



Denver Food Matters Restaurant Challenge

Cut waste. Feed community. Strengthen your business.

U.S. restaurants generate **11.4 million tons of food waste** each year, costing **over \$25 billion**—not to mention the toll on water, energy, transportation, and labor resources.



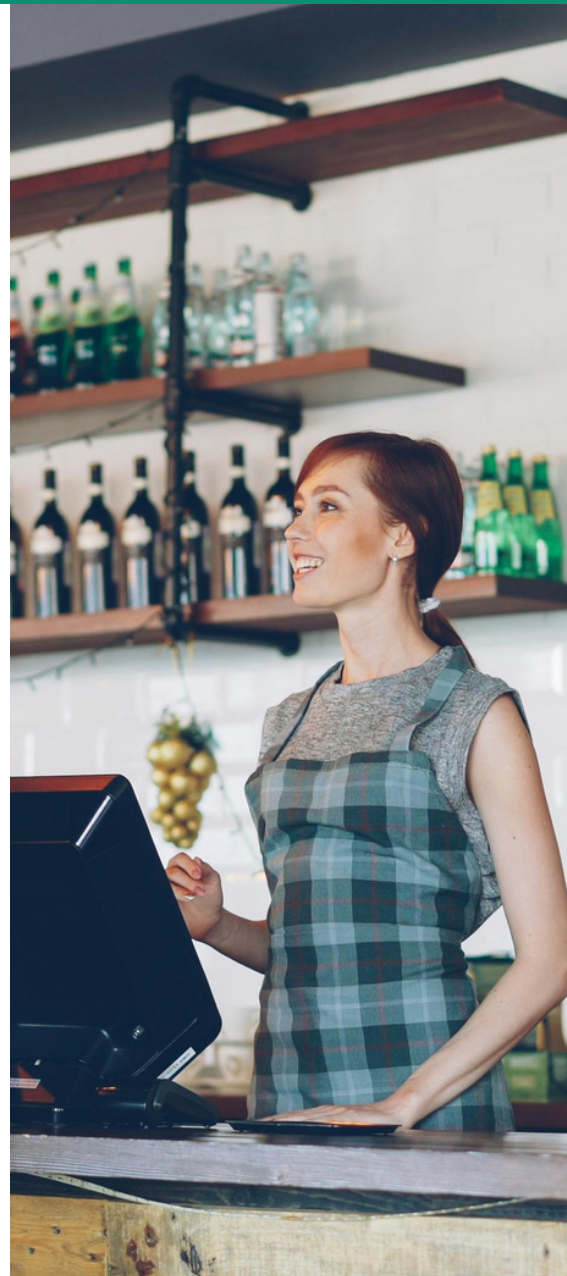
In the Denver Department of Public Health's Food Matters Restaurant Challenge, restaurants became part of the solution. From Fall 2025 through Spring 2026, **15 restaurants** joined the Challenge to focus on food waste prevention, reduction, and donation strategies—all designed to help them give back to their communities while adding value to their bottom line.

The Challenge

The Challenge was designed to be practical, accessible, and community-driven. Participating restaurants committed to implementing one or more wasted food reduction or diversion strategies during the Challenge period. They earned points for demonstrating progress on their chosen strategies — rewarding their progress no matter the starting point.

All participants received:

- Custom guidance to reduce wasted food within their business
- Ongoing support to troubleshoot challenges
- One-on-one consultations with Jonathan Deutsch, culinary innovator and hospitality educator of Drexel Food Labs
- Training in wasted food tracking, food donation requirements, compost best practices, and more
- Social media and publicity from Challenge partners



Challenge Team

Challenge Host



Waste Strategy Advisor



Food Rescue Partner



On-The-Ground Support



Food Upcycling Expert



Less waste, more culinary creativity!

Challenge participants embraced the chance to think creatively about wasted food in their businesses. With the support of the Challenge team, participants were able to explore modifying recipes to reduce waste, finding new uses for unused or surplus food, and taking steps to make food last longer. Creative solutions included:

Using surplus rice for fried rice dishes

Eliminating the step of removing the seeds from cucumbers to reduce waste from cucumber salad (prep chefs rejoice!)

Developing a simple syrup using spent coffee grounds

Modifying a classic pico de gallo to increase its shelf life

Turning broken gordita shells into a new menu item: nachos!

