

# Matsentralen Kitchen



## FROM SURPLUS FOOD TO READY MEALS

Project report

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Matsentralen Norge

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# WHAT?

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Matsentralen Kitchen is a collaborative project where single-serving ready meals are prepared from surplus food from selected supermarkets and the food bank in Oslo. The meals reach out to people in need thanks to non-profit organizations providing food relief in the city and metropolitan area. The project is a cooperation between a supermarket chain, the local food bank and non-profit organizations that either prepare or redistribute the food.

The concept is a win-win-win situation. By rescuing, preparing and distributing surplus food, the project maintains and increases the value of the food. The ready meals reach out to homeless people or people without access to a kitchen, helping them secure basic nutritional needs. In addition, the project helps supermarkets reduce food waste by being able to send a stale carrot to a kitchen, instead of the waste bin. Furthermore, thanks to the project, the food bank is able to rescue larger volumes of surplus food, in particular products originally destined to commercial kitchens, such as, for example, large containers of sauces. Last but not least, the project also contributes to social inclusion and a valuable everyday life for many. This by giving people who have fallen outside the ordinary working life, an opportunity to get work experience in a professional kitchen, as well as working with collecting and delivering the food.

The project started in Oslo in May 2020, and has been a success since then. In the first phase, the ingredients used came exclusively from the food bank in Oslo, but after February 2021, the project expanded to also include surplus food from supermarkets.

This report is the result of data collection, observations and interviews with the actors involved in the project.

# WHO?

## COOPERATION AS A FRAMEWORK

The project is based on collaboration and includes the retail group NorgesGruppen, representing six Meny supermarkets and a Jacobs supermarket; the non-profit organization Unikum and its project Unimat, which provides inclusive employment opportunities; and Matsentralen, the local food bank in the city of Oslo. The project is financially supported by The Kavli Trust. In addition NorgesGruppen and Findus, two of the biggest actors in the Norwegian food industry, also contributed to the project economically.

## MATSENTRALEN OSLO

Matsentralen Oslo is the city's food bank. It tackles food waste and poverty by rescuing surplus food that would have otherwise been thrown away, and providing good and nutritious food to non-profit organisations that offer food aid in the city and metropolitan area. Matsentralen Oslo typically rescues surplus food from

wholesalers and producers, but for this project, it started rescuing surplus food from supermarkets as well. The surplus food received from wholesalers and producers includes both consumer and commercial products, such as products designed for use in canteens and commercial kitchens. This last category of surplus food was especially relevant for this project.

Matsentralen Oslo is the country's first food bank and was established in 2013. It cooperates with more than 50 actors in the food industry and more than 130 non-profit organizations. Matsentralen Oslo is part of a network of eight food banks spread throughout the country, and organized under the umbrella organization Matsentralen Norge.

## UNIKUM

Unikum is a social entrepreneur that works with creating inclusive employment opportunities in Oslo. It is owned by The Church's City Mission and the Municipality of Oslo. Unikum helps people return to working life through guidance, education and work training. Through professional and individual follow-up Unikum creates opportunities for both job seekers and employers, while developing a portfolio of products and services to facilitate inclusive employment opportunities. One of these many projects is UniMat, a professional kitchen that sells catering services to other non-profit organizations and private actors.

## NORGESGRUPPEN

NorgesGruppen (NG) is Norway's largest retail and wholesaling group and runs various retail supermarket chains. NG has been committed to reducing food waste for many years. Some of the most successful initiatives include systematic price reduction for food products approaching their "best before" date, internal date alert and ordering routines, and sale of yesterday's bread at a reduced price. MENY and Jacob's are NG's exclusive supermarket chains with special focus on a broad selection of quality products and professional staff. This means that in addition to having a better capacity in terms of staff, these supermarket chains also have higher quality standards for their selection of fruits and vegetables, which contributes to the potential of the project, in terms of food rescue.



# WHY?

## BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Several factors were crucial to get this project running: On one side the food bank in Oslo, who often receives surplus food originally destined to commercial kitchens. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding restrictions contributed to an increase in volume of this kind of food, as a result of closed schools, restaurants and canteens. Some examples of this kind of food are 10 kilos buckets with sour cream, 30 kilos buckets with taco sauce or 10 kilo bags of rice. Although the food bank cooperates with various organizations that are able to use these products in their big kitchens, large packages of food are in general more difficult to redistribute through individual/family food boxes or bags.

In addition, NorgesGruppen often struggles with fruits and vegetables going to waste when they no longer look appealing to consumers. Although some of it is used in internal production, or sold for a discounted price through apps such as Too good to go, at the end of the day, supermarkets still have a small amount of fruits and vegetables that are still edible but challenging to sell.

