

EATING OUT AND FOOD WASTE

INTERVIEW WITH ABBY FAVIS

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Rather than focus on households, this film suggests that efforts could be made at the level of the service sector – in restaurants, workplace canteens, or school cafeterias. What do you think about this approach?

Households have often been the focus of food consumption and food waste studies. While these are certainly important nodes to investigate, attention should also be given to meso-level units such as restaurants and cafeterias. Such spaces are governed by a different set of social norms which may affect behaviours towards food consumption and waste generation. For example, the purchase of food in restaurants and cafeterias is more public than the spending of households on food, which is more hidden. Eating out may influence the decisions of other consumers in relation to how much food is bought and how much waste is left behind. Studying such facilities could help identify customized approaches to food waste minimization, given that behaviours in larger, communal, and more public spaces may be different from those in households.

You worked on the Ateneo campaign to reduce food waste on campus. Can you explain how this initiative came about? How important is it to have a clear directive from the administration?

In 2013, the Philippine government declared the year as the National Year of Rice. There was much media attention given to issues of rice self-sufficiency, production, and waste. We realized that, while there was data on rice wastage in the pre-consumption stage, there were not a lot of studies being done post-consumption. Government data on household rice waste were based on surveys and not on actual waste measurements. This highlighted an important research opportunity! At the same time, Ateneo de Manila University was beginning to integrate sustainability more and more into school operations. As one of the strategic thrusts of building a sustainable campus, waste management and sustainable food consumption were highlighted and the Sustainable Food Program was initiated. This program includes shifting towards more nutritious food, as well as minimizing food waste. As one of the school's strategic thrusts, we were fortunate to have support from top level school management.

How did students come to understand their role in reducing food waste? How did the campaign go about changing habits?

After we measured the food waste, we made sure to share the information with different stakeholders – including parents – so that they would support and understand the changes implemented. For example, the unlimited rice option was modified by removing the rice bowls from the dining tables. This minimized passive over consumption (and waste generation) of rice. To assure the parents that their children will still have adequate rice servings, we still provided the option for them to approach the food service counters to ask for more. Food waste issues were also integrated into classroom activities. For example, one class was assigned to keep a “food diary” for a week so they could tally their intake and waste generation. Giving the students opportunities to explore their personal food habits also enables them to identify the changes they can make to improve their consumption. For the older students, the information was shared through talks and classroom lectures. Food waste was also connected to vermicomposting activities on campus. This gives students a more complete picture of where the food comes from and where it goes.

We learned, in this research project, that Ateneo serves brown rice once a week. On the brown rice day, people tend to waste more rice – as there’s a preference for white rice. Is this changing?

Yes, brown rice is served on Wednesdays. It took a while for young students to adjust to the taste and look of brown rice. On the other hand, brown rice is also now served in the college cafeterias! It started with one small rice cooker but when the demand proved to be high, they use larger rice cookers to supply more brown rice. This shows us that maturity might play a role in the preference. Younger students are more particular about taste while the older students – and faculty and staff – appreciate the environmental and health benefits of brown rice.