

Cut-price ‘ugly’ supermarket food won’t reduce waste – here’s why

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They all taste the same once they're mashed. Lucie Lang/Shutterstock.com

The battle to reduce food waste and increase access to nutritious food just got a whole lot cheaper and uglier in Australia.

In early December, Woolworths launched its “odd bunch” campaign, becoming the latest retailer to offer consumers “ugly” food at discount prices.

Mainstream food outlets tell us that fruit and vegetables are ugly when they are blemished, misshapen (perhaps with an extra appendage or two), or otherwise fail to meet their usual standards.

Ugly food is marketed as a way to reduce food waste. But selling it cheap won't help, because it doesn't address the underlying issue: that we're buying too much food.

Wasting away

Australian households throw out up to A\$8 billion worth of food each year. The environmental impacts range from wasted water and fertiliser, to significant methane emissions from rotting food in rubbish tips.

In affluent nations like Australia, most wasted food has already been bought and brought home (so-called “post-consumer food waste”). Developed countries have largely eradicated the problems that lead to food wastage in poorer countries, such as pest infestation and inadequate storage or transportation. Yet rates of food waste seem to be similar everywhere, equating to about a third of the food produced.

Research shows that 72% of Australians feel guilty when they waste food, yet still do it. Over the past decade numerous initiatives have appeared, courtesy of charities such as SecondBite, Ozharvest, and The Yellow Van, which redistribute food to those in need, as well as consumer awareness campaigns such as Love Food Hate Waste and FoodWise.

Even ugly carrots are beautiful to someone. Katharine Shilcott/flickr.com, CC BY

Supermarket swoop

By offering discounted imperfect food, retailers are now positioning themselves as part of this broader effort to cut food waste.

Woolworths’ “Odd Bunch” campaign and Harris Farm Market’s “Imperfect Picks” are part of a worldwide trend started by French supermarket Intermarché’s “Inglorious” initiative, launched earlier this year. Tied to the European Union’s year against food waste, Intermarché’s campaign aimed to “rehabilitate and glorify” ugly food. It led to a 24% increase in store traffic and attracted global attention.

Advertisements show Intermarché’s inglorious fruit and vegetables in all their wayward glory, accompanied by descriptions such as “grotesque apple”, “ridiculous potato”, “hideous orange”, “disfigured eggplant” and “failed lemon”.

Alongside the tongue-in-cheek descriptions are reminders that under these deformed exteriors lies fresh, nutritious, tasty food, such as “a grotesque apple keeps the doctor away as well”.

The undesirable natural packaging of inglorious foods is presented as beneficial to consumers because they are 30% cheaper than their more aesthetically pleasing counterparts. But this message also reinforces the notion that “ugly” (even if only skin-deep) equals “cheap” when it comes to food.

Sell it cheap, waste it anyway

In affluent countries like France and Australia, access to cheaper food doesn’t mean less household food waste. What’s more, charging lower prices for ugly fruit and vegetables also neglects the fact that the same labour is required to produce and harvest crops, regardless of their appearance. Thus ugly food helps to perpetuate a food system that undervalues food, in which consumers routinely buy too much and throw away the leftovers.

My research has investigated the food waste behaviours of consumers of mainstream supermarkets and alternative food networks such as community gardens and farmers' markets. The results suggest that people who grow some of their own food or talk directly to producers go to great lengths to prevent food waste. These consumers speak of the time, effort and care that underpins food production, and are motivated to avoid waste out of respect for the food itself as well as its producer.

This attitude values food not in terms of its appearance or cost, but as a source of nutrition and pleasure painstakingly produced by a combination of factors, both human and non-human (such as water, weather and soil nutrients).

Cheaper food — ugly or not — is not really the way to encourage people to rethink and reduce our wasteful behaviours. Ugly food should be sold and eaten, not wasted. It should be priced fairly. But we must also learn to respect and value our food beyond its appearance and price. Only by promoting ethical and sustainable practices will we really get a grip on the problem of food waste.