

A new market for fruit & veg waste

Waste occurs all along the food supply chain. Part of the problem can be seen at farm level as farmers struggle to sell products which do not meet certain aesthetic expectations. The demand for 'perfect' fruit and vegetables from major distributors results in the waste of about 30% of what is produced by farmers in the EU according to a report by the FAO. Fruta Feia, a cooperative in Lisbon, Portugal has come up with a concept to turn this food waste into a business opportunity. Fruta Feia has been working with farmers and consumers and have created a new market for 'ugly' fruit and vegetables.

Boxes of ugly fruit

Vegetable box schemes are on the rise throughout Europe today. Fruta Feia, meaning 'Ugly Fruit' in Portuguese, is a consumers' cooperative which runs one of these schemes selling local and seasonal products. But there's a twist. Fruta Feia only uses fruit and vegetables which are neglected by the normal markets because they do not conform to the preferences of supermarkets and other large distributors in terms of shape, size or colour.



Food waste at farm level has economic consequences for the farmers as well as a high environmental impact. Water, energy, soil and many other precious resources go into producing these wasted products, and the decomposition of food that is not eaten causes carbon dioxide and methane emissions. The 2 tons of products which Fruta Feia rescues for its boxes every week would have previously been wasted, turned back into the soil or sold for an extremely low price for juicing for example. This cooperative is making turning this waste into a product, paying the farmers a proper price for these products which are just as nutritious and tasty. Fruta Feia accepts the spinach which has spots on the leaves due to exceptional weather conditions, the tomatoes which are smaller than usual and the pears and apples which have spots on the skin, the Fruta Feia team tells us "Most of the time we even buy them from the farmers at the same price of the beautiful fruit."

Fruta Feia sells their boxes weekly at a reasonable price to its 500 associate consumers. The cooperative works directly with 34 farmers in total and the products vary depending on the season and their availability.

Popular with producers and consumers

Isabel Soares from Fruta Feia says "At the end of 2013, at the beginning of the initiative, there were two or three producers who immediately supported the Fruta Feia project. However most reactions were not so positive mainly because the farmers couldn't believe that someone would be interested in the ugly part of their production that before was considered waste. Now, almost every day we receive emails and phone calls from producers who would like to work with us." Isabel Alves, a farmer who provides Fruta Feia with sweet potatoes pumpkins and onions tells us "If it wasn't for Fruta Feia, these tasty though ugly products would be offered to our neighbours or used as cattle food and the rest would ended up as garbage, which is a pity because they are very good quality products".

Their popularity has not only grown on the producers' side, many consumers are also on board. Fruta Feia currently has a waiting list of 2000 people including people from other regions of Portugal, all wanting to save this 'ugly' produce from going to waste. They carried out a consumer survey and the two main reasons for buying these products were "environmental concern" and to "help local producers" with "quality" and "price" just behind. This really has opened up a new, alternative market for the farmers which prevents waste of food and the resources used for its production.



Cooperation and communication

"We have been learning a lot with the farmers to minimise waste and improve our process" says Joana Baptista from Fruta Feia. Close collaboration with the farmers is essential for the Fruta Feia as Joana says "Farmers are the ones who spread the word, speaking about the Fruta Feia project to their neighbours and work colleagues". The cooperative also works with local associations who provide them with rooms and volunteers to help put the boxes together. They have also worked with the Refood movement in Portugal, schools, scouting groups and more.

Raising awareness about food waste is important to Fruta Feia and they want to encourage new groups to set up similar projects elsewhere. Joana tells us "We are already being contacted by people from around the world who would like to begin a similar project or other movements related to Food Waste." Fruta Feia has won several awards and it has been presented at a number of national and international conferences on food waste. This 'ugly fruit' model is one which is expected to be taken up in many European countries in the next few years.

Fruta Feia has a website in English and Portuguese. You can follow the quantity of 'ugly' products they have saved in total, you can watch videos and see a map of all the producers they work with.

www.frutafeia.pt

Photos: ©Fruta Feia

Other information:

[European Parliament resolution](#) of 19 January 2012 on how to avoid food wastage: strategies for a more efficient food chain in the EU

[Article New York Times](#)

[Report FAO: Food Losses and Food Waste 2011](#)