers...

“Our clients also buy – and even appreciate – vegetables and fruits which are not necessarily „ideally” shaped,” added Markus. *“Farmers are not forced to throw away a large part of their harvest only because their produce does not meet the standards of big retail companies. That’s why direct sales from food producers to consumers also have a huge impact on food waste mitigation.”*

The Food Emergency

According to [Future Agenda](#), the current predictions of population growth mean that by 2050 we will need 60% more calories every day to feed 9 billion people. If we cut current food loss and food waste, this gap will shrink by 22%. However, solving the issue of food waste and hunger doesn’t only rely on minimising the losses – it requires a major policy overhaul, especially in terms of making nutritious food accessible and affordable to everyone. Let’s not forget local farmers, who should become part of any sustainable fair food chain to support the growing demand for food.

Only when we establish a healthy, circular, and resource-efficient food system can we talk about truly solving the issue of food waste in Austria and globally.

Visit [Paradeisa](#) online to find out more about what they offer.