

# ‘Rescue Angels’ Fight Waste to Feed the Hungry

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NEW YORK — It’s 10 minutes after closing time, and kitchen workers are busy cleaning up an empty Greenwich Village restaurant. What remains of the day’s menu has been dropped into tin trays that are stacked and waiting for pickup.

Just a few years ago, the food that didn’t make it into a \$10 lunch bowl would have been thrown away, trucked out of town and left to rot in a landfill. But these leftovers are headed to a different location: A volunteer grabs the trays, and the Brussels sprouts, leafy greens and farro begin a milelong trip down Canal Street before they arrive at a shelter.

Lunch for downtown workers has become dinner for the homeless.

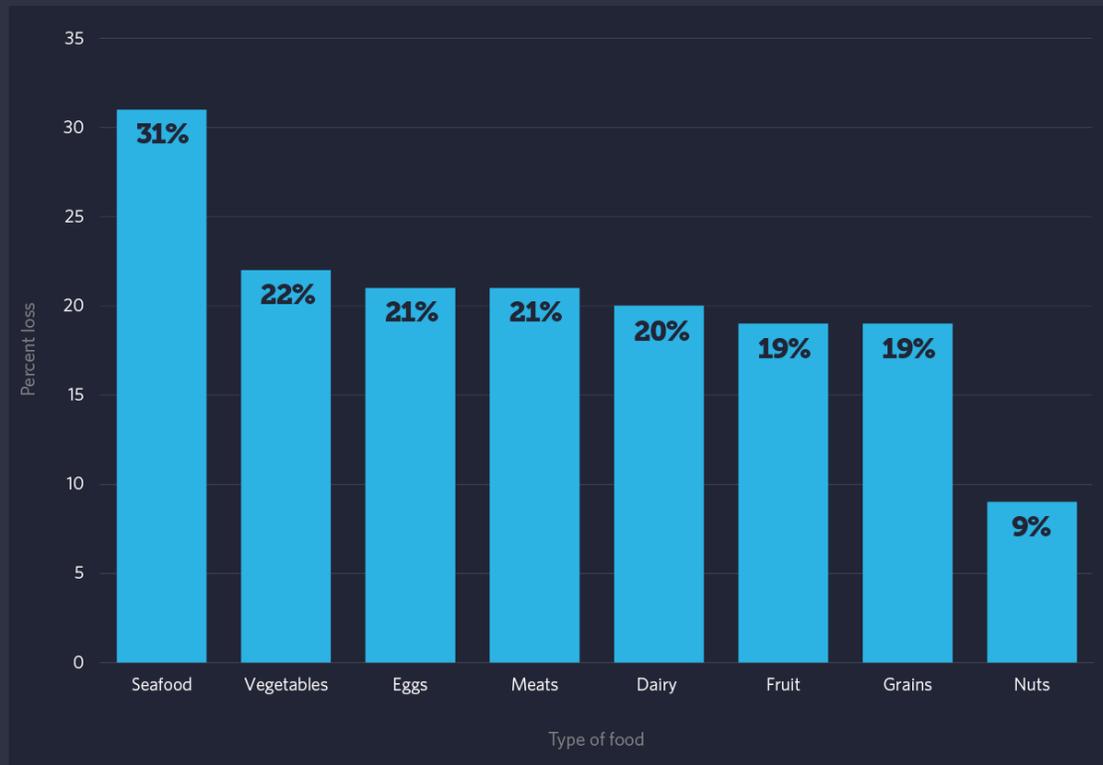
How the leftover bounty from Dig Inn didn’t end up buried with the rest of New York’s garbage is the story of a tiny nonprofit tackling a persistent and shocking problem: that a nation so rich in resources still has trouble feeding all its citizens.

In 2013, Robert Lee created Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, which intercepts food before it hits the dumpsters and delivers it by hand to nearby shelters, soup kitchens and social service agencies. Last year, the organization collected nearly 793,000 pounds of food, which sounds like a lot until you learn that the United States each year tosses up to 160 billion pounds of food.

Most of that waste is committed by people at home (the average family of four throws out 1,160 pounds of food a year) but as much as 33 billion pounds end up in the trash behind restaurants, grocery stores and other food retailers. Nationally, just 2 percent of restaurants say they donate their unused food.

