

ADVERTISING



Courtesy of Imperfect Produce

Does Your Box of “Ugly” Produce Really Help the Planet? Or Hurt it?

Startups like Hungry Harvest and Imperfect Produce say they're helping to reduce food waste in America. Critics say they're deceiving their customers and making the problem worse.

By **EMILY ATKIN**

January 11, 2019

 Add to Pocket

“I’m an *environmental journalist*, not an *environmentalist*.” I’ve said this countless times over the course of my career, usually to make a distinction between myself and the people I write about. But last year, while reporting on a growing number of climate crises, I realized I could no longer pretend that I was just a journalist. I *am* an environmentalist, in the sense that I believe humans should modify their behavior for the benefit of the planet. I just hadn’t acted much on that belief—until now.

I started eating mostly vegetarian. I bought a metal straw. And, most importantly, I changed how I got my fruits and vegetables.

The latter was most important to me. I wanted to do my part in the fight against food waste. Every year in America, between 30 to 40 percent of food available for consumption goes uneaten. The majority of that is thrown away at home and at restaurants, but anywhere from 11 to 16 percent—about 20 billion pounds—comes from farms that can’t find buyers for their products. Some research suggests about half of all produce grown in the country goes to waste. It’s an economic, environmental, and moral offense.

I considered enrolling in a community-supported agriculture program, or CSA, where members pre-pay for a share in a local farm. But then I learned about Hungry Harvest, a company that buys up excess or “ugly” produce from growers and wholesalers around the country and sells it to consumers for less than supermarket price.

According to the company’s website, Hungry Harvest “rescues at least 10 pounds of fruits and veggies from going to waste.” In a world where individual action can feel pointless, this felt tangible. If I received a Hungry Harvest box every other week, I reasoned, I’d be saving 260 pounds of fruits and vegetables from being wasted every year. And even if I wound up throwing away half of my box, it would still be a net environmental benefit because the produce would have been thrown away otherwise—or so I thought.

I felt a twinge of pride when, every other Sunday morning, an orange-and-brown cardboard box showed up in the mailroom of my apartment building. I would bring it upstairs and marvel at its contents: tiny avocados, bruised pears, hilariously oversized eggplants. I’d arrange the strange produce in bowls on my dining room table.

After a few months, I started noticing orange-and-brown cardboard boxes everywhere. They were piling up in my mailroom and appearing on my neighbors’ doorsteps. Hungry Harvest ads started appearing in my Instagram and Facebook feeds, and ads for a competing food waste delivery company, Imperfect Produce, even popped up while I was swiping on Tinder.

The “ugly produce” movement had been monetized, and it was becoming a big business. On balance, that seemed like a positive development. If companies could find a way to profit from unwanted food, maybe there was an economically sustainable solution to this crisis. But after looking deeper into these companies, I now question the entire concept of “rescuing” excess produce for profit. I even wonder whether the planet would be better off if I threw the next orange-and-brown box in the trash.

Food waste doesn’t make many headlines, but it’s one of the

biggest environmental problems in the United States. Every year, 30 million acres of cropland, 4.2 trillion gallons of water, and nearly two billion pounds of fertilizer are used to grow food that’s never eaten, according to a recent study. The latter is particularly concerning since nitrogen-based fertilizer is a major cause of water contamination and a significant emitter of greenhouse gases.

In fact, reducing food waste is “one of the most important things we can do to reverse global warming,” according to Chad Frischmann, policy director of the climate solutions group Project Drawdown. In an op-ed for *The Washington Post*, Frischmann wrote that reducing food waste will ultimately require American consumers to “embrace ‘ugly food’—fruits and vegetables that are blemished and not perfectly shaped but are perfectly delicious and nutritious.”

More consumers are doing just that. Founded in 2014, Hungry Harvest was propelled by a \$100,000 investment through the popular TV series *Shark Tank*. It now delivers boxes in six cities on the East Coast, and CEO Evan Lutz says he plans to expand the business “to 30 more cities over the next four years.” Imperfect Produce—founded in 2015 by one of Lutz’s original business partners, Ben Simon—serves 10 West Coast cities, as well as Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Simon envisions Imperfect delivering in “all major metropolitan centers on the East Coast by the end of 2020.” NBA superstar Kevin Durant recently announced an investment in the company.

As these delivery services have grown, though, so have their critics. In an op-ed last year for The New Food Economy, the heads of two food-justice nonprofits in Oakland wrote that Imperfect Produce

“reflects a very troubling trend ... that commodifies and gentrifies food waste.” The company, they argued, is not in the business of food waste so much food surplus: It buys excess products that farmers can’t sell to supermarkets, but could sell to restaurants, canned and processed food companies, or, as a last resort, donate to food banks. “The stuff in these boxes is not ending up in a landfill,” co-author Max Cadji, the founder of Phat Beets Produce, told me. “They’re just tapping into the same marketplace as the guys who make shredded carrots.”