Furthermore, non-profit organizations providing food relief through food bags or food boxes, often struggle to find a way to help people who do not have access to a kitchen or don't have the resources to make

a meal at home. A survey Matsentralen Oslo carried out in August 2019, showed great demand for ready meals, with as many as 63 per cent of organizations interested in receiving ready meals that they could give out to people in need. Furthermore, even non-profit organizations making and serving food to people in need in their own premises, became more interested in ready meals as a result of the pandemic's restrictions and corresponding closing down of many of these kitchens and dinners.

Finally, the COVID pandemic also affected the activity at Unikum. A "closed" society as a result of the restrictions, left Unikum's professional kitchen without requests for catering services.

The first discussions about a potential project took place when Unikum reached out to the food bank in Oslo. From there, it was just about connecting all the dots and working together towards a common goal: Reducing food waste and poverty, while facilitating opportunities for people in challenging situations.

Through the economical support of Kavlifondet, Norgesgruppen and Findus, the project became a reality. By joining forces, the food bank in Oslo was able to accept larger volumes of surplus food originally destined to commercial kitchens, MENY and JACOB's stores were able to find a solution to their waste of fruits and vegetables, Unikum was able to continue on providing opportunities for work integration and

non-profit organizations collecting food from the food bank, were able to reach out to even more people by distributing single-serving ready meals among people in a vulnerable situation.

## HOW?

### LOGISTICS OF THE PROJECT

The logistics of the project are very simple. Unikum collects food from the food bank in Oslo every other week. In addition, a driver from the food bank collects fruits and vegetables from selected stores and delivers the food collected directly to Unikum's kitchen. This is done with the help of two volunteers, making the operation not only efficient, but also a social experience. The supermarkets, who already have good sorting routines in place, assign one person to make sure that the food collection happens in an efficient and safe way.

Once all the food collected has come to Unikum's kitchen, the staff sorts the ingredients and uses them to prepare a meal. The meal is packed in single portions and is sent to the food bank, together with whatever ingredients that were not used in the preparation of the meals (around 10%).

At the time of writing this report (June 2021), the kitchen was making an average

of 2,500 single-serving ready meals a week.

### ECONOMY

A good financial framework was crucial for the project's existence. Operating costs include expenses for transport, packaging, labor and electricity. In the project's first operating year (May 2020 - May 2021) the total cost of the project was just under one million norwegian crowns. This was financed by NorgesGruppen, Kavlifondet, Findus and Matsentralen Oslo.

### RESULTS

Since the start of the pilot project, Unikum turned 39 tonnes of food from Matsentralen and 6.6 tonnes of food from the selected supermarkets into 75,000 single-serving ready meals. For the wholesale and retail sectors, this meant a reduction in food waste of 45.6 tonnes.

In addition to good quantitative results, the project has also had a particularly positive effect on everyone involved. In the next part of the report you can read more about this.

***"The key of this project is appreciating food, practicing food safety, preparing healthy, tasty meals and not least, respecting all of the actors involved in this initiative"***

***- Kitty Stensrud,  
General Manager, Unikum***

# READY MEALS TO THE RESCUE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The organizations providing food relief in the city of Oslo do so by giving out bags/boxes of groceries and/or preparing and serving a meal. An example of the latter is “The meeting place” by The Church City mission in Oslo, where they run a "social cafe" that helps the homeless. Unfortunately, with the COVID pandemic, the cafe had to close down, therefore the ready meals from Matsentralen became a valuable solution.



*- We have many guests with unstable living conditions, without access to a kitchen. The “meeting place” is for many a safe haven where they can meet other people and receive a warm meal. The ready meals from Matsentralen Kitchen were essential for our users during this time, we do not know what we would have done without this service. When things return to normal, we will resume own kitchen and café operation, and then the ready meals are redundant for us, but there are many organizations that don’t have the capacity to make and serve meals, so this is a valuable help to them, says Kjersti Klouman Høiner, Manager at “The meeting place”, The Church City Mission.*



# A DAY WITH MATSENTRALEN KITCHEN:

## #morethanameal

It is still early in the morning when the Manager from the food bank in Oslo, Cristiano Aubert receives an email from the dairy company TINE: "We have lots of sour cream with short shelf life in 5-liter buckets that we would like to donate, can you take this?" "Yes, we can take all of it", answers the engaged manager. Later that day, as the TINE truck drives away from the food bank, Unikum's van drives in and is ready to collect food for the kitchen, including a couple of 5-liter buckets of sour cream. For Matsentralen Oslo, the project provides added value in many ways. *"There is no amount of surplus food that is too big or too small for us, but we need to be flexible and innovative to handle the food in an efficient way. The potential to rescue more food is huge and the need for food relief likewise. Ready meals are especially popular, and our largest customer could easily handle all the meals produced by the project,* says Cristiano Aubert, Manager of the food bank in Oslo.