## Some Foods Thrown Out More Than Others

Consumers discard fish and vegetables more often than nuts, fruits and grains.



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council, "Wasted," 2017

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Other organizations such as City Harvest and New York Common Pantry have similar missions. But Rescuing Leftover Cuisine operates in a niche many residents may not realize exists. Many shelters will pick up donations but will only make the trip if people are giving enough food to meet their "minimum pound requirement."

Most restaurants don't have the time, money or ability to drop it off themselves. The nonprofit relies on its 100 regular volunteers to pick up and drop off the food. Another 8,000 volunteers are on their roster who can sign up online for one of the 200 pickups a week the nonprofit coordinates.

Lee, 27, grew up in Queens, the son of immigrant parents who left behind careers in Korea but, with basic English, were limited professionally once in the United States. His father worked at a grocery store, and ironically the family could not count on eating three meals a day.

“With my parents coming here not knowing any English and not understanding what they would do when they got here, they struggled a little bit and had trouble finding jobs and keeping them,” Lee said. “My brother and I would watch them watch us eat or watch them struggle to pay rent.”

Some days he would get no more than a bowl of ramen noodles. When he got hungry, he would try to ignore it. At school, he was shocked to see classmates throw out vegetables or the crust of a sandwich.

Founding the nonprofit, Lee discovered he wasn’t the only one offended by the waste in the food industry. His organization helps retailers who are trapped between their conscience and the need to offer their customers an unceasing abundance of aesthetically perfect food.

“It just destroys me to see it go to waste,” said Philip Penta, an owner of Three Guys from Brooklyn, a 24/7 produce stand and one of the few grocers that have partnered with Rescuing Leftover Cuisine.

“Eye appeal is buy appeal,” Penta said. “Look at these dates. Because the stand is less full, the psychology in the consumer’s head is, ‘If it’s not full, it’s not fresh,’ but the reality is we’re getting these in every day.”

In a typical grocery store, produce with a few dents or dark spots will be thrown out alongside packaged greens that were approaching their “sell by” dates and were bumped by new shipments.

Penta’s produce stand generates enough extra food to make three donations each week. Rather than getting tossed, the food goes to St. John’s Bread & Life, where half is used in the kitchen and the rest is given away at a food pantry.

## **College Club**

Lee first noticed food waste as a child — his eyes widening when large portions were thrown away at friends’ houses — but he didn’t learn about the concept of “food rescue” until college. But that was by no means his priority when he arrived at New York University with a full scholarship to the Stern School of Business.

Lee, who had worked for a hedge fund doing data entry during high school, was determined to make “as much money as soon as possible” to help support his family.

But a club called Two Birds, One Stone quickly grabbed his interest. Student volunteers would collect leftover food from a dining hall and bring it to a nearby shelter. At his first meeting, Lee peppered the group’s leaders with questions.

“I thought it was a huge problem that they didn’t work on the weekends and only worked with one dining hall,” he said. “I was like, ‘Oh, do people not need to eat on the weekends?’”

Lee became the club’s president in his second semester and set about expanding its reach and hours.

## **How many people in the United States do not have enough food?**

**49 million people in the United States do not have enough food.**  
(Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014)[TWEET](#)

## **How much food does an American family of four throw out per year?**

**An American family of four throws out 1,160 pounds of food a year.** (Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014)[TWEET](#)

Even in school, Lee was thinking about how to expand food rescue beyond campus. Rescuing Leftover Cuisine was branded when he and college friend Louisa Chen entered the concept in a pitching competition for startups.

Lee took a job at J.P. Morgan after graduating in 2013, but he soon realized he needed to work on Rescuing Leftover Cuisine full time. His parents thought he was crazy, and so did his friends.

But these are the same parents, he pointed out, who told him any uneaten food is “all compiled, and in the afterlife you have to eat it all in one sitting,” and “for every single grain of uneaten rice it would mean a pimple on your future wife’s face.”

Lee spent that year squirreling away money to support himself as he switched to working on Rescuing Leftover Cuisine full time. Eventually his parents came around, becoming the nonprofit’s first donors.

