

# Leftovers Through History

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We all know we're supposed to reduce our food waste, but what exactly is the difference between waste and leftovers? Eleanor Barnett is a historian whose book *Leftovers: a history of food waste and preservation* takes a much broader look at food scarcity, food surpluses and the byproducts of food production that people don't or won't eat.

**Eleanor:** I'm a food historian first and then came to this topic, second, if you see what I mean. Whereas I suppose most of what's written about this is from activists. And so my impression of the topic, it made me feel anxious and guilty. You know, all those negative things and, and you think, oh, I just haven't got enough time in the day to, you know, think about these things.

Some people think of leftovers as literally just let's just throw them away, and I think looking back into the past, it's more often the case that you're ... what was left on your plate was leftovers. And it wasn't supposed to be food waste. It wasn't supposed to be thrown away. So the book explores all the ways in which the leftovers were reimagined into new dishes, even things that were inedible, the inedible bits of animals or, you know, things that had really gone off. They were still reused and put to good use in ways that they're not today. So, you know, leftovers would become compost or they'd become food for animals which, you know, in turn then becomes your meal as well. So, yes, it's a big question and that's kind of the problem, I think that we think of our leftovers as food waste, when perhaps they shouldn't be.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, maybe. Maybe it's an age thing. But to me, leftovers is something you put in the fridge and hope you remember in time to turn them into something else. Let's start with meat, because one of the things I found very interesting in the book that you mention is that back in, I guess it's early modern, 13th or 14th century, even the rich were eating bits of animals that nobody eats today, or hardly

anybody eats today. They go into pet — you know, things like calves feet — and they go into pet food mostly. So what's changed? I mean, how come the rich were willing to eat them then, but nobody's willing to eat them now?

**Eleanor:** Well, I think it's again the major issue for me is how much our ... the value that we place on food has changed. So then if you were lucky enough to have a pig to slaughter in the autumn time, it was such a celebrated thing that you would want to eat every little bit of it and they came up with many ingenious ways of turning all, all of the parts of the animal into delicious dishes. Much were preserved, of course, to last through the winter, lots of brines and so on. Whereas today it's not sort of a celebrated thing, is it, to have a whole animal. We kind of want to pick and choose the bits that we want. And so therefore I think, you know, we don't value offal and things like that.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, but I think the point I'm getting at is that, you know, I don't know whether the lord of the manor celebrated his peasants killing a pig, but nevertheless, the lord of the manor and his table would eat all of the pig. And today we do get to pick and choose. But they could have picked and choose as well. I mean,

**Eleanor:** Yeah, it is an interesting question. I think we've lost contact with the method of slaughtering the animals, because they would have been very much aware — even the wealthy — of what goes into producing your food. And so they would have had much more knowledge of all the different part of the animal. Well, we're just very distant from that side of our palates today.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. And what about the actual ... I mean, you've said that all of the pig was used, but there were pigs, cattle, sheep, whatever ... There were byproducts from butchery industries. And those really were waste. I mean, okay, leather was leather, but there were bits of the animal that nobody knew what to do with. What happened to them?

**Eleanor:** Yes. So the book also does go through the, yeah, the inedible bits. And it's surprising. I forget exactly the statistics now, but perhaps I could have a look. So, for example, 49% of the weight of a live cattle today is made of materials that are not consumed by people. So the book goes through all of the non edible uses, non culinary uses. So leather, turning the guts into violin strings. In art you

would have made brushes and pigments for cooking, not for cooking, for painting. Bones became dice, pins, knife handles. You could make glue from hooves and leather cut offs. So there's this ... The book also traces the development of these animal industries and how they become linked to butchery. And they make all these contracts. But yes, even the leather industry itself produces lots of, you know, incredibly smelly byproducts because they use faecal matter and urine and all sorts to make leather. So the book also explores the development of public health and how even from medieval, medieval era onwards, for centuries, local governments are trying to banish these types of industries outside of cities and towns because they did just pollute.

So they did just throw the waste into waterways, essentially. And I think that's a kind of something that maybe people are surprised about the book is that, you know, it's not just, you know, they were so wonderful in the past and look how wasteful we are now. And we should do ... We should look back to the past and just do what they did. In some ways there are ... We can talk about there are some amazing ways in which we can emulate what they used to do in the past, but in other ways they were they were behind us. And one of those ways is certainly the development of public health. For centuries and centuries, the butchers would throw offal into the waterways. And that was actually that was the accepted system. There's lots and lots of complaints about them throwing it into the streets. Um, that that is a problem. But they actually want people to throw it into the waterways. But what happens is over centuries, you know, it gets so bad. And as the industries increase and the population increases, that by the Victorian era, you have this great stink. When the, um, when the Thames in London is just so polluted that it's, it's actually, you know, insufferable to live in the city and the houses of Parliaments have to close down because they can't, you know, they can't actually function. Queen Victoria's pleasure cruise along the Thames is aborted within minutes. It's just, um. Yeah, it's just awful. And we have come up with much better ways of, you know, hiding that side of the industry.

