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Exploring Food Waste Issues Spring 2026

From Plate To Profit

How Portion Customization Elevates Dining and Reduces Waste

A recent study by ReFED and Datassential, examines how well restaurant portions align with diners' actual wants in a single sitting, the strategies eaters use to manage oversized meals, potential interest in customizable options, and the complex relationship between portions and perceived value. Following is a list of key takeaways, but you can find the full report at <https://refed.org/downloads/Datassential-ReFED-Restaurant-Portion-Size-Study-2025.pdf>

1. Dining out is an integral component of most Americans' lives, but the experience is seldom perfect, especially in the context of portion sizes. In the past month alone, nearly half of consumers were surprised by how large a restaurant meal was, a third ate past the point of fullness to avoid waste, and 30% wished a restaurant meal they purchased had been smaller. Aware that portions often exceed what they can comfortably eat, many diners have had to adopt workarounds to navigate this mismatch. For example, in the past month, nearly 40% intentionally over-ordered to take food home, over a third shared a regular menu item to avoid too much food, and a similar share skipped ordering something entirely (whether an entrée, side, or dessert) they didn't think they could finish. About 30% even asked for parts of a meal to be left off. GLP-1 users, who dine out even more frequently than the average consumer, are especially likely to use all of these tactics — and to feel frustrated by the lack of right-sized options.

2. Plate waste and leftover behavior signal a meaningful opportunity to reduce food waste — both environmental and economic. In the past month alone, over a quarter of consumers left uneaten food behind at a restaurant. In general, across all dining segments, but particularly at full-service venues, more than two in five admit to leaving food uneaten at least "some of the time." Even more striking, 25% of consumers say they leave food behind always or most of the time — deceptively small percentages that translate into significant volumes of waste industry-wide. Younger consumers and GLP-1 users are even more likely than the average diner to say they left food on the plate. And while taking leftovers home is more common (with six in ten doing so at least once last month), that still leaves four in ten consumers who haven't taken leftovers home at all in recent weeks. These findings highlight an urgent need for portion solutions that reduce waste at the source, not just after the fact.

3. While most consumers say restaurant portions generally match their appetite, many still encounter significant mismatches, most often in the form of too much food. On average, full-service venues are more often perceived as serving too much food compared to limited-service counterparts, and this observation is especially salient in the minds of women, Gen Z, Boomers, and GLP-1 users. And when evaluating across dishes, pasta entrées (like spaghetti and lasagna) as well as other full-service entrées like pizza, meat, and seafood are most often seen as imperfectly portioned, with many diners finding them either too large or too small. Fast food staples as well as other handhelds (e.g. sandwiches, burgers, tacos, etc.) perform better but are not immune, as roughly a quarter of consumers in general believe even these formats could be more appropriately sized.

4. Balancing portion size and value is a strategic opportunity for operators — not just a tradeoff. While larger portions have long been tied to perceived value, today's consumers are also highly motivated to reduce waste and eat in line with their appetite. Three in four say smaller portions must come with lower prices, but nearly half are willing to pay a little more for the right-sized meal that better suits their needs. GLP-1 users are even more likely to feel this way: they're 13% more likely than non-users to pay more for a right-sized portion and more likely to say they value a lower bill over maximizing food. In 2025, portion perceptions are shaped not just by economics, but by a growing desire for customization, control, and intentionality. Portion innovation must therefore be paired with transparent pricing strategies that emphasize control and personalization, ensuring diners feel empowered by their choices rather than shortchanged.

5. Visual cues can help close the gap between expectations and reality. When portion sizes are misjudged, it's often because consumers had no clear visual reference. And with 70% of consumers saying portion sizes are hard to judge without visuals, it's clear that elements like photos, displays, or sample plates play an outsized role in setting expectations. Roughly two-thirds of consumers say they sometimes wish they could see what a dish looks like before ordering — not just for presentation, but to understand the quantity. Nearly half of all diners (and a majority of GLP-1 users) say they would avoid ordering an item if a visual cue made it look too large. These simple design elements can help diners better match their appetite to their order, reduce waste, and feel more confident in their choices. For operators, transparency through visuals is a simple but powerful way to build trust and improve the overall dining experience.

6. Overall, consumers are largely supportive of portion innovation: 59% say they would be more likely to visit restaurants that offer flexible, customizable, or innovative portion size options. GLP-1 users are even more enthusiastic, with 73% saying this would influence their restaurant choice. Support for flexible or alternative portion sizes also spans across all foodservice segments. Younger diners, foodies, and higher-income consumers drive this demand, but the ideal format depend heavily on venue. For example, structured sizing (small/medium/large) is perceived as most appropriate for fast casual restaurants, while ideas like split portions for two or taster flights feel more natural in full service. Overall, portion flexibility isn't just about offering smaller or larger quantities of food, but also about providing diners the right options in the right context.

