

# **The generative mechanisms of 'food waste' in South Australian household settings**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the developed world, up to 50% of food produced for consumption is wasted, with much of the uneaten, wasted food coming from households. Much of this waste ends up in landfill where it contributes to greenhouse gas production through the production of methane and presents an environmental hazard. While studies have attempted to quantify the amount of food waste, little is known about the underlying generative mechanisms. Through this exploratory research, I provide insights into the socio-cultural and generative mechanisms of food waste. Without knowing why people waste food, we cannot reduce its occurrence.

I developed a contemporary methodological approach using ethnographic methods to study food use in 14 households across the city over a 13-month period in 2011 and 2012. I used a suite of methods including in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, food maps, photographs and vignettes to gather a range of data.

Waste practices occurred at five key food activity stages. These were Provisioning, Storage, Preparation, Consumption and Clean-up. Practices that generated or mitigated waste were identified for each stage. The subsequent conceptual analysis presents four dimensions of food waste. The cultural, social, temporal and material dimensions of food practices influenced the perception of edible and inedible food by participants. 'Food waste' practices occurred as part of everyday routines, which were confounded by situational impediments. The term 'food waste' did not resonate with participants, but what constituted wasted food was socially and culturally constructed, imbued with a range of values that determined edibility or inedibility of food. The perishable nature of food and the perceived risk by participants were also contributing factors to the determinations of edibility.

Food waste at the household level is reflected as the shadow of consumption. It is an intrinsic and embodied component of food and associated food practices. Therefore, food waste should always be considered within the context of food and not as a separate set of discrete practices.



## **DECLARATION**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS & DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH**

**Association of American Geographers (AAG) Annual Conference**, New York, USA,  
25 February 2012

Title: One person's food trash is another person's treasured meal: Insights into understanding why people waste food

**Presentation to WRAP** in London, UK, 6 August 2012

Title: Insights into understanding why people waste food

**World Congress of Rural Sociology**, Lisbon, Portugal, 31 July 2012

Session Chair: Theoretical frameworks for food waste

Title: From food to food waste: Using ethnographic methods to inform theoretical development

**Food Studies: A Multidisciplinary Menu**, Adelaide, Australia, 17–19 February 2014

Title: Wasting food at home: Creating innovative ethnographic methodologies to address the challenges of researching multiple households over multiple sites

**Radio Adelaide** 5 March 2014

Interview on Harvest, discussing PhD and food waste research

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*“I spend half of my time keeping, throwing, keeping, throwing. You know, you think you are going to eat it, but then it doesn’t happen” – Sally, participant, dinner observation*