**Jeremy:** Hiding is appropriate because it really is out of sight. when people were throwing their food waste out into the street, of course, the arguably the good part was that there were pigs running around, preparing to turn all that stuff into good pork. So was was keeping

urban pigs, was that acknowledged to be a good thing, or was there also opposition to urban pigs?

**Eleanor:** Yeah, there was opposition. So you have certain people have special licenses to keep pigs, but essentially, the book in part traces a story of the clamping down of pig ownership because of growing concerns about sanitation and public nuisance as well. People weren't allowed to kind of just let them roam free in the streets. Of course they produce their own waste as well, which can become hazardous. And then really, there's a massive clamp down on urban pig keeping in the Victorian era. And that's all kind of tied to class identity and a little bit of snobbery, where essentially it's kind of, you know, middle class, upper class people saying, look how dirty the slum dwellers are who are who have still got pigs in very cramped spaces and still lived sort of cheek by jowl. But we're using them to produce meat and to get rid of any inedible leftovers.

**Jeremy:** It's really a question of scale. I wonder whether the move lately towards backyard chickens ... If every house had backyard chickens, there'd be objections to that. I guess, a few pigs in the city, not such a bad idea, but it's ...

**Eleanor:** Yeah, yeah. And, you know, you get these stories of people being knocked over by pigs in the street and things like that. So yes, I can imagine as the population grows, it became less kind of tenable. And that there it's partly the rise of the industrial revolution and transport, which means that before, people were marching these animals for miles and miles and miles to go to slaughter at the big slaughterhouses and markets, but with trains, they can bring them in. And so gradually you get this sort of movement of the animal industries out of the cities and the towns. But like I say, these problems are ones that really, they have their roots in the medieval era and for centuries they've been trying to kind of distance these smelly, polluting industries out away from people.

**Jeremy:** The transport thing is interesting because, on the face of it, it might be thought you are creating more waste because ... Different kinds. I mean, you've got the question of emissions associated with transport these days and so on and so forth. So in general, do you think transporting food long distances, has that increased or decreased waste, or is it impossible to say?

**Eleanor:** Oh, it's a huge question. And that is really the thing that is fundamental to the rise of the modern food system. Right? So again, the book talks about, obviously, the industrial revolution and the rise of railways. But perhaps even more significantly is the rise of refrigeration, artificial refrigeration and refrigerated ships, which mean that ... So these experiments really kind of take off [in the] 1870s. But, you know, by the 20th century, there, it's becoming much more common, more successful. And it means by 1900, that half of the lamb and mutton in Britain is coming all the way from Australia and New Zealand. So in some ways, that's ... It was imagined as a way of stopping waste. So in the southern hemisphere, they had a complete excess in sheep. And they were just sort of throwing carcasses into the ground because they just. It was not valuable. And so being able to ship that to somewhere which really wanted it, had a market for it, in Britain, was a way of stopping that going to waste and creating value out of the product. But at the same time, ultimately, it's created the society that we have today, which is that we're so distanced from, again, the production, the growing of our food that I think it changes attitudes towards food. And so we're less likely to value that which has come in. And I mean, ultimately it's cheaper as well, which is obviously a good thing in some ways. But on the other hand, it means that we just think, oh, it's you know, they're ten a penny, doesn't doesn't matter. So it's complicated.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. It's this whole question of what you value. And the incentives seems to be driving an awful lot of the history that you talk about in the book. For example, I didn't realise that in Victorian times there were people who bought, let's call it, ugly fruit and veg and sold it to people who couldn't afford the good stuff or wanted a slightly cheaper foodstuff, made a living themselves, made sure the stuff was eaten. And now we have exactly the same going on supermarkets today. In France, it's the law. So how does that all work out?

**Eleanor:** So in the Victorian era, essentially the poorest people go to the fruit sellers and they collect — for a much cheaper price, obviously — the fruit that's had an insect burrow in it or it's just past its best. And then they sell it on very cheaply to essentially slum dwellers. So yeah, I agree. I thought that was interesting to think about, how today it's become ... for climate change reasons really, though, right? We've decided that actually we should make use of those types of foods. And there's all sorts of initiatives that collect the less than aesthetic food, produce, and turn it into other desirable

products. But interestingly, I would say it's actually become ... It's more of a middle class thing to do now, isn't it, to actually have the kind of time, energy to research your food, to think, to go. ... For example, there are lots of jams and pickles and things like that now that are specifically made by companies that go and collect produce from farms that is wonky or whatever they call it — you know, misshapen — and, and turn it into a valuable product. But they're actually not cheap, those ones, they're sort of a luxury item. So, yeah, it's interesting to think it's not just the kind of the leftovers, is it? It's actually branding that as a kind of eco friendly, trendy product.

**Jeremy:** Yeah. It's like the beer made from wasted bread. I mean, you could also eat the wasted bread rather than going to the beer. I mean, it seems to me that a lot of the focus nowadays is on guilting people into reducing their food waste in much the same way as as you're supposed to reduce your carbon footprint. And it's kind of greenwashing that lets the big wasters off the hook.

