

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

**Household Food Waste and Consumer Culture:  
Reflections on Italian Behaviour**

**This is the author's manuscript**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1690226> since 2019-02-05T14:31:14Z

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)



# Household Food Waste and Consumer Culture: Reflections on Italian Behaviour

Maria Cristina Martinengo

*Department of Socio-Economical Sciences, Statistics and Mathematics, Turin University*

This work includes some considerations about household food waste in Italy. Consumer types are presented according to their food waste and sobriety behaviors, along with a discussion about the reasons for such waste. Finally, some considerations about the relationship between food waste and socioeconomic context are drawn, with particular regard to consumption culture.

**Keywords:** Household Food Waste, Consumer Behaviors, Culture of Consumption.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This work deals with the question of household food waste in Italy.

In the first part the most recent data on this subject are analysed and in particular the drivers of food waste and its relationship with the socio-economic characteristics of consumers.

The second part includes reflections on the relationship between household food waste and the consumer culture which has characterised western society in the past few decades.

Finally the obstacles to reducing waste are discussed as well as the policies which could overcome them and increase awareness of the problem and its consequences.

Food waste is multi-faceted and involves all stages of the chain of production and distribution; household food waste is one of them.

The data presented by the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition<sup>1</sup> on the weight relative to waste within the European chain, show that the end consumers is responsible for 43% of all food waste, exceeding the proportions wasted in food processing (39%), the food service sector (14%) or even retail/wholesale (5%).

If these data are exact, consumers are responsible for the most significant percentage of food waste and echo the words many of us heard our parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts say when, as children, we wouldn't finish our food: "Shame on you! You are wasting food while children are dying of hunger." Indeed, the size of household food waste, in addition to hyper-nutrition which robs calories from the global supply, points to the individual consumer as a crucial player whose behaviours, good or bad, are increasingly more relevant. However, to trigger consumer change certain conditions need to be met: the first is a

question of values which accept that waste carries a negative value; the second involves consumer empowerment in regards to knowledge and capability, and finally the third depends on the willingness of consumers to change some of their behaviours, despite the time and effort required.

## 2. HOUSEHOLD FOOD WASTE IN ITALY

The report Knowledge for Expo-Waste Watcher<sup>2</sup> on household food waste in Italy shows Italians waste about 76 kg of food per person each year, placing them below the European average. Household food waste costs 8,7 billion Euros each year and 7,06 Euros per family a week.

The highest percentage of food waste comes from fruit (51,2%) and vegetables (41,2%), followed by cheese (39,3%), fresh bread (27,8%), milk (25,2%) and yogurt (24,4%). Cooked foods are thrown away much less often and do not make up more than 10%.

The main reasons for household waste are well known<sup>3</sup> and are confirmed by the Knowledge for Expo-Waste Watcher report: bad or even a complete lack of shopping planning, preparation of too much food, poor storage, stock planning inefficiencies, marketing strategies and special offers by retailers, confusion about labelling on food. Yet, the most frequently reported reasons are related to food perishability ("it had mould," "it was expired," "it had gone bad," "it didn't smell or taste good") and these also reflect on the way food is purchased, prepared and stored.

The survey identified 9 Italian waste-types based on the group of causes that led to the waste itself.

Since it aimed to evaluate the Italians' aptitude towards waste in general, the report showed how only one of the waste-types can be placed in the average 7,06 Euros weekly, while the waste-types below the average represented about 46% of the population, and the number above

average, about 39%. On the whole, more than half of the Italians are situated on or above the average.

A more careful analysis of waste-types identified by the report revealed some interesting points.

The first is that the typology quantitatively more relevant (around 35%) is below the average. For this segment of the population food waste represents a serious problem in regards to sustainability, and the people included in this category state that their waste comes from an objective non-usability of the food and not from an excess in the kitchen, nor from the tendency to buy more food than they consume.

The second point has to do with the relationship between waste and socio-cultural resources, a relationship that shows how waste grows as these resources increase. In synthesis, it seems clear that waste types belonging to average or above average groups have a medium to high standard of living; but more importantly, they have high levels of social inclusion and participate actively in social and cultural activities.

Being classified below average, then, seems to depend on two factors: strong values oriented to sustainability which determine behaviours that try to reduce food waste, or social and economic marginality which often accompanies age and “forces” people to live a more frugal lifestyle. Moreover, it must be emphasized that low income, in addition to old age, seems to be characteristic of a marginalized group of people with respect to contemporary forms of social life and consumer behaviour. At the same time, they are tied to traditional models which provide both the competency and the “know-how” to reduce waste.

