

OPINION

LOWERING FOOD INSECURITY

You can help reduce food waste



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One month ago this Sunday, Americans consumed an enormous amount of food.

Everyone was gearing up for the Super Bowl, and in our Living & Arts section that day, we reported some of the game day numbers: 1.3 billion chicken wings, 28 million slices of pizza, 9,200 tons of chips and 3 million pounds of nuts. In case you didn't know it, Super Bowl food consumption is second only to Thanksgiving Day.

It should be noted that consumption figures are mostly based on purchases, not food eaten. That means a good deal of the food in those reported numbers went into the trash. In fact, the New York Times recently reported that as much as 40 percent of the food we buy ends up in a landfill.

Food waste is an issue many of us struggle with. We like to get BOGO deals at the grocery store, cook meals at home and bring home our leftovers after dining out. Every time I'm tempted to throw away unwanted food, I hear my grandmother's voice telling me as a young girl about all the starving children in Africa.

It wasn't until I was well into adulthood that I realized that my eating all of my food would not save starving kids in Africa or anywhere else for that matter. That doesn't mean that I can't be smarter about my purchases, consumption and how I dispose of food that I don't consume.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has worked to clarify the meaning of dates applied to food products so that consumers don't needlessly discard perfectly



Bruce Beecham moves pallets of donated food items at the Atlanta Community Food Bank. Hundreds of thousands in metro Atlanta and North Georgia struggle to get food. CURTIS COMPTON/CCOMPTON@AJC.COM 2016

good food. The USDA stresses that dates are applied to food for quality not safety and that most food is safe to consume past the dates on the label.

Studies show that 1 in 7 people (and 20 percent of children) in our country are food insecure. The key for our nation is getting the food into the hands and mouths of those most in need. And there's plenty we can all do to help.

Today, the Atlanta Community Food Bank will hold its Hunger Walk Run, where thousands of participants will participate in a 5K race to bring more awareness to hunger and raise money for local hunger relief organizations. If you haven't signed up yet, you can still register online at acfb.org or onsite this morning. The race starts at 2 p.m.

According to the food bank, hundreds of thousands of people in metro Atlanta and North Georgia struggle to get food. In fact, each year they distribute more than 60 million pounds

of food to needy families. When we think about the effort and money spent to grow food on farms in Georgia and then get it into farmers' markets and stores, and finally our refrigerators and pantries only to end up in the trash, it makes the food insecurity problem in our country pretty hard to swallow. Now more than ever, farmers, retail food producers and chefs are fighting against waste efforts.

Mary Blackmon, founder of Farm Star Living, (www.farmstarliving.com) is a farmer advocate and champions the farm-fresh food movement. Her website showcases farmers, food and healthy living and has also been helping with "food transparency" by educating her audience to the brands behind the labels they see in their local grocery stores.

"We 'lift the veil' to help shoppers understand their values, mission and food products better," said Blackmon, a

fourth-generation farmer.

One company that Blackmon works with is Missions Produce, a supplier of Hass avocados that has a ripening facility here in Atlanta.

How does a ripening center help with food waste? The ripe avocados are the ones most customers buy, as opposed to hard avocados that can sit on store shelves and deteriorate. The innovative techniques at the ripening center help get the fruit to the store at its peak, thereby moving product more quickly.

"We also partner with food-service providers and avocado oil processors who take our small and externally scarred avocados," said LeighAnne Thomsen, brand marketing manager at Missions Produce. "We make sure that our remnant inventory is distributed to food banks so that all unused avocados get a home."

Georgia's own Vidalia Brands also works to prevent food waste.

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"When onion packers grade Vidalia sweet onions and sweet potatoes, the packers separate the yield by produce that is considered 'pretty' enough to be sold to retailers and produce that still tastes good but may not be as aesthetically pleasing," said Sandra Bland, president of Vidalia Brands. Rather than dumping bruised product, Vidalia processes it for use in other food products. In addition, short-date product is donated to local charities like America's Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia, a food bank in Brunswick and Savannah.

At White Oak Pastures there's a push to waste nothing.

"From an animal welfare side, we feel that it's our job to utilize the entire carcass," said marketing director Jenni Harris. "When we take that animal's life, it's our responsibility to find the value in every part of it."

Regardless of who we are, we can do our part to fight food waste. Every dollar you donate is equivalent to sponsoring four meals for a hungry child or adult, including the elderly. The food bank also leads cooking workshops to help families learn cooking skills and how to stretch the grocery money. You can also volunteer at a local food bank, or even host a food drive.

But if you're in the mood to walk in today's 5K run/walk, sign up at www.acfb.org or just show up.