

UNFATHOMABLE WASTE

BY JAN ELLEN SPIEGEL

JONATHAN BLOOM '99 NEVER EXPECTED TO BE A NATIONAL AUTHORITY ON FOOD WASTE

It wasn't as if Jonathan Bloom '99 had dreamed of being a food waste expert.

"Whenever anyone calls me a food waste expert, I just laugh. How can you hear that and not?" he asks. "I often say I never set out to be a food waste expert, how could you? It's not something that you even knew existed or that the world needed."

But it exists and arguably Bloom is the guy. And if you believe his own writing, the world—or at least the United States—may indeed need a food waste expert. Badly.

Take the opening image of his book, *American Wasteland* (Da Capo Press, 2010): the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., filled with food. That, Bloom says, is how much food America wastes everyday. Hyperbolic? Maybe. But no matter how you calculate it, America wastes unfathomable amounts of food. Thirty-four million tons a year by the official Environmental Protection Agency count. Forty percent of all food produced by other counts. The numbers are staggering, and it is Jonathan Bloom who, more than anyone else, has brought them into public view.

American Wasteland is a comprehensive, intricately referenced look at what farmers leave in the fields; what grocery stores, restaurants, and other food estab-

lishments dump; and what consumers waste. It explores why it happens and the implications, or "3-Es"—environmental, economic and ethical.

Bloom points to a tangle of relationships and a bloated food chain reflected

arly treatment is a challenge he overcomes through his own adventures in classic shoe-leather journalism.

He is on the ground, surreptitiously at times, viewing the American food system from the inside: he works on a farm, at a supermarket, a catering company, and even a month at a McDonald's to get the kinds of answers he couldn't otherwise. The folks he worked around didn't know—and still don't—of his ulterior motive. At least one person suspected him at McDonald's, and a former classmate almost blew his cover at the supermarket.

He also spent time with gleanng organizations—they strip farm fields after the farmers are "done" harvesting; food recovery operations that repurpose unused food for food pantries, soup kitchens, and other distribution venues; and even dumpster divers determined to reclaim perfectly good food (in the case of scroungers—often half-eaten) otherwise left for trash and destined for overstuffed landfills and stressed waste systems. He prowled around people's refrigerators, poked around buffet spreads at a Bob Dylan concert and a Mets game to see how excess food was handled, and prodded anyone worth prodding.

In the end, *American Wasteland* is a series of true-life tales and eye-popping reali-



in how we feed our poor; the availability of affordable, quality produce; the impact on health—especially the obesity epidemic in the United States; and what we do with our trash. Making it more than a dry schol-

ties that may mean you'll never look at your grocery cart, refrigerator, and trash can the same way.

It would seem the International Association of Culinary Professionals agrees. In June it awarded *American Wasteland* top honors in its new "Food Matters" category. In the world of food writing, that places Bloom on a very prominent map.

Food waste, though, is something of a story within a story for Bloom: how he got from a degree in history at Wesleyan with no notion of food waste and not even an inclination toward journalism to being an award-winning author, authority, and ultimately advocate on the subject.

The tale he tells is on an oppressively humid morning that will later turn very stormy in Durham, N.C., where Bloom, a Boston-area native, now lives. His World War II-era house is quiet and tidy, with only faint indications that a toddler, his son Bruce, now

learned about food waste.

"My fellow intern, who was there that day, said he was kind of watching me because he knew I really liked food," Bloom says. "He saw this lightbulb go off in my head."

Food waste with all its tentacles became Bloom's master's thesis, but there was an unintended shift.

"One of the comments from one of my faculty members was, 'It's clear that you're a crusader for this topic,'" Bloom recalls. "And I remember being taken aback by that. I started that project as a journalist and transitioned, unknowingly, into more of an advocate."

Bloom turned down an offer with Bloomberg, opting to take food waste to the next level—a book. Or at least try.

"Making it happen was difficult," he admits. "There were a few years of real struggle where I was trying to figure out how to get the attention of the publishing world."

The answer was *wastedfood.com*—a

is something that hadn't received much attention."

Bloom, she says, is a natural storyteller with just the right light touch for an otherwise serious, potentially boring topic. "Low key is an asset; he doesn't preach," she says. "What he does is let the facts speak for themselves. 'This is what I've seen; this is what I've heard; this is what I know.'"

What Bloom now knows more than anything is that there is no single answer for how to minimize food waste. Do you get farmers to grow less excess? Do you change the expiration dating system, which most food experts agree is confusing and results in the dumping of lots of good food? Do you get restaurants to cut back on portion sizes? Do you get rid of the Costco monster sizing mentality that in all likelihood results in over-purchasing by consumers? Do you educate, educate, educate—and hope for the kind of rapid societal changes we saw years

BLOOM SAYS IF HE COULD MAKE ONE GRAND POLICY CHANGE, IT WOULD BE TO BAN ORGANICS FROM LANDFILLS.

at day care, lives here. His wife, Emily, is at work. His impossibly well-trained mostly golden retriever, Maisy, is lounging. A poster—also WWII vintage—that says "Food Is Ammunition, Don't Waste It," offers the only visible hint of Bloom's passion.

A few years after college and a post-9/11 layoff, Bloom explains, he fell into freelance reporting. Coming from a family of low-key foodies, Bloom says he's always liked eating, though given his beanpole build, it's a little hard to believe. He gravitated toward food stories, discovered he had a flare for, and interest in, journalism and finally took the graduate school plunge at the University of North Carolina.