The economic crisis that our country has been suffering for some time now has contributed to a progressive reduction in food waste, as noted in the report Knowledge for Expo-Waste Watcher as well as in the research that Coldiretti (the leading associations of farmers in Italy and Europe) presented at Eating City, a lunch against waste.<sup>4</sup> According to Coldiretti, household food waste has decreased by 25% in the past 5 years due to greater care when shopping and preparing food.

The influence of the crisis and the growth of environmental awareness appear to be the main factors influencing the behaviour of Italians, in addition to the development of information and educational strategies as well as the influence of the mass media. The report Knowledge for Expo-Waste Watcher reported that the number of Italians has decreased who believe that the warning signs regarding environmental issues are alarmist and those who think that economic and job development should be regulated to protect the environment has increased. Moreover, most Italians say they are convinced that a person’s daily habits can personally contribute to protecting the environment, but only a fifth of those interviewed think that there is a real commitment to doing so.

### 3. CONSIDERATIONS ON HOUSEHOLD WASTE

In 2012 the publishing house, Laterza, published Emanuela Scarpellini’s book entitled “A TAVOLA! Gli italiani in 7 pranzi,” (At the Table, Italians in 7 Meals). It is very useful to defining and understanding household food waste.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to a precise analysis of Italian food consumption since the 1800s, the writer describes 7 typical meals in 7 periods and different social classes: a nobleman’s meal during the unification of Italy, a farmer’s meal in the area around Cuneo at the end of the 1800s, a working class dinner in the years leading up to the First World War, a lunch during the Fascist autarky, a working class meal during the economic boom, a lunch for small businessmen in the wealthy 1970s and 80s in the rich territory of the North-East and a meal in a small family of intellectual workers at the beginning of the 1990s, when some of the consumer trends that still concern food today—localism, naturalness, tradition, health-consciousness—began to take shape. Finally, it offers two different scenarios for meals of the future; one in which technology and chemistry prevail and the other in which traditions, seasonal and typical foods remain popular. Those who read through the book, lingering over the description of the 7 meals, will note a few aspects that seem relevant to the discussion on food waste.

The first aspect is the progressive increase in the amount of food eaten at meals, up to the peak of the economic boom, at which point it decreased in the years to follow with greater focus on the quality of what was eaten.

The second aspect concerns the increased amounts of food in the pantry, which replaces the need to shop daily and offers various options when deciding to what to eat.

Lastly, the third involves the change from an almost exclusively vegetarian diet to a protein diet, rich in milk and dairy products, meat and fish.

To sum up, we are on the road to abundance: abundance in terms of quantity of food, an abundance in nutrition and an abundance in choices of foods available.

This very word, abundance, represents one of the main keys to understanding food waste, in that waste represents a necessary by-product of abundance; to search for and obtain abundance, just as Italians have during the economic development of their country, implies and “contains” waste which, however, is reduced wherever moderation or scarcity prevail.

Various economic, social and cultural phenomena have contributed to sustaining the combination abundance/waste.

The first is industrial growth that is accompanied by the process of urbanization: during the economic boom, farmers abandoned their fields and moved to the city in search of a guaranteed and higher industrial wage, fostering the rise of a consumer model which goes beyond localism and the community horizons while embracing “citizenship” of

the new industrial world and a wider society that includes the most advanced nations which share similar goods and lifestyles.<sup>6</sup>

The success of a consumer model which places value on city life, or rather belonging to the industrial society, as epitomized in the American society, advanced the process of homogenization of the Italian population in terms of lifestyle and values. Moreover, social success became associated with the city and industry and the goods they had to offer.

The industrial city offered the opportunity to create new needs in the population, needs which traditional contexts could not meet. Thus, a process of urban-industrial socialization was created whose contexts and forms of life were sought after by immigrants as well as by those who were on the verge of moving or who remained in the South or in the countryside. Consequently, there was a rapid disintegration of the forms of life and traditional cultural models.

In the field of nutrition, the transformation in diet was striking: where food had been scarce or lacking in variety, it became a rich, diversified high protein diet (in 1968 the average daily threshold of 3000 calories was exceeded) whose symbols were meat and sugar, almost completely lacking in the traditional farmer's meals and consumed only on special occasions.

During the years of development the expenditure for food increased most for industrialized products which contained prices but also the know-how to respond to social and cultural changes: not only the cultural and physical abandonment of the fields, but also the increased number of women on the job market. The "intermediate products" like stock cubes, tomato sauce, baking mixes, frozen foods, along with other ready-made products like tinned food or sauces, were helpful to modern women who had less time to spend in the kitchen and remembered and knew less about traditional food preparation.

The progressive change in female roles represents the second relevant phenomenon supporting the combination abundance/waste. The increase in women working outside the home made it necessary to reduce housework in general, which included the work of consumption. Reducing the number of shopping trips, filling the pantry, using intermediate food products or ready-made food, cooking large quantities, represented a near must for women with two careers and contributed to relieving them of some of the weight from the many and diverse household jobs they needed to carry out.

