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Waste not, want not: The 'food angels' collecting goodies we're about to throw out to cook for Hong Kong's underprivileged

The Food Angel programme 'rescues' normally disposed food from various sources and cooks nourishing meals for underprivileged people

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Ninety-two-year-old Lau Yuet-ngor has a big smile on her face. She's looking forward to her early dinner at the Food Angel Community Centre in Sham Shui Po.

"The food here is delicious. I come here every day, for lunch and dinner," she says.

On the day we visit, young teenage volunteers spoon out large cubes of steamed tofu with soy sauce, a scoop of rice and some napa cabbage onto plates for elderly residents who live in the area.

Not only do these seniors get a well-balanced meal, they can also socialise with others and pick up some fruit as well.

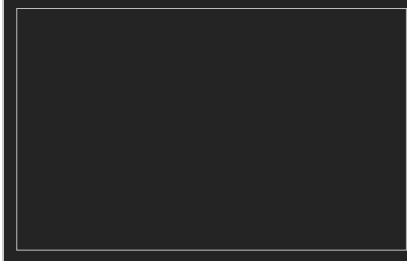
Food Angel operates Monday to Friday. Lau says she doesn't mind cooking on the weekends, and feels the programme's food, friendly staff and environment make a good combination.



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Elderly residents enjoy the nourishing results at one of the programme's centres. Photo: SCMP pictures

The group collects mostly raw ingredients from suppliers, supermarkets and wet markets that would normally have been thrown out, and then prepares them into meals. They are then distributed to people in need, from the elderly who visit the community centre, like Lau, to low-income families with young children, and homeless people.

Chief executive Caribbean Chan Miu-yu said when Food Angel was launched in 2011, it served 30 meals a day - it has now grown to provide 6,000 meals daily.

This illustrates how much food is wasted every day and also how many people go hungry in Hong Kong, which the group estimates is one in every seven people. "Some 3,600 tonnes of food are thrown out every day, and we can only collect four tonnes of it," she said.

The charity has a small fleet of trucks that pick up food from suppliers during the day on a regular basis, and also at closing time. They rush to supermarkets and wet markets to "rescue" as much food as possible, mostly fruit, vegetables, meat and some seafood.

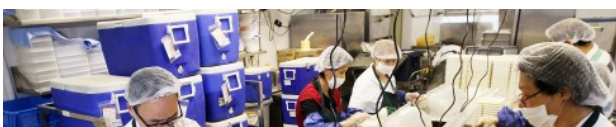
Watch: '3,600 tons of surplus food is discarded in Hong Kong every day' says local charity Food Angel

In the group's Sham Shui Po kitchen, there is an army of staff and volunteers chopping vegetables and meat, cooking food, and portioning them out into individual meals that are then packed into styrofoam boxes and immediately delivered to various districts.

It is an efficient operation in a compact space, and despite the cramped quarters there is a congenial atmosphere.

Chan explains the dishes are steamed not only to ensure they are cooked thoroughly, but also to make it easier for elderly people to eat. Staff stick thermometers in trays of cooked dishes to ensure they reach a certain temperature to prevent spoilage.

Cooked food is also collected from hotels, but only dishes that have not left the kitchen.



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The group collects mostly raw ingredients from suppliers, supermarkets and wet markets that would normally have been thrown out, and then prepares them into meals.
Photo: David Wong

Lawmaker Kenneth Chan Ka-lok, who is also vice-chairman of the Legislative Council's panel on the environment, says while Hong Kong has plenty of options for places to eat, he thinks the government needs to do more to cut down on food waste.

He says the government has secured funding to bring in a state-of-the-art machine that will process food waste into compost, but is still trying to figure out the best location for it.

"We would need to have six or seven such facilities. At the moment, we only have money to build the first one," Chan says.

Despite the government's "Food Wise" campaign, featuring a character called Big Waster to educate the public on purchasing less food, Chan says it hasn't promoted enough awareness to make a dent in the amount of food waste accumulated in the city daily.



A small army of staff and volunteers prepare and package the meals made from food that would normally have been thrown out by various sources. Photo: David Wong

Asked about NGOs' efforts to collect surplus food, The Environment Bureau said it "actively supports such surplus food recovery projects at the community level through the Environment and Conservation Fund".

A spokesman added: "Technical advice on food safety and financial support are considered by food recycling NGOs as key challenges in implementing surplus food recovery and food donation programmes."

Local NGOs involved in these programmes were becoming increasingly adept at observing good hygiene practices, the spokesman said.

The government aims to reduce food waste disposal at landfill sites in Hong Kong's by 40 per cent by 2022.

"The sad story is that this is a capitalist society. Consumption is king in a free market economy. Many food suppliers, restaurants, cafeterias ... I think they're happy to see people eating happily by providing a little bit more goodies," Chan says.

He has suggested the government implement a plan to collect unsold food from wet markets so that NGOs can pick it up more efficiently. But the idea has stalled, mainly because of health safety reasons, he says.

"The government said asking the shops to put the food waste together at a certain location at a certain time is not a problem. The government is very worried that it would cause food safety

concerns, or food hygiene issues, that eventually the government would have to take all the blame and all the responsibility."

Last May, France passed a bill that forbade retailers from throwing out unsold food, ruling it had to be given to charities.

When asked whether Hong Kong could follow suit, Chan stressed the government would need to recognise the urgency of the situation before that type of legislation could even be tabled at Legco.

That means Hong Kong will fall far behind other cities such as Vancouver that have implemented food recycling programmes aiming at zero waste.

Chan admits there are challenges in food recovery as most of the city's population lives in high-rises and the logistics can be difficult.

"We have multi-storey buildings, huge public housing estates, private estates as well. It's an ongoing challenge in terms of encouraging individual households to contribute and to monitor the situation so that everything will be done properly."

In the meantime, efforts by programmes such as Food Angel continue to ensure people like Lau will have something to eat.

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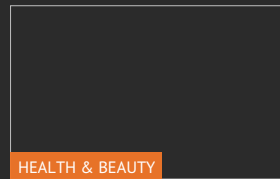
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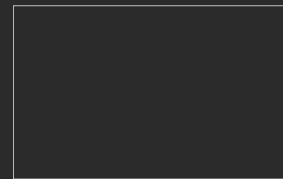
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