Taste over waste: how ugly food is making friends

Comment: Some supermarkets are pushing new ranges of imperfect fruit and vegetables, but not all have chosen to follow suit

Consumer-driven food trends are nothing new. Organics, gluten-free, and more recently buying ‘local’ have all captured consumers, encouraging supermarkets around the globe and in Australia to respond. But the next emerging European food trend that may have the biggest impact on what we buy each week is ‘ugly food’.

It is estimated that a third of all the food produced in the world is never consumed, with the total cost of that food waste being as high as US$400bn a year.

In response to the European Commission’s plan to make 2014 the European Year Against Food Waste and the EU’s scrapping of rules that prevented the sale of oddly sized or misshapen fruit and vegetables, supermarkets across Europe were quick to respond.

The overarching objective of the ugly food movement is to reduce food waste by selling to consumers those fruit and vegetables that would normally be either rejected by supermarket buyers or dumped by farmers.

Celebrity adds integrity

So how do you market ugly food? The first rule is don’t use the word ‘ugly’ to describe the product. French supermarket Intermarché instead uses the term ‘Inglorious’ to brand such fruit and vegetables. UK retailer Asda, meanwhile, promotes ‘Wonky fresh produce’.

And late last year, Australia’s largest supermarket retailer Woolworths released its ‘Odd Bunch’ campaign, a replication of the Asda ‘ugly good’ strategy, right down to the same celebrity chef. At the same time, New South Wales food retailer Harris Farms launched its ‘Imperfect Picks’.

More recently, Canada’s largest supermarket Loblaw’s announced the roll out of its ‘Naturally Imperfect’ range.

Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has been used by both Asda and Woolworths to help add credibility and consumer interest to the campaigns.

How ugly is too ugly?

Not all supermarkets have been quick to follow suit, with some instead cautiously approaching this new phenomenon.

The UK’s largest food retailer Tesco last year told the House of Lords EU Sub-committee on Agriculture that its supermarkets regularly supplied misshapen fruit and vegetables to eastern and central European stores, but found British consumers consistently demanded better quality. It called for consumer education campaigns to support the programme.

In Australia, both Coles and Aldi have remained silent on whether they will implement such a campaign.

While it’s too early to tell whether these forays into ‘ugly food’ will be a resounding success for supermarket promoting healthy eating, is also a positive

If campaigns to promote taste over waste
After many years of produce buyers rejecting blemished and oddly shaped produce, and store managers removing offending items from shelves, Australian shoppers have been conditioned to expect only the very highest levels of freshness, quality and aesthetics.

**The benefits of taste, not waste**

Supermarkets that have effectively launched such a programme have gained from both a perceived positive corporate social responsibility position and increased sales.

Intermarché gained strong public support during the initial launch of its Inglorious Fruit & Vegetable campaign, selling 1.2 tonnes of misshapen fruit and vegetables across its stores in just two days, receiving a 24 per cent increase in foot traffic, 3.6m views on YouTube and over 500,000 Facebook likes.

Being able to provide lower-priced fresh fruit and vegetables to low socio-economic consumer groups, while outcome for both retailers and shoppers.

Ultimately, an ugly food programme is a win-win for all those in the supply chain: growers, retailers and consumers.

It also allows supply chain costs to be reduced. Ugly produce would normally be transported from the farm gate to the market, only to be rejected, then transported back and disposed of.

Now, such produce can be accepted, albeit at a lower ‘buy’ price and sent on to stores as an ‘ugly’ alternative. This reduces costs to farmers, supermarkets and eventually shoppers.

**A cautionary note**

Assuming retailers are successful in convincing consumers of the merits of ugly food, the strategy could create price pressure across the category.

From a shopper’s perspective, when provided with a choice of loose, somewhat misshapen carrots at a low price versus perfectly presented, aesthetically pleasing, high-priced carrots, will shoppers simply switch to the cheaper option? Will price-discounted, lower-quality produce reduce waste? Some say no.

A cautionary note to any potential supermarket buyers: are successful on a grand scale, there could also be unintentional consequences for farmers. Consider the grower who has invested heavily in agriculture infrastructure and processes to ensure their potatoes meet very high standards set by supermarkets, only to find the market has now shifted to the ugly alternative.

Finally, the alleged power of the major supermarkets has come under increasing criticism and inquiry. Potentially the ugly food movement could inadvertently create a market where supermarket buyers are able to set very low ‘buy’ prices for subjectively imperfect fruit and vegetables, with the alternative being to reject.

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