It's 10 am and Kenneth gets in the van to start the collection round, first stop: MENY Alna. As he approaches the first supermarket, Lasse Bremnes, manager for the fruits and vegetables section at Meny Alna, comes out to meet him. He has a green IFCO box full of fruit and vegetables that he had saved from going to waste the night before. Half an hour later the manager for fruits and vegetables at the store Jacob in Majorstuen, Maria Pettersen does the same. Together, they save an average of 200 kilos of fruits and vegetables from going to waste, every week. - *It is fantastic that food that could have been thrown away is now actually saved and eaten by people in need. Nobody wants to waste food, so the staff is very engaged in the project,* says Pettersen. During his round,

Kenneth will visit 8 stores. He is grateful for the opportunity to work on this project. He works at the food bank in Oslo as part of the last stage on his prison sentence and had been offered this opportunity as a transition back into working life. *"After the prison sentence I was very depressed, but when I started driving for Matsentralen I believed in life again, there is hope. I am getting stronger both physically and mentally. To contribute to something so meaningful gives me a lot of peace and joy"* says Kenneth.

At Unikum's kitchen, the chef Arne-Christian and the logistics manager Oskar wait for the food to arrive. Every day is different, so they are looking forward to «today's catch». The unpredictability inspires them to be creative in the kitchen. This is how new dishes such as "The Oslo stew" were created. Today they need to find a way to use sour cream. After a cooking day, the food is vacuum-packed in single portions and stored in the fridge. The staff at Unikum says that the project gives them an opportunity to help other people who are also in a vulnerable situation, just like themselves. General manager Kitty Stensrud adds that the work in the kitchen provides the stability the kitchen staff needs. - *To have a job to go to every day is very important and meaningful for our staff. Some of them enjoy the opportunity so much that they will stay longer in the project,* says Stensrud.



After Kenneth is done with collecting food from the supermarkets and delivering it to Unikum, he takes with him the ready meals made by the kitchen the day before, and delivers them to the food bank. The evangelical Center is among 133 organizations who collect food from Matsentralen and it is Matsentralen's largest customers. They serve a warm meal two times a week, and also hand out 2000 bags of food every week. Two thirds of all the ready meals produced at Unikum, end up in these bags. In addition, The Evangelical center also offers rehabilitation and aftercare services for people struggling with addiction.- *The ready meals from the project Matsentralen Kitchen have been very popular among our users,* says general manager Stian Ludvigsen. - *A ready meal is a*

*bonus for our beneficiaries. Not everybody has access to a kitchen or knows how to cook a meal.* One of those receiving a ready meal is Jonas and he agrees with Stian. He is a drug addict and has received assistance from The Evangelical center for over six years. - *The ready meals have improved my life a lot! We are so lucky to get ready meals in addition to the bags of groceries. One of my favourites has been a sausage stew,* says Jonas smiling. For many, the road towards a better life starts with a meal.

# SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This reports has tried to describe the most important elements of the project Matsentralen Kitchen. The quantitative results show that the project has been a success and has a lot of potential. Furthermore, the conversations with the actors show that the success rests on the good relationships, the trust, the opportunities and commitment that the project creates.

A well-established collaboration between actors with complementary roles was crucial. From the suppliers of the surplus food (supermarkets and Matsentralen), to a professional kitchen that can make delicious ready meals (Unikum) to the many organizations that redistribute the meals among people in need. Furthermore, having dedicated resources, to secure the continuity of the project, was also essential. Establishing a working group with representatives from all the parties involved and holding regular status meetings was a great way to identify and sort out challenges. There needs to be a strong focus on food safety, but also on creativity. Surplus food is unpredictable, so the right people are needed to make sure the most is made out of the food rescued. All the parties involved feel a very strong bond to the project, and want to continue with it. A year of experience has given all involved the necessary experience and knowledge to continue with the success of Matsentralen Kitchen.

*“My best advice to others who want to start a similar project is the following; do it! But make sure to have the right financing and to collaborate with an established kitchen that has people on work training, and who have food expertise - this is important in regards to all costs, knowledge and social responsibility.”*

**Cristiano Aubert,**  
**Manager of Matsentralen Oslo**



MANY THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS!