7. GLP-1 users may be a small and growing subgroup, but highly engaged audience in foodservice. At present, 8% of respondents in this survey currently take GLP-1 medications, with another 17% interested in trying them in the future, whether for weight management or existing conditions. But for these consumers, dining out isn't just a treat — it's a regular part of life. Nearly all GLP-1 users purchase restaurant food monthly, and over three-quarters do so weekly, significantly more often than non-users. This is partly due to demographic factors: GLP-1 users are more likely to be higher-income and urban-based, giving them greater access to restaurants, delivery services, and the disposable income to support frequent dining. Despite their appetite changes and dietary adjustments, GLP-1 users are more likely to dine out daily or several times per week, making them a disproportionately important segment for restaurants to understand and serve.

8. Among all generations, Gen Z stands out as the most portion-conscious, consistently showing greater concern about receiving too much food when dining out. They're significantly more likely than older consumers to say that restaurant portions, especially at quick-service restaurants, are too large for a single sitting, and they're also more likely to report adjusting their orders to avoid waste. In the past month alone, Gen Z consumers were more likely to share entrées, skip ordering sides or desserts, or request items be left off their meals to better match their appetite. Notably, this generation also shows stronger alignment with the idea of paying a little more for right-sized portions, valuing control and personalization over quantity. As this cohort continues to shape the future of dining, their preferences signal growing demand for flexibility, customization, and conscious consumption.



Shopping your fridge first is an important strategy for reducing food waste. Here's a recipe idea that will help you use what you have before buying more!

Restaurant Doggie Bag Recipes

COZY COMFORT FOOD THAT WASTES LESS AND TASTES GREAT

In keeping with this issues theme, it seemed an appropriate time to post a few creative ways to repurpose restaurant leftovers - Enjoy!

Leftover Steak: Steak & Biscuits

Ingredients: Leftover steak, refrigerated biscuits, butter.

Directions: Reheat steak in a pan. Bake biscuits, slice in half, and butter them. Place warm steak inside the biscuit.

Leftover Steak: N.Y. Strip Salad

Ingredients: 6 oz steak, 6 cups greens, 1 cup cherry tomatoes, 1/2 cup bleu cheese, dressing.

Directions: Slice cold steak, toss with greens, tomatoes, and cheese. Top with creamy vinaigrette.

Leftover Fried Chicken: Fried Chicken Potpies

Ingredients: 4-6 oz fried chicken (diced), 1 small onion (diced), 2 celery ribs (diced), 1/2 cup bell pepper (diced), 1 potato (diced), 1 cup peas, broth, flour, butter, puff pastry.

Directions: Sauté vegetables in butter, add flour to make a roux, then add broth to create gravy. Add chicken and peas. Fill ramekins, top with puff pastry, and bake at 400°F for 12-15 minutes.

Leftover Rice: Rice Pudding

Ingredients: 2 cups cooked white rice, 2 cups milk, 3/4 cup cream, 1/4 cup orange juice, 1/2 cup brown sugar, 1/2 cup raisins, orange zest.

Directions: Combine all ingredients in a saucepan. Simmer until creamy and thick.

Leftover Hot Dogs/Sausage: BBQ Hot Dog Bites

Ingredients: Leftover hot dogs, yellow mustard, BBQ rub, BBQ sauce, butter, brown sugar.

Directions: Coat hot dogs in mustard and rub. Smoke or bake at 200°F for 1 hour. Slice into thirds, toss in a pan with butter, brown sugar, and BBQ sauce until thickened.



BEANS, NUTS & VEGETARIAN PROTEINS (Continued)

TOFU

REFRIGERATE IT: Yes **AT FRESHEST:** 10 days

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Refrigerate in original package until opened. Once opened, keep submerged in water in an airtight container in the refrigerator and change the water daily.

FREEZING: Freezing tofu causes moisture to drain from it and changes its consistency, making it more firm and dense. This is helpful for marinating but may not be desired for some uses. If marinating, rinse, drain, and place in a sealed zip-top freezer bag. Thaw in the refrigerator and drain, squeezing out excess moisture.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: The consistency of frozen tofu once it's thawed makes it a great substitute for ground beef, perfect for soups, chilies, and sauces. Make a tofu "ricotta" as a nondairy substitute for pizzas and lasagnas.

TREE NUTS

REFRIGERATE IT: Yes

AT FRESHEST: Without shell — Almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachios in refrigerator, 1 to 2 years; freezer, 2 years or more

With shell — Almonds, walnuts, pecans (storing pistachios in the shell is not recommended), 1½ to 2 years

Pine nuts — refrigerated, 3 months; freezer, 9 months

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Wait to shell or chop until ready to use. Store shelled nuts, even if roasted, in an opaque, airtight container in the refrigerator or freezer. If you must keep them in the pantry, store in a cool, dark place in an airtight container and use within a few months. Store pine nuts tightly wrapped in plastic wrap in an airtight container.