Developing a new miso recipe to utilize leftover bread

Pursuing strategies to extend the shelf life of fresh juice blends and a banana syrup

Testing longer-lasting storage processes for charcuterie

Creating a new cucumber agua fresca from cucumber scraps

Using broccoli and cauliflower stocks in soups and stocks

Starting a new labeling practice for house-made syrups to better reflect "best by" dates—making sure customers get full use of their purchases



These actions may seem small, but they add up: participating restaurants prevented a combined **3.46 tons of wasted food** from going to landfill—*per year of operation*.

Several restaurants began or expanded their existing food scrap recycling practices as part of the Challenge, keeping an additional **22 tons of food scraps** out of the landfill.

Restaurants also took action in other ways, building shared capacity to address wasted food challenges in their communities. This looked like:

- Starting a routine of sending food scraps home with an employee to feed backyard chickens (lucky birds!)
- Building a tool to calculate carbon savings from their food rescue donations
- Amplifying the call to reduce wasted food via their social media platforms
- Pursuing shared compost service with neighboring businesses

Many of the restaurants also participated in the public-facing Denver Food Matters Food Crawl. Over the 10-day event, restaurants featured new menu items crafted with recovered food: perfectly good ingredients that would have otherwise been discarded during the prep or cooking process. This event engaged 95 participants across Denver to help take action to reduce food waste – keeping food on the table and out of the landfill. Even more people (60,000+) engaged with the Crawl via social media, planting seeds for future action.



Challenge Impact

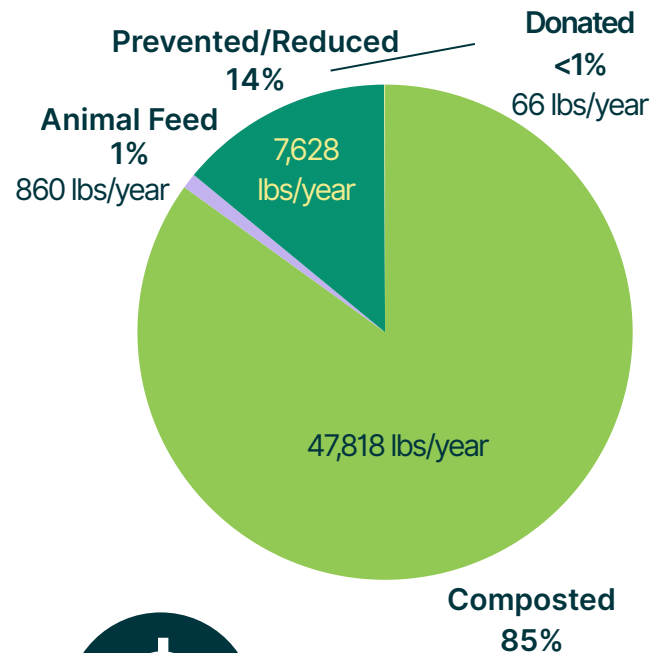
15

Restaurant locations

26.92 tons

of avoided greenhouse gas emissions (t CO₂eq) per year

Combined 25.57 tons/year of wasted food was...



Combined cost savings of **\$21,525** per year

Additional profit unlocked: **\$6,750** per year

The benefit-to-cost ratio of wasted food reduction efforts in the restaurant industry is compelling: for every \$1 invested in food waste reduction, restaurants can realize approximately \$8 of cost savings.*

*Source: World Resources Institute. Champions 12.3; The Business Case for Reducing Food Loss and Waste (Table 3, pg. 15). World Resources Institute (2017) Web. <https://champions123.org/the-business-case-for-reducing-food-loss-and-waste/>



RESTAURANT OLIVIA

Restaurant Olivia is known for their handmade pasta and classic Italian-inspired cuisine. The chef insists on local sustainably produced shell eggs (as opposed to more commonly used frozen pasteurized eggs or yolks) and previously only used the yolk of the egg, yielding gallons of extra egg whites each week. The Restaurant Olivia team started the challenge by coming up with creative ideas to use the surplus egg whites including a brunch frittata, baked goods, and bartering them with a local sandwich shop for breakfast burritos. But these ideas addressed the symptoms and not the core problem. In collaboration with food scientist Jonathan Deutsch, the Restaurant Olivia team experimented with their pasta recipe to use whole eggs instead. Both versions were tested side-by-side, first in some items and then across all the pastas. While there was a slightly noticeable difference, the change did not result in a loss of quality. Further, once in application (sauced and cheesy), diners and even cooks couldn't tell the difference.