“They sacrificed everything in their whole lives to come to the U.S. for us to have the opportunities they didn’t have, so for me to squander that at a job where I felt I didn’t have an impact ... would’ve been the real waste,” Lee said. “To take this chance and risk while at same time learning a lot is the whole point of coming here. And I think they finally understood that.”

### **A Complex Process**

Getting the food from a restaurant to a shelter takes more than just a long walk down New York's bustling streets. Rescuing Leftover Cuisine has seven full-time employees to help coordinate the process.

Some staff reach out to new social service partners who may want the food. Others look for new food donors, which range from restaurants to grocery stores to office cafeterias.

It often takes some convincing. Donors won't face any liability for their donations, staff assure them, thanks to the federal Good Samaritan Act, which protects those who donate food in good faith.

Recently, Lee and Clara Son, who heads partner outreach for Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, made a pitch to a new social service agency that has food pantries across the city. The woman on the other end of the phone sounded hesitant.

Her agency works with vulnerable people who need safe and healthy food, she said. Once she learned the food comes from places with health department licenses that follow food safety guidelines, her tone changed, and the team arranged for food donations to start the next week.

Pairing the two sides can be complex. Food donors detail the products they are likely to give and the hours they can hand over the food — sometimes late at night as restaurants close. They are matched with nearby soup kitchens that have someone on hand to take the donation. Refrigeration, storage capacity and number of people to feed all factor into the match.

Lauren LeBeouf, a volunteer who does about five pickups a week, said most only take about half an hour, and volunteers see their impact immediately.

"In New York, our trash is on the curb, so I've seen massive trash bags full of bread just sitting on the sidewalk," she said. "There's no need for that when there are hungry people."

## **Economic Challenges**

Noble as the cause might be, there are economic forces at work that have proven challenging for Rescuing Leftover Cuisine.

In New York, restaurants must pay commercial haulers to remove their trash. In theory, reducing the amount of waste they produce could reduce their bill, but the difference in volume between the smallest pickup and the next size up is so great most restaurants would be unlikely to eliminate enough trash to make a difference in their bill.

That's why Lee stresses the higher tax deductions available to businesses that donate their leftover food.

Businesses can currently write off the cost of food they throw away. One hundred dollars of discarded tomatoes is worth \$100 in write-offs. But the enhanced tax deductions for donations mean those same tomatoes, if given to Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, are worth up to \$150 in tax write-offs.

This is important, because Rescuing Leftover Cuisine charges \$30 for the pickups. (The \$30 payments fund about half of the nonprofit's operating costs, and Lee views the payments as a path to sustainability for the nonprofit.)

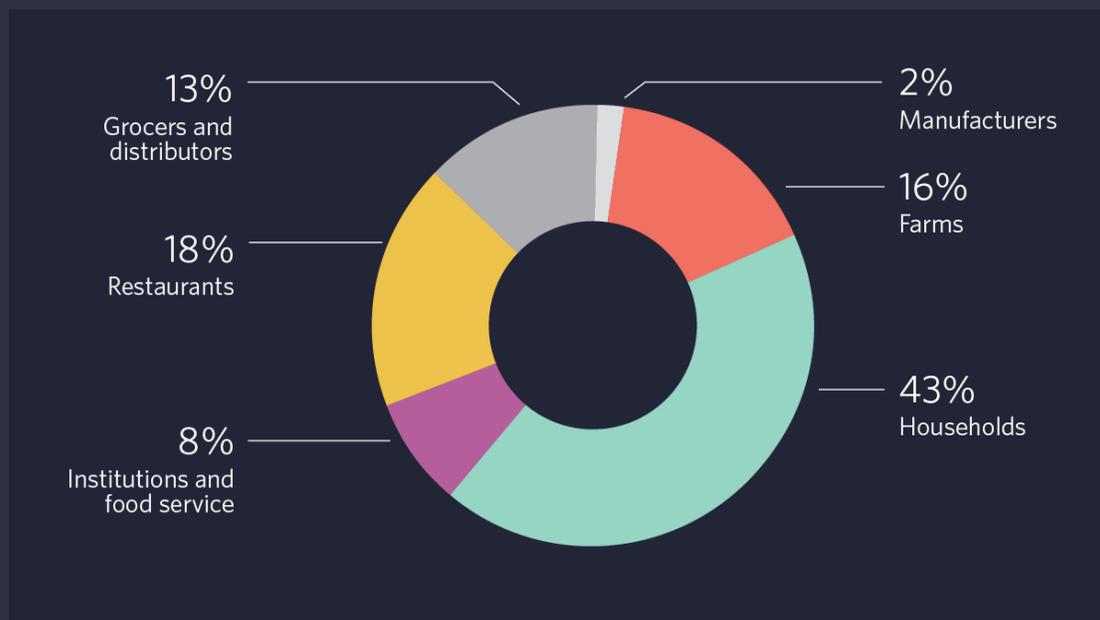
Using the tax credits should cover the cost for the donor and still leave a little left over, Lee said. But many restaurants said they do not use the credits, because they are too complex or their accountants use other write-offs.