“The stuff in these boxes is not ending up in a landfill.”

If the vegetables inside these boxes were never destined for the landfill, then the growth of ugly-produce companies threatens to make the food waste problem worse, according to co-author Eric Holt-Gimenez, the executive director of Food First. The companies, while well-intentioned, are now competing with the other players in the surplus market, incentivizing farmers to overproduce to meet that demand. “The reason we have so much waste in the first place is because of overproduction,” Holt-Gimenez said. “This is a way to capitalize on overproduction and increase the flow of waste.”

The solution to food waste, then, is not to normalize and monetize ugly produce. It’s to create a system where excess food isn’t produced in the first place. How can venture capital-backed companies contribute to that goal when they profit from industrial agriculture’s overproduction? Wouldn’t the growth of these companies, in fact, make the problem worse by providing yet more reason to overproduce?

I put these questions to the founders of Hungry Harvest and Imperfect Produce.

“Honestly, the criticisms are a bit surprising,” Ben Simon said in a 90-minute phone interview last week. Some people might not trust a for-profit, venture capital-backed company to act with the planet’s best intentions in mind, he said, but they should trust the results: In the last three years, Imperfect Produce claims to have saved 30 million pounds of food and 900 million gallons of water from being wasted.

Simon thinks Holt-Gimenez and Cadji are ignoring these positive results, and pointed me to a blog post where he responded to his critics. “We are saving good produce from rotting on fields, paying hard working farmers a fair price for it, and helping middle and working class people save money on healthy produce,” he wrote. “To me, calling that ‘commodifying food waste’ is a gross misrepresentation of the heart of this problem, which is good food not getting eaten, and a negligent dismissal of the climate implications if we don’t do something about it.”

Simon did concede to two points: that Imperfect Produce sources from large-scale industrial producers, like Dole, and that not all of their fruits and vegetables are destined for the landfill. “We’ve been transparent from the beginning that a small portion of the produce we buy may have had a previous market, and may not have been wasted,” he said, adding that non-wasted food only accounts for about 5 to 10 percent of their products. “It’s really a minority of it.”

Lutz, of Hungry Harvest, said the company also sources from agribusiness, but only sparingly. “I don’t have the exact figure for how much comes from Big Ag, however we define that,” he said. “I can tell you it’s not a lot.” The average farm the company buys from is under 500 acres, he said, and he insisted that all of the fruits and vegetables in Hungry Harvest boxes would have gone to waste, either by getting thrown out, composted, or left in the field.

But how does Lutz know that? How can Hungry Harvest promise that a farmer wasn’t going to sell her bruised cucumbers to a different surplus company, or donate it to a food bank? “It’s based on trust between us and the supplier,” he said.

Lutz put me in touch with one of those suppliers: Andrew Rose, whose family founded North Carolina’s New Sprout Organic Farms in 2011. Before Hungry Harvest approached the medium-size

company in 2016, Rose said, “a lot of times our stuff would get left in the field.” Now, Hungry Harvest has created a market for that surplus—as well as produce that gets rejected by supermarket buyers. For example, Rose said, he recently sent 300 pounds of watermelon radishes to a big grocery store, only to have it sent back because of decay that happened in-transit. “The first thing we did was call Hungry Harvest,” Rose said. “The timing was crazy, but we wound up getting 50 cents on the dollar on it, where we wouldn’t have gotten anything on it.”

But Rose also made a surprising acknowledgement: Not all of the food New Sprout Farms sells to Hungry Harvest was going to waste before the service came along. In most cases, Rose said, “We

“A lot of times our stuff would get left in the field.”

donated it to food banks.” New Sprout even received an award from one local food bank in 2012 for donating 85,000 pounds of produce, he said. “We still donate a lot to food banks—quite a lot,” Rose said. (Manna Food Bank, which gave the award, confirmed they still receive donations from New Sprout). The big difference is that now, “Hungry Harvest allows us to offset some of our costs.”

Lutz says this offsetting of farmers’ costs is what’s important. “I define the [food waste] problem not as overproduction, but as misallocation,” he said. “We’ve got 20 billion pounds of food that go to waste on farms every year, and 41 million Americans who are hungry. That’s a vast misallocation of resources. There should be a way that we can get those people food while helping farmers make money off of it.” Lutz says Hungry Harvest has paved that way. “We buy that surplus food from farms that they wouldn’t be selling otherwise, sell it to customers, and using those funds, we subsidize donations [to food banks].”