Finally, the third phenomenon is cultural and has to do with the symbolic aspect of food and the search for abundance.

Abundance is a display of status, as Veblen teaches us in regards to the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy class;<sup>7</sup> it shows belonging and sociability, it promotes socialization; it is the recognition of another's status and finally, it is transgression in regards to daily spending

and poverty, as the studies on traditional country holidays show.<sup>8</sup>

The period of economic development and the search for abundance by numerous classes of the population was followed by the post-Ford society in which the economy of scope took hold and was characterised by an extremely wide range of product choices. From the consumer's point of view, the economy of scope offered a freedom of choice, real or unreal, never known before.<sup>9</sup>

This freedom also assumes abundance and its effects in terms of waste. The gratification of one's desires and the continuous rising of new ones assume that goods will be available and usable *hic et nunc*. Opening the refrigerator or the pantry to find a variety of foods, fresh or preserved, ready-made or not, represents an example of how the gratification of a momentary desire requires abundance and how, obviously, the abundance available can easily degenerate into waste.

The economic and social crisis our country is experiencing has challenged the forms of consumption connected to the economy of scope for two reasons: economics and values.

On the one hand, reduced economic resources have driven a part of the population to give up abundance and pay more attention to waste; on the other, consumers have become concerned with new values, such as sustainability, consumer ethics and moderation; indeed, scholars have even hypothesized a "post-growth" irreversible change in the consumer model. With this term they indicate the rejection of the consumer lifestyle typical of the years of economic development and those which followed.<sup>10</sup>

According to Fabris, waste as a negative value represents one of the post-growth dimensions, or rather a new model that does not deny the centrality of consumption, but is in opposition to the hyper-consumerism typical of the consumer culture in western society over the past decades.<sup>11</sup>

The post-growth model, in addition to waste as a negative value, includes other dimensions like environmental sustainability, ethical consumption and the replacement of the underlying principle of ownership for one of access. The report Knowledge for Expo- Waste Watcher confirms some of the changes postulated from the post-growth model. While environmental sensitivity is growing, the problem of food waste also seems to be more relevant to the population: 90% of Italians consider waste very or fairly serious, almost 80% say it worries them and almost 90% demonstrate the desire for more information on the consequences of waste as well as on ways to reduce it.

Behaviours also seem to be changing: almost 60% of Italians say they almost never throw away leftovers and many re-use them in some way.

National data show, then, a growth in consumer sensitivity and a general interest in issues of waste: certainly turning attitudes into behaviours is more difficult and is slowed down by the more common and desirable

means of consumption as well as by consolidated daily habits.

One final consideration concerns, in fact, the obstacles that seem particularly important to promoting more moderate and mindful behaviours.

The obstacles are tied to the attitudes and work of consumption necessary to reduce household waste and the value that individuals attach to avoiding waste.

The former can be traced back to the pleasure of irresponsibility, which leads to behaviours that do not contain waste, optimism for the future of the ecosystem which makes it possible to believe one's own behaviour does not matter, and scepticism towards contradictory information from knowledgeable sources in mass media that regard health, environment and nutrition.

With a more widespread awareness that waste represents a negative value, an initial consideration is related to the negotiation between freedom and obligations; as said previously, the economy of scope promotes the freedom—real or unreal—of consumers to choose at any time how to satisfy their desires. Complying with ethical obligation to respect food and, with this, the environment and people globally, objectively limits this freedom.

A good example of this limitation is given by the report Knowledge for Expo- Waste Watcher itself and shows how an active lifestyle which keeps one outside the home encourages waste: going out to lunch or dinner often to satisfy a moment's desire or to engage in social life, means that the food at home is used differently than planned and many foods may begin to deteriorate or spoil. Wasting less means, in this case, deciding not to do what you want in order to respect an ethical principle and carry out the required work of consumption to eat the food purchased. For this reason the term "negotiation" has been used: it is a matter of negotiating with yourself to decide what is more important: the personal desire or the value to respect food.

The second aspect is related to what was said in the first paragraph of the article on the relationship between social inclusion and food waste. The higher the economic, social and cultural resources are and the more intense social life and free-time activities are, the greater the waste will be. It was already noted that, in this case, waste is the result of the need to reduce the work of consumption to have time for expressive, fun or cultural activities that a large part of the population will choose, unless there are strong ethical values for sustainability which cause a revision of the personal hierarchy of values.

Finally, the third aspect is the distribution of the work load of consumption based on gender.

