

End of buffet? Don't throw the food away

Increasingly mindful about wasting food, hotels and eateries are taking steps to tackle the issue, with some selling food at discounted prices near closing time or turning it into fertiliser



Wong Ah Yoke
Senior Food Correspondent

About three or four times a week, when Ms Mary Miao feels hungry, she would check an app on her smartphone.

The Treatsure app shows her where she can pack a lunch or dinner box from a hotel buffet for \$10.

"It's wonderful," says the spa therapist, who is single and in her 40s. "It meets my needs as I have no time to cook."

She works at Tanglin Shopping Centre and lives in the Orchard Road area, so it takes her little effort to go to hotels such as the Grand Hyatt Singapore and Hotel Jen Tanglin, which are listed on the Treatsure app. She used the app for the first time on New Year's Day.

"Ten dollars for a packed meal of hotel food is a fair price," she adds. "Throwing away all that food from buffets is such a waste and I can trust the hotels to ensure that the food I pack is still good to eat."

The Treatsure app was launched in September 2017 by two men who wanted to get hotels and restaurants to sell the food on their buffet spreads near the end of meal times instead of throwing it away.

Today, they work with eight hotels and a cafe, and another hotel will come on board in the coming weeks.

Mr Preston Wong, 29, and Mr Kenneth Ham, 28, came up with the idea during their final year as undergraduates at the National University of Singapore. They were motivated by an interest in entrepreneurship, but also saw it as a way to reduce food waste in Singapore.

"A lot of food gets thrown away each day," says Mr Wong. "The mindset of many businesses is that it is all right to have some leftovers. But the accumulated amount is staggering."

He works full-time in the business, while Mr Ham, who has a full-time job, helps out part-time. They take a cut from the boxes sold.

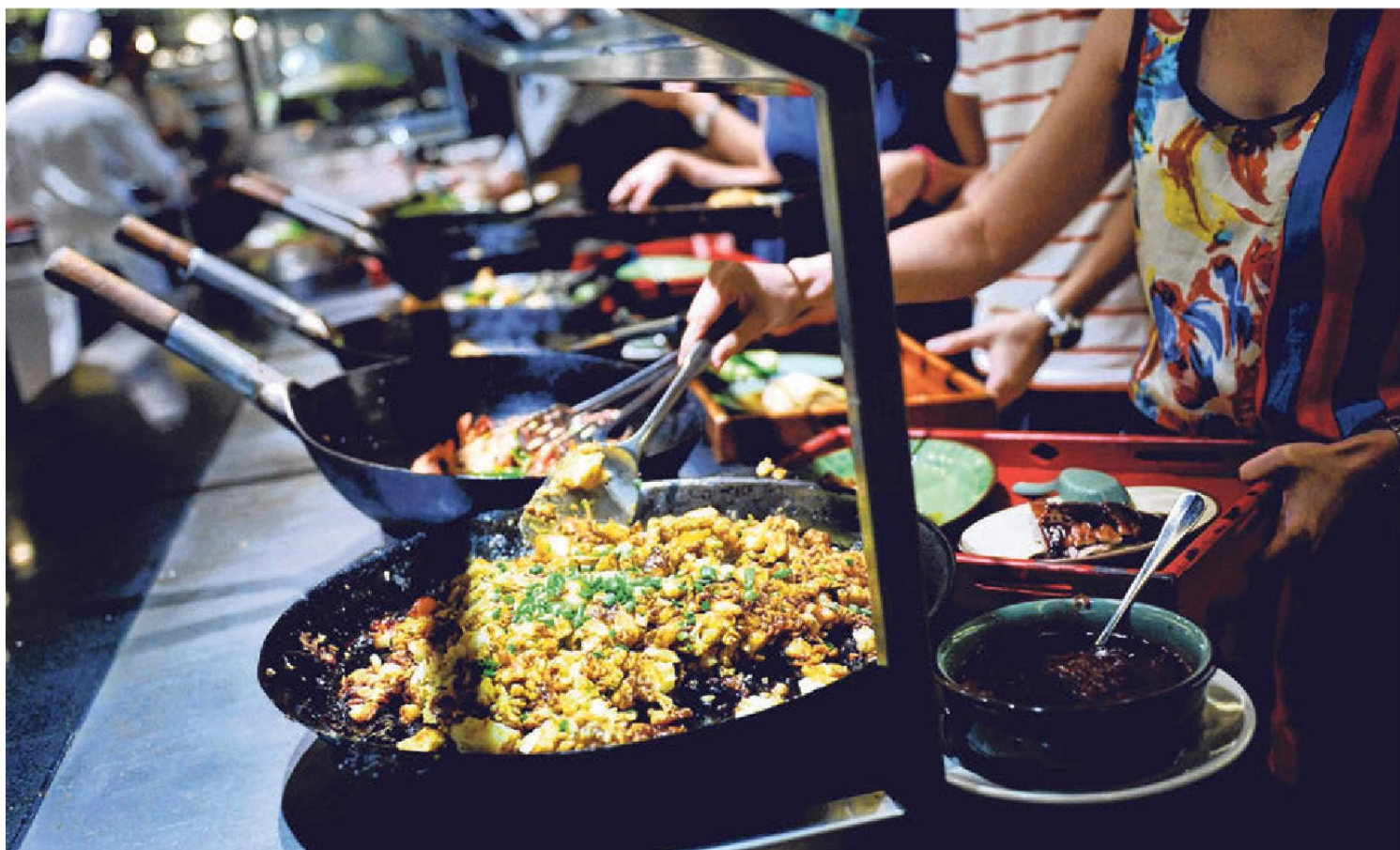
In Singapore, food waste has risen 40 per cent over the past 10 years – from 568,000 tonnes disposed of by households and the food industry in 2008 to around 809,800 tonnes in 2017, National Environment Agency (NEA) figures show. This made up 23 per cent of the total waste disposed of in Singapore in 2017.