This is a compelling argument that ugly-produce companies helps farmers. It does not, however, address the environmental argument: that such companies are incentivizing large-scale agribusiness to continue overproducing. Lutz and Simon could quell these concerns by disclosing all the farms and wholesalers they use, making it possible to fact-check their claims. But neither company will disclose that information.

“We’ve explored being transparent about the farms, but some of our farms don’t want to be broadcast for whatever reason,” Lutz said. Simon, meanwhile, claimed producers don’t want their brands to be associated with misshapen goods, adding that it’s not particularly business-savvy to disclose one’s suppliers. “Competitors would love to know all of our growers,” he said. “We need to be competitive as a business.”

Companies like Hungry Harvest and Imperfect Produce portray

themselves as disrupters of a broken food system, but critics say they may actually be disrupting something else: CSAs.

Community-supported agriculture programs are, in a way, the original ugly-produce companies. Customers pay for a share in their local farm, usually before the farmer plants anything. The farmer then knows exactly how much to plant. The customer assumes some of the risk—it’s possible that they won’t receive abundant or beautiful produce, depending on the year—while the

farmer is financially protected if she suffers a bad harvest. And, of course, it keeps food waste to a minimum.

In his *New Food Economy* op-ed, published last August, Cadji claimed that his organization’s CSA had seen a 30 percent drop in customers since Imperfect Produce came to Oakland. When we spoke in December, he said the loss was “probably closer to 50 or 60 percent.” He can’t prove the decline is because people decided to switch to Imperfect Produce. But CSAs in other cities where Imperfect is thriving are reporting similar wariness to what they see as a fierce market competitor.

Cadji also believes Imperfect Produce is doing “sneaky little things to undercut CSAs”—like, for example, advertising itself as a “CSA Style Box.” He said this is misleading, and has the potential to lure away potential CSA customers who believe they’re signing up for something similar. Simon, for his part, defended the characterization. Like CSAs, he said, “We eliminate a step between the grower and households.”

Still, Simon said he doesn’t see CSAs as Imperfect Produce’s main competitor.* Lutz says the same about Hungry Harvest, and even offered proof: a survey the company took of its customer base in August, which found that only 1 in 10 had ever used a food delivery service before. “So I don’t think our customers are switching from CSAs to us,” he said.

But how many customers, like me, had signed up because they were searching for a way to solve the environmental epidemic of food waste, and chose Hungry Harvest over a local CSA?

“I don’t have a ton of data on that choice,” Lutz said.

In the weeks following their *New Food Economy* op-ed, Cadji and Holt-Gimenez said, they received a lot of support for their critiques. “People had never thought about what it meant to tackle the systemic problem of food waste before,” Holt-Gimenez said. At the same time, he added, “A lot of people accused us of having a case of sour grapes. Like, why can’t you just be happy with their success? Why do you have to try and ruin something good?”

These are legitimate questions, because companies like Hungry Harvest and Imperfect Produce are doing tangible good. They’re giving organic family farms like New Sprout Organic increased financial security. They’re using their proceeds to fight hunger and provide well-paying

jobs. They’re challenging grocery stores’ silly aesthetic standards. They’ve prevented millions of pounds of food from going to waste.

But what if all of these benefits make it harder to achieve an even greater good? Is it worth saving ten million pounds of fruit and vegetables a year if doing so perpetuates their systemic overproduction?

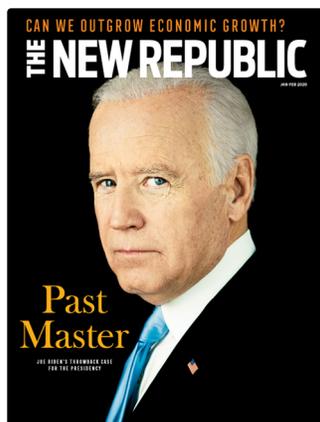
I don’t believe the founders of Imperfect Produce and Hungry Harvest are cravenly exploiting their customers’ do-goodism for financial gain. They seem genuine about wanting to solve one of our most complex environmental problems. But Cadji and Holt-Gimenez’s criticism is valid and necessary. Humanity only has about a decade to take the necessary steps to avoid a climate catastrophe. We need radical, not incremental, solutions—and that includes a complete overhaul of the food system.

This, ultimately, is why I’m ditching my orange-and-brown box. I became a Hungry Harvest customer because I wanted to do my part to reduce food waste. But I can’t be sure that I’m doing more good than harm. Am I preventing pounds of produce from going to waste, or propping up the very system that I’m trying to help fix? I won’t be haunted by these questions when I get my first delivery from my local CSA.

** This article has been updated to clarify Simon’s view on CSAs.*

Emily Atkin is a contributing editor to *The*

letter Heated. [@emorwee](#)



the civically exhausted

SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEW REPUBLIC

Subscribe **\$20**

THE NEW REPUBLIC DAILY