**Eleanor:** Yes. And actually, that was something that I was really aware of when I wrote the book. So it was important to me to explain, you know, how we became the wasteful society that we are today, but also to, as a historian, just think about the past on its own terms. And like I say, there's good parts of the past that we can emulate and try and reimagine. But also there are things that we want to leave in the past.

And yes, of course a huge kind of debate is where you put the responsibility to solving the problem. Ultimately I am not particularly hopeful about governmental practices. But I do think that if there's a kind of sea change in attitude that, because money speaks, there will be change. So a lot of companies today do have policies — environmental policies or policies specifically to do with food waste or sustainable food waste policies — that they advertise and they advertise them because they know that that's something that consumers care about. So I do think there is stuff you can do as individuals, but I agree that the way that it's perhaps been presented to the public is not particularly fair or helpful.

**Jeremy:** There is a moral dimension to the whole thing. I mean, whatever your belief system, food is — okay, it's never been more available than it is today — but it's still kind of precious.

**Eleanor:** Yes. And yeah, that's something that runs ... Another theme that runs through the book is, how food waste gets us onto the topic of the divide between the rich and the poor. So in the Tudor era we had these huge, elaborate feasts that they would have had. I love researching all these banqueting dishes that they would have had. You know they had sugar sculptures turned into chess sets, and they had a pies that shot out birds or cannons with with real gunpowder on the table, like these amazing baroque displays of food. But then, of course, you had the poor who literally waited at the gates of these grand estates for the leftover scraps. And inequality continues, of course, throughout history when we're discussing food waste, but perhaps slightly shifts where we see it. So in a globalised world today, today there are 842 million people who are living in food insecurity, whilst we're wasting 10 million tons of food in the UK and ... On all these statistics ... The richest 5% take home 45% of the nation's total income.

**Jeremy:** It's particularly interesting that when there's an artificial scarcity, like there is, for example, in times of war, people are willing — people in the UK particularly — completely willing to eat things, to do things, to reduce waste because they perceive some sort of emergency. But then as soon as things relax, they go back to their old ways. This is true during Covid. People said they were wasting less food, didn't take long for the national food waste to go back up again. It makes me think that the human condition is to waste food.

**Eleanor:** Yeah. I was shocked by the statistics on on food waste in the coronavirus. Like you say, it was a third ... We were wasting a third less food in the first, I think it was 3 or 4 months of lockdown and about 40% of people were self-reporting that they were wasting less food. You know, we ... and we did. We ... Remember, we all came together and it was that kind of all coming together mindset of, we're going to get through this. And it felt like a crisis, didn't it? But then, it's amazing. By summer 2021, so it's still in the pandemic, but self-reporting food waste was completely back in line with 2018 levels. If you look at the war, the world wars or ... Take World War Two. World War Two is obviously on a much more extreme level, isn't it, in terms of what people had to go through to reduce, to change their eating habits? But people are so fed up, I suppose, of being conscious of their food the whole time that given the opportunity they want to go for this world of abundance.

**Eleanor:** And so it's amazing how quickly after the Second World War we go into, we construct the kind of modern food system which is incredibly wasteful. By the 1970s, food waste has doubled compared to pre-World War Two levels. Yeah, it's hard not to see it as human nature, really. And I think that's why throughout history, we've had to have checks on us. In the Tudor era, it's religion. So people who've got so much are still being taught from the pulpit, but also by the government, these religious messages about feeding the poor and Dives and Lazarus and all these biblical stories that keep people in check. And I suppose today it's trying to remind people of ... More often it's the, you know, global warming and climate change to try and keep people remembering to be conscious about their food when they have it in abundance.

**Jeremy:** You've you've said there are things that we could learn and repeat from the past. So what would be your favourite things that people should start doing now based on what people were doing in the past?

**Eleanor:** So for a start, the book is full of recipes, so I think you can just adapt some of those recipes now. Things that we've lost touch with, like making pickles, you know? There's some wonderful Tudor pickles that I share. Or just getting into the habit of using up your leftovers into things like Victorian fritters, basically just frying up your leftover meats. It's delicious. You can take some of the recipes from the world wars. I tried crumb fudge from World War Two recently, and it's really delicious, a way of using up your stale breadcrumbs. And you use chocolate so you know, what's what's not to love, really? All those sort of things to adapt these recipes. Take some more time enjoying using up your leftovers. That's one thing. Of course, there's other things that we could all be doing in our homes, like composting, things like that. But I think the bigger message and where I landed is, the solution — of course, it's far too simple to say that — but my biggest take home was trying to connect again to the value of your food, because if you do value it, you're much less likely to waste it.

For me personally, learning about the history ... Real people in the past until very recently who had to grow their own food, who had to slaughter their own pigs, then cook it, then preserve it, you know, all these laborious things. Learning about the energy and resources that go into to producing food in the past, that's been enough for me to change, I think, how I value food, and I hope that people who read the



book, it does that for them too. But, and in addition, the other thing is to just try and grow your own veg or something like that, like we did in the pandemic. Just grow a few veg on the windowsill and just try and connect to the energy that goes into producing your food. And I think ultimately that's it's incredibly enjoyable. It does something to your soul, doesn't it? But it also hopefully will help people to see the value in their food and to ultimately waste less of it.

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