But it was a summer 2005 internship at Bloomberg News in Washington, D.C., that included a volunteer day at the heralded D.C. Central Kitchen—all-purpose soup kitchen and food provider to those in need—that changed Bloom's life. While stirring a vat of tomato sauce fashioned from cast-off food components, Bloom

blog he still maintains. And after two years establishing food-waste cred, collecting information, getting his name out and living in fear that someone would write his book before he did, a reporter from *The New York Times* called because he needed a food waste expert.

"At that point I'm thinking this could be the best-case scenario or it could be terrible," Bloom recalls thinking. "Is this guy going to steal my thunder and use all my research and is someone else with more access to the publishing world going to run with it?"

It turned out to be Bloom's "Julie and Julia" moment. He got an agent and a book contract. "I should point out that we retain the film rights to this book," he says, laughing hard. "Which I find hilarious."

Renee Sedliar, his editor at Da Capo, saw the book dovetailing perfectly with the tremendous current interest in food in general and the local food movement in particular.

"The dark underside is that we waste a lot of this precious food," she says. "This

ago, when mandatory recycling took hold, and more recently in the shift to reusable shopping bags?"

"What I've discovered—so many of these things that are seemingly common sense answers to reducing waste aren't common sense to everyone," he says. "Some people don't even save leftovers. They just say it's not worth the time."

Bloom says if he could make one grand policy change, it would be to ban organics from landfills. "That would create this upward pressure on the food chain where if you can't just go in and throw the stuff out, then you're going to treat it differently and you're not going to waste as cavalierly," he says.

He also talks about the need for a food waste czar. The EPA has recently re-dedicated itself to the food waste problem, which has been increasing, according to Jean Schwab, a senior EPA program analyst, who also leads the national food recovery initiative. She appeared recently on a webinar

with Bloom, whom she calls "very passionate about food waste."

The EPA's primary focus, Schwab says, is on the big waste generators—giant food retailers and grocery stores, restaurant chains, and institutions like schools and hospitals—offering online tools to calculate economic and environmental impacts.

She points to one success story from Sodexo, the food service company. It measured and tracked food waste at eight univer-

to those in need and support farmers by paying them for their excess. Her first reaction to Bloom's book when he contacted her was defensive. "I thought, 'Ugh, I don't want to be associated with that,'" she recalls. "We're not about giving the seconds, rotten food, the stuff we wouldn't eat in our own family. It's about the firsts."

But a friend convinced her to read *American Wasteland*. "Jonathan's book and Jonathan himself have helped me fill in the fuller chain of logic to supplement what we do and why we do it," she admits, regretting her earlier skepticism. "And what I noticed about him immediately is that he does put his time where his mouth is."

Bloom now volunteers for Gifford's group and otherwise practices what he preaches. All it takes is a look inside his black, smaller-than-standard Frigidaire refrigerator. A study in order, with containers, plastic bags, and—he admits—too many condiments squeezed in the door shelves.

Nothing is too small to save: something, he says, that goes back to his mother—who laughs at the notion he learned about leftover tactics from her, though she admits to being a saver.

Susan Bloom recalls that even as a kid, Jonathan could make sandwiches out of anything he found in the refrigerator, an aptitude that continues to hold him in good stead. Leftovers

often get repurposed in frittatas, grilled cheese, pizza, and the house favorite—burritos. And indeed, inside the Frigidaire is a small Revere Ware pan with so-called burrito guts: rice, beans, zucchini, green pepper, rutabaga, tomato, and sweet potato—mostly fresh. A thimble-full or so of leftover restaurant hot sauce will join the end product along with a saved avocado half.

The walnut pesto incident notwithstanding

ing (a not-very-good recipe that he tried desperately to repurpose as salad dressing and sandwich spread before giving up), Bloom says he's really not a leftovers extremist—although the broccolini burrito raised some eyebrows and he did 'fess up to rinsing the gelatinous sauce off leftover Chinese broccoli and chicken before reconstituting it with rice. But the mouthful of cake frosting he hasn't had the heart to dump is likely destined for the counter-top composter and eventually the big one in the backyard. So is a container of pasta and meat, made while he was out of town. "It's a classic example of what not to do," he says. "Out of sight, out of mind."

That kind of personal-use advice will be added to the paperback version of *American Wasteland*, due out this fall.

Emily, who has more-or-less-happily ceded the kitchen to her husband, has made her peace with the role of food waste minimization in their lives. She does, however, own up to dumping things when Jonathan is out of town, which happens frequently in his current role as food waste evangelist, speaker-for-hire and general food waste "quasi Pied Piper," in his words.

"It's a good thing to do; it's important work," Emily says. "There's huge opportunity for profound influence on various aspects of our culture. It's awesome and exciting."

For his part, Bloom would like to figure out how to turn the momentum of his book into tangible action on food recovery and redistribution.

"I'm right now trying to think about how to pull something like that off," he says. "I'm trying to prompt behavior change a bit and get people to think about how they approach food."

"It goes hand in hand with eating better and that is simpatico with eating local and often eating healthier foods. So I see it as part of this movement to eat better, eat locally, and just be connected to your food more."

In the meantime, ask him what he is, at the moment, and the answer is at once earnest and flip.

"I'm a food waste expert!" he pronounces. And then he lets out a big laugh.

Jan Ellen Spiegel is a freelance reporter and longtime food writer based in Connecticut who has always like cooking with leftovers.



Jonathan Bloom '99 has examined the myriad ways our culture wastes food and offers both insight and tips on overcoming careless—and extravagant—habits.

sities and was able to change procedures to lower it by 30 percent.

"The biggest bang for the buck really is waste prevention," she says. "The best use of resources is not creating waste in the first place."

Less waste means less for recovery groups—a bit of tug-and-pull for people like Margaret Gifford, who started Farmer Food Share in the Durham area to get food