By using whole eggs rather than egg whites, the restaurant saves both eggs and labor, and prevents over 1,600 pounds of wasted egg whites per year.

Savings Math:

One 360-count case of eggs saved weekly: \$3,640 per year*

Labor: two hours x \$28/hour for egg separation: \$2,912 per year

= \$6,552 in savings, 18,720 eggs annually

*A case of eggs cost around \$70 at the time of the Challenge but this is currently priced around \$70 but has been as high as \$110 in recent years.



The Restaurant Olivia team also found waste-saving opportunities for their well-known homemade focaccia. They often had extensive leftovers and were trying to find uses such as croutons, crostini, and savory bread pudding. To treat the core problem rather than the symptoms, they put forecasting in place and changed their standard focaccia recipe to one of four recipes, yielding anywhere from 31 to 85 loaves depending on reservation numbers. The recipe formulated for the slowest night will now save over \$100 in food and labor cost and prevent 12.5 pounds of food waste, compared to the full recipe.

Savings Math:

\$1.25 food cost savings per loaf

\$1.25 in labor savings per loaf

Over a year, this could add up to over \$10,000 in savings

Paula Thomas, who heads sustainability for the restaurant, says, "This was a great exercise in rethinking processes we felt were unchangeable. By redesigning the pasta dough to utilize whole eggs instead of only whites, we are able to save thousands of dollars a year in product, plus team members' time that can be used on other tasks. We are now looking at this as an example to rethink and redesign other recipes and overall processes we have to reduce waste and increase efficiency. Thank you to the Denver Food Matters team for your support!"



Restaurant Olivia was the winner of the Fall 2025 Denver Food Matters Restaurant Challenge hosted by the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.



BLUE SPARROW COFFEE

Among the highest-value products in a coffee shop are the spices used for chai. These aromatic gems are so flavorful that it is only natural to ask whether there is more life left in them after steeping. The team at Blue Sparrow Coffee worked with Drexel Food Lab's Jonathan Deutsch on a new process for their famous chai that reuses the spices in an additional steeping with additional tea and then blends the first and second batches together in a way that preserves the flavor and quality of the original.



Sara Van Hatten, the now former Sustainability Manager at Blue Sparrow, says, "Reworking the chai recipe would have never crossed our mind as part of achieving our 2025 Sustainability Goal of reducing food and liquid waste from our operations. It's incredible what a new perspective can do for a small team. We couldn't be more excited to share our findings in our 2026 reporting."

In a pleasant surprise, the revised process also allowed the original beloved flavor to be delivered with less sugar. Across all three Blue Sparrow Coffee locations, this process improvement resulted in **annual savings of**:

Over \$2,500 in cost of spices and sugar

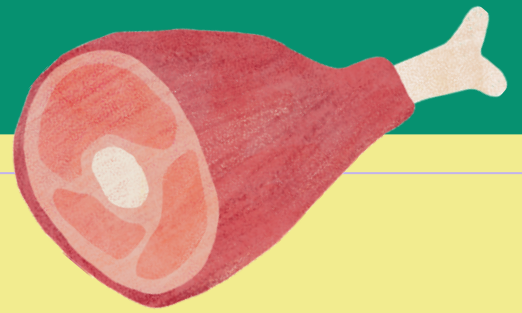
Over 70 pounds of sugar

Over 100 pounds of wasted food



Blue Sparrow was a participant in the Fall 2025 Denver Food Matters Restaurant Challenge hosted by the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.





PIT FIEND BARBECUE

Pit Fiend leaned into the opportunity to work with Chef Jonathan Deutsch to explore ways to reduce waste in the kitchen. Informed by careful waste tracking, the team identified several areas of opportunity.