FREEZING: Pack into tinted zip-top freezer bags and freeze.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: Translucency or darkening can be a sign that nuts are becoming rancid. Be sure to taste before using.

Quick Tricks! Brought To You By: Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources NEBRASKA EXTENSION

QUICK TRICKS

Food tossed is money lost. One way to add new life to still edible foods is to repurpose leftovers and reuse them in new ways and new recipes. This booklet will get you started with simple tips and recipes. You'll find "recycled" can taste just as good, maybe even better than the original recipe.

Allice Henneman, MS, RDN Extension Educator

Makeover your leftovers

DAIRY

- Freeze Parmesan rinds and add (frozen) to a soup or stew for extra flavor.
- Use up extra odds and ends of cheese by shredding them with a grater or in a food processor. Mix in your choice of ingredients, cut or chopped into small pieces (i.e. olives, pickles, pimientos, chives, walnuts, peppers, etc.). Add enough mayonnaise (regular or low-fat) to bind the ingredients together. Spread on your favorite bread.
- Use vanilla and fruit flavored yogurts as a dressing for fruit salads.

COMBINATION FOODS

- Make a chopped salad with small amounts of extra fruits, vegetables, nuts, cooked eggs, etc.*
- Combine leftover pasta with foods such as boiled egg wedges or slices, bitesize chunks of cheese, chopped fresh vegetables,
- Pasta salad cooked dry beans. Mix with your favorite vinaigrette-type dressing. Refrigerate about an hour before serving to let the flavors blend.
- Create a colorful parfait by layering cookie crumbs, then pudding served by fruit - such as berries - in parfait or wine glasses. Alternate as desired. Serve soon after preparation to prevent crumbles from becoming soggy.

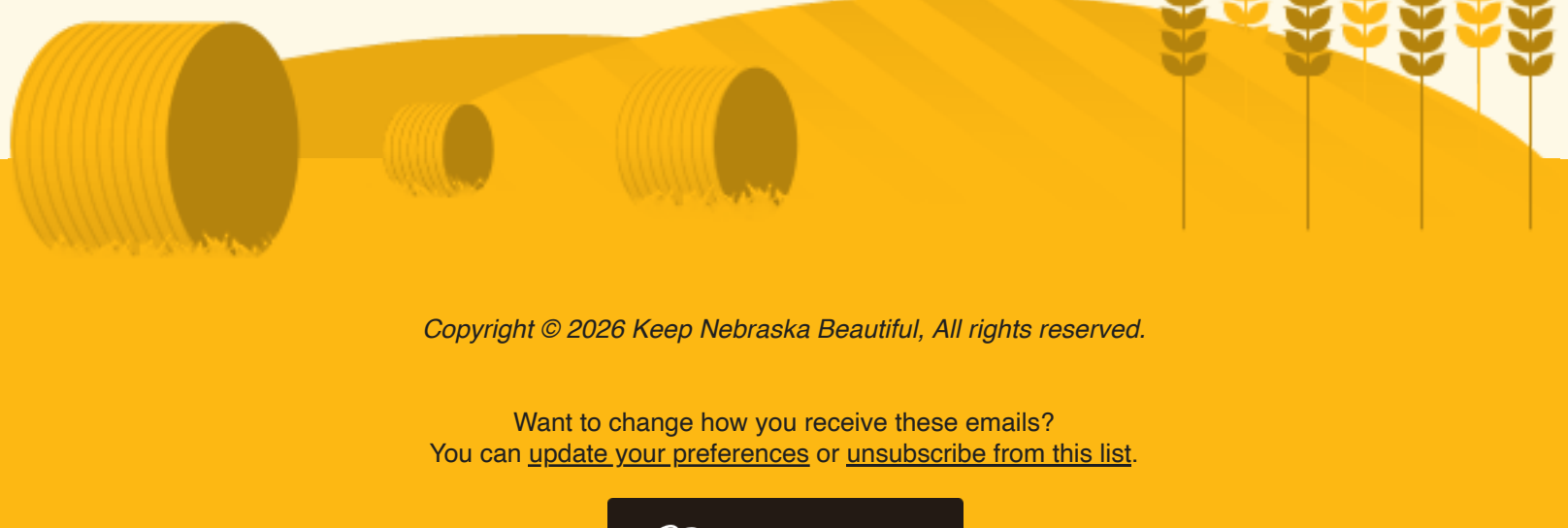
Source: USDA/FSIS Food Safety and Security: Food Product

For more waste reducing tips, go to: www.food.unl.edu/cook-it-quick-documents/makeover-your-leftovers.pdf



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