

FOODIES JOIN *to cut waste*

A successful trial shows just how much we could benefit the environment by cutting food waste. **Graham Readfearn** reports

Occasionally down at The Surf Club restaurant, executive chef Ben O'Donoghue will rush out from behind the counter to pluck a fistful of herbs from the planting boxes scattered beside the dining tables. "I can pay \$2 for a bunch of sage or I can walk out here and grab a handful," says Ben.

Now working hard at his new restaurant overlooking the beach at South Bank, the laid-back chef has one eye on the environmental impact of his restaurant. The basil, thyme, rosemary, parsley, curry leaves and lemongrass that fill the planters is one example. Ben's efforts to source seafood which is sustainable is another.

But on this morning, father-of-three Ben reveals he's on another mission – to cut the impact of food waste. "In a domestic sense, we tend to throw a lot away," he tells *bmag*. "For every \$100 we spend on food we throw out about \$20. At home I'm composting all my waste but from a restaurant point of view, it's phenomenal what you throw away."

At the beginning of his new book *At Home With Ben*, which includes an entire chapter on cooking with leftovers, he

writes: "We need to move away from our disposable culture. Making use of leftovers is something previous generations lived with, especially after the war and into the 1950s and 1960s."

During his 13 years working in London, Ben took part in a scheme to collect food waste and turn it into compost. "While I was there they started to have food waste bins where you could throw everything in," he says. "It was collected and composted and used on council gardens."

To try and make a change in his own industry, 40-year-old Ben helped to instigate a similar three-month pilot project, which ended in August, with seven food outlets in the South Bank precinct. Brisbane City Council provided 34 food waste bins and biodegradable bags. The bags were collected and the waste thrown into a special food composting bin at the nearby Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. From there, the waste was delivered to Petrie-based business Sustainable Organics and turned into compost.

"The idea was that we wanted to quantify how much waste there was," says Ben. "In three months the pilot scheme produced

more than 12 tonnes of food waste."

But what is food waste? From The Surf Club, Ben says it included trimmings and discards from the kitchen as well as left-over food, fish bones and shells from the plates of diners. "Usually what happens is that all that waste just goes into general waste and into landfill which produces large amounts of methane gas. But we eliminated this from the biosphere."

As well as the positive impact of re-using the food waste, Ben says the trial also cut the cost of his general waste collections and encouraged him to be more vigilant in the restaurant. Now he wants to convince the city council and other restaurateurs to be part of something which could have a far greater impact. "The big picture is to get every restaurant in Brisbane to separate all their food waste," he says.

Jon Dee, current NSW Australian of the Year and founder of the anti-waste FoodWise campaign, tells *bmag*: "People don't realise just how environmentally damaging food waste is. When it rots in landfill it gives off methane, a greenhouse gas 25-times more potent than the carbon

pollution from our car exhaust."

Dee says a "conservative estimate" is Australians send about three million tonnes of food waste to landfill annually, generating more than 11 million tonnes of climate-changing greenhouse gases. "The fact that so much waste came from so few restaurants during that South Bank trial shows the size of the problem," says Dee.

"It's time all authorities got together to do something practical. We need more ambassadors like Ben to be out there making a real difference by encouraging other chefs to sign up and first reduce their waste and then get it composted."

A Brisbane City Council spokesperson said food waste makes up about 20 per cent of the city's entire waste stream. "The aim of the trial was to see how dedicated food waste bins could reduce the amount of waste ending up in landfill and determine the viability of collecting food waste from restaurants and food producers. Council is now assessing the results of the trial and looking at options to capture food waste in the long term."

For ideas on ways to cut down on food waste at home go to www.foodwise.com.au.

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