A survey carried out by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT)<sup>12</sup> on the use of time and gender roles shows how housework in which virtuous behaviours reduce household waste is, for the most part, still done by women and that female roles are reproduced. In Italian families 97% of the

cooking is done by women, who also do 60% of the shopping and errands. The same survey evinces that, inside the family, daughters contribute more to household activities than their fathers.

Reduction of household waste, then, is prevalently a woman's job and the same women seem to be aware of their role in the process of empowerment as consumers, as a recent report by CERMES-Bocconi shows. In this report "Donne che combattono la crisi,"<sup>13</sup> (Women fighting the crisis) two important issues emerge for household waste: the first is women's awareness that they have an edge over men in how to face the crisis because of their knowledge and experience as homemakers, and the second is a request to lighten and simplify their daily lifestyle. These two issues depict ambivalence between their confidence in themselves and abilities and their stress related to a heavy work load and responsibility in the home. Certainly women seem willing to take on more responsibility for the housework and consumption during the crisis, but the weight of women's activities also needs to be reduced to slow down the isolation of women themselves.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS WHICH POLICIES AGAINST HOUSEHOLD WASTE?

The subject of food waste is particularly relevant today, not just because of the growth in the population's sensitivity to environmental issues and the numerous events public organizations have undertaken and tested to reduce it, but also because the focus of the upcoming Expo 2015 is on the topic of food waste.

It is clear that actions to reduce household waste involve multiple sectors: production, distribution, consumers and finally institutions and associations which work in the field of food education and responsible consumption.

All concerned can implement good practices to reduce food waste: to cite a few, the use of surpluses from production, promotions, discounts on products expiring in retail and wholesale sectors, single portion or divisible packaging, shortening of the supply chain, etc.

However, the focus of these considerations is the consumer. Previously it was said that the responsibility weighs on the consumer as an individual: this player, according to the report Knowledge for Expo- Waste Watcher has become more aware of the problem of food waste and, in general, would like more information, especially on the environmental damage and its negative effects on the national economy. There is also wide support for the idea that schools should take on the education against waste. Other types of measures such as smaller or larger packages and paying taxes based on the amount of rubbish produced are less popular. However, while the percentage of those who advised against taxing individuals in proportion to the amount of waste produced is smaller, it is still relevant.

One discrepancy emerges between the problem of other direction based on sanctions against waste and the request

for knowledge, information and tools to make it easier for individuals to reduce it autonomously.

The measures reported by consumers are congruent with those desired, promoted or set up by various local and European institutions and by associations which work to provide information or pressure policy-makers, production and distribution to take steps to reduce waste. Taking a different approach, although limited, the Coldiretti has activated an interesting initiative which aims to pass on traditional and local know-how on re-using leftovers. It hinges on the growing interest for food and cooking and uses such interest to make values tied to sustainability more popular.

In any case, the reflections made in this work might suggest still another area of intervention. The years of the crisis have driven the beginning of a cultural turn in the direction of environmental sustainability which promotes the reduction of food waste. This reduction might really be meaningful if the values are able to trigger and maintain continuous virtuous behaviour for most of the population. As described previously, these are costly behaviours in terms of work of consumption and are often at odds with those connected to other values such as sociability and self-realization through social and cultural activities.

For this, in addition to other educational and informative activities, possible sanctions and, in general, a growing awareness of the problem, it seems necessary to facilitate the work of consumption especially for women. This

means that the subject of food waste cannot be dealt with separately from the problem of a fair distribution of the work load in the home so that all members of the family participate in it.

#### Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

#### References and Notes

1. Barilla center for food and nutrition, *Lo Spreco Alimentare: Cause, Impatti e Proposte*, Parma (2012).
2. Knowledge for expo-waste watcher, *Rapporto 2013 Sullo Spreco Domestico*, Milano (2013).
3. D. Evans, *Sociology* 46 (2011).
4. Coldiretti-SWG, *I Comportamenti Degli Italiani Nel Tempo Della Crisi*, Milano (2013).
5. E. Scarpellini, *A TAVOLA! Gli italiani in 7 pranzi*, Laterza, Bari (2012).
6. F. Alberoni, *Consumi e Società*, Il Mulino, Bologna (1964).
7. T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, edited by B. W. Huebsch, New York (1918).
8. B. Hayden and S. Villeneuve, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011).
9. G. Lipovetsky, *Le bonheur paradoxal, Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*, Gallimard, Paris (2006).
10. G. Fabris, *La società post-crescita, Consumi e stili di vita*, Egea, Milano (2010).
11. G. Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*, Sage, New York (2005).
12. ISTAT, *Uso del Tempo e Ruoli di Genere, Argomenti* (2012), p. 43.
13. CERMES-Bocconi, *Donne Che Combattono la Crisi*, Milano (2013).

Received: 14 January 2014. Accepted: 22 February 2014.