Because of that, Rescuing Leftover Cuisine has begun to turn to more nontraditional partners such as corporate offices that regularly feed their employees.

Free lunches are becoming the norm for New York tech companies, including mParticle, which feeds its employees three times a week. And it's clear they are far less concerned about how the payments might affect their bottom line than restaurants with tight profit margins.

## Food Is Wasted at Every Stage

Food goes unused as it moves from farms to grocery stores, homes and restaurants. Households throw out the most food of any stop on the chain.



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council, "Wasted," 2017

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But Lee said he believes that to create a real turning point in eliminating food waste, the government will have to start charging people for throwing away scraps, finding a price that reflects the cost to the environment.

"A lot of the reason why food rescue is not prevalent is because there is no financial incentive for people to do it. It's just a nice thing to do," Lee said. "Everything becomes aligned once you start talking money."

## Kale and Quinoa?

Much of the food brought in by Rescuing Leftover Cuisine doesn't get served the way it arrives. Food donated later in the day may not land in time to be served as that day's dinner.

Many of the ingredients get incorporated into new dishes to help round out existing meals or to better fit the taste of the clientele — which is a nice way of saying kale and quinoa are not the go-to choices in most missions around midtown Manhattan.

“The food is a little ... granola,” said Bruce Foster, a volunteer at the Koreatown shelter Helene and BJ’s Place, south of the Empire State building. “I’ve usually had more success with what I’d call meat-and-potato meals.”

But the chefs on the receiving end are nothing if not adaptable and inventive. Tofu is thrown in with spaghetti and meatballs so it can absorb some of the flavor. Farro is mixed in with rice, a chef says, because people won’t eat it on its own.

The organizations receiving Rescuing Leftover Cuisine’s food have slowly become more reliant on it. Many social service agencies say the group has saved them thousands of dollars a year in grocery bills.

New York City Rescue Mission and its associated shelters through the Bowery Mission get 90,000 pounds of food a year from Rescuing Leftover Cuisine, which saves them about \$150,000.

“They’re saving me money,” Kevin Lewis, a chef at Mainchance Drop-In Center, a homeless shelter, said as Lee drops off trays of sauteed vegetables and cookies. “I buy about three weeks of food at a time, but maybe with this, that will last me for five weeks.”

On a recent night, the mission fed more than 400 people. Half were residents. The rest were passersby who stopped in for a free meal, no questions asked. Even an hour before dinner time, people were gathering in the chapel.

There was no prayer service, but staff proselytized about the job training and housing services the mission offers. The staff hope the food becomes a gateway to other positive life choices.

Charles Blackburn was living on the streets when he first stopped in for a meal. He later moved into the shelter and now works at its front desk, where he accepts the food brought in by Rescuing Leftover Cuisine volunteers. In three years, he’s gone from being an addict to training for his second marathon.

Getting a good meal rather than having to eat on the run — he said he was often chased away from restaurants — sparked him to want more. He wanted a place to sleep. He started to fight his addiction to crack.

“You get that sense of dignity when you get it on the plate,” he said, speaking warmly of salads and nuts and fresh bread. “What I like about the Rescuing Leftover Cuisine people is they don’t know they’re giving peoples’ self-respect back to them. ... They’re rescue angels putting food in people’s bellies.”