Pit Fiend Barbecue typically prepares about 4-5 gallons of cucumber salad per week, using 20-25 pounds of cucumbers. Initially in the project, chef and co-founder Michael Graunke asked about how to upcycle the seeds generated by scooping out the cores of the cucumbers. Focused on treating the problem and not the symptom, the team discussed whether it was necessary to seed the cucumbers at all, deciding it was a fine-dining habit that was not necessary in a casual restaurant. Leaving the cucumbers with seeds intact increased the yield of the salad, requiring fewer cucumbers (source reduction), and saving on the labor of seeding. Importantly, no one detected a decline in quality from leaving the seeds in the recipe.

Graunke says, "I asked our catering manager if she'd tried the cucumber salad, and if she'd noticed anything different about it, and she was pretty confused because it tasted exactly the same. The kitchen staff loves the expedited process, which allows us to process cucumbers in roughly half the time."

Starting with their average usage of 22.5 pounds weekly, this change resulted in annual savings of:

\$867 in labor

\$1,648 in cucumber costs

= Total annual savings of \$2,515

Total food waste diverted: 14 pounds weekly and 719 pounds annually



Pit Fiend Barbecue was the winner of the Spring 2026 Denver Food Matters Restaurant Challenge hosted by the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.

The team also developed a new lentil side dish that utilizes leftover lamb fat as part of the Denver Food Matters Food Crawl. "We trim around 1 pound of fat each day off the shoulder cuts we use for our pulled lamb, and occasionally we have lamb that we are unable to sell. We'd always thought that the lamb fat was too gamey to use, but through this challenge, we discovered that it adds a really excellent flavor to legumes such as red lentils, which pair nicely with the ras el hanout seasoning blend we make in-house. Add the slightest amount of pulled lamb, and you've got a filling meal or robust side packed with savory BBQ flavor and bold spices. Many of our customers were very excited to see lentils on our menu - we had no idea they'd go over so well.

Over the Food Crawl, this new dish diverted 2 pounds of lamb fat from the landfill. If Pit Fiend rolls it onto the menu permanently, they'll divert **104 pounds of lamb per year, saving over \$200 in food costs and creating a revenue stream from what was once waste.**

As part of the Challenge, Pit Fiend also increased its food donation to The Other Side Academy, and is implementing a new composting program with support from the Denver Office of Climate Action, Sustainability & Resiliency.



CHOOK CHICKEN

Chook Chicken found a revenue win in an unlikely place: upcycled cucumber ends.

Chook Chicken uses cucumbers in their signature smashed cucumber side dish, as well as in salads. They usually trim the ends of the cucumbers, yielding just under four ounces (3.71 ounces) of trim for every twenty-pound case of cucumbers (a yield of nearly 99% already). While this product is virtually zero waste, Abby Sands, Director of People and Culture at Chook Chicken, thought the operation could do even better.

While less than a quarter pound per case seems insubstantial, multiplied over Chook's three high-volume locations, the quantity of cucumber ends is significant. The operation averages 7.5 cases (150 pounds) of cucumbers each week, meaning the trim waste is about 1.75 pounds per week. A little waste each day adds up to quite a lot over a year: that's 90 pounds of cucumber waste per year.

By pureeing these ends and incorporating them into a cucumber and lemon aqua fresca, Chook turns cucumber ends into a revenue-generating upcycled beverage with high customer appeal. The recipe combines pureed cucumber ends, lemonade, water, and simple syrup. Every 3 quarts of cucumber puree, combined with the other ingredients, yields eight gallons of cucumber lemon aqua fresca.



The cost is minimal: cucumber ends (otherwise wasted trim so zero cost), 1.5 quarts prepared lemonade (\$3.17), water at nominal cost, and simple syrup at the cost of one quart of simple syrup (approximately \$.73). Labor is also minimal: about fifteen minutes to puree the cucumbers and measure and mix the other ingredients (approximately \$4.82 in labor).

With a total food and labor cost of \$8.72, the 12.5 quart batch of cucumber lemon aqua fresca costs under 35 cents per 16-ounce portion, approximately two cents per ounce. With a sales price of \$2.95 for a glass of the refreshing beverage, this creative upcycling yielded a new menu item with an 88% margin and a revenue of \$73.75 per batch. Assuming one batch per week, the upcycled cucumber lemon aqua fresca results annually in:



Revenue of \$3,835

Gross profit after food and labor costs of \$3,375

90 pounds of food waste diverted



Chook Chicken was a participant in the Spring 2026 Denver Food Matters Restaurant Challenge hosted by the Denver Department of Public Health & Environment.