It is a problem that has increasingly been a concern with hotels and restaurants.

The Grand Hyatt Singapore in Scotts Road has been looking into issues of sustainability and food waste reduction for the past 15 years, something that was initiated by its corporate headquarters in Chicago.

Joining the Treatsure app in August last year – it was the first hotel to do so – was just its latest step in reducing food waste.

It has been donating more than 10kg of surplus bread and pastries to food charity Food From The Heart every day since 2004. It also works with Kerbside Gourmet, a food truck business, to deliver excess food from its restaurants to



At the Grand Hyatt Singapore, food that is not consumed by the end of meal times is sold at a discount, given away to charities or turned into fertiliser for its plants. PHOTO: ST FILE

low-income families.

Edible leftovers, including bread, stews and soups, are collected, packed, vacuum-sealed and blast-frozen by chefs every day. Food that does not taste good after reheating, such as pizzas, is not included.

Every three or four days a week, Kerbside Gourmet collects and delivers the food to the South Central Community Family Service Centre, where the food is heated and served to low-income families.

The Grand Hyatt's executive chef Lucas Glanville, 50, says: "Being a hotel that receives a high accreditation for food production, there's no way we can keep anything left from the lunch buffet and serve it for dinner."

"But having said that, if I go to your home for lunch and there's food left on the table, you won't throw it away. You would put it in a container and keep it in the fridge."

"So if you take that philosophy, even if we can't sell the food again, maybe someone in our society can benefit from it."

Five years ago, the hotel also installed a \$750,000 machine that includes a digester that converts food waste into fertiliser in 24 hours.

The entire system is automated, with food waste fed into chutes and transported in pipes through a vacuum system to a grinder and a de-watering system, before ending up in the digester in the hotel's basement.

There, at a temperature slightly above 80 deg C, a natural enzyme turns the food into fertiliser, which is used for the plants on the hotel's premises, including its herb garden located above the ballroom.

Chef Glanville says the hotel's efforts have resulted in its food waste going down from about 900kg to 1,000kg a day five years ago to between 200kg and 300kg a day now. He reckoned this saves

the hotel about \$100,000 a year.

The Shangri-La Group, another major hotel chain here, has also stepped up its food waste management.

The group's hotels here comprise The Shangri-La Singapore, Shangri-La's Rasa Sentosa Resort & Spa, Hotel Jen Tanglin Singapore and Hotel Jen Orchardgateway.

Both Hotel Jens convert their food waste into fertiliser.

According to a spokesman for the hotel group, Hotel Jen Orchardgateway converted 192kg of food waste for its 20 sq m herb and spice garden last year, while the Tanglin hotel converts around 120kg of food waste monthly for its 85 sq m spice garden.

The two hotels' buffet restaurants are also partners with Treatsure.

The spokesman says the chain has also made efforts to nudge customers not to waste food.

Hotel Jen Tanglin puts up signs to encourage diners to take only as much food as they can eat. Serving plates are now smaller and food is displayed in reduced portions and topped up more regularly.

Restaurant chains, too, are mindful of the savings from reducing food waste.

Ms Katherine Kee from the marketing department of Zingrill Holdings, which owns Seoul Garden, says the Korean barbecue chain's outlet at Nex recently installed display chillers for its raw food. It reopened on Jan 24 after a month-long renovation.

The chillers prolong the shelf life of the displayed food. Previously, food on open display had to be discarded after a few hours.

The company has also sent the message to diners to reduce food waste – by placing reminders through small collaterals in the restaurants and, more subtly, reducing plate sizes.

While Zingrill does not have figures, Ms Kee, 37, says the company has observed less food waste at its outlets as members of the public are now more aware of the problem.

They are not the only ones.

Chef Kenjiro Hashida, 39, from Hashida Sushi, is among a new crop of chefs who are thinking of ways to use food odds and ends that were thrown away in the past.

In fact, the Japanese have a term for this – mottainai, which means zero waste.

At his restaurant in Mohamed Sultan Road, he keeps the skin scraped off wasabi before it is ground into paste. This is simmered with soya sauce and mixed with fresh wasabi for a different taste to go with sashimi.

And the juice from boiling ginger slices for pickles is saved and mixed with lemon, celery, beetroot and pineapple and made into a sorbet, which is served as a palate cleanser.

The chef says: "Why throw it away when we can turn it into something delicious? As we say in Japanese, mottainai. That means we reduce wastage, recycle and reuse."

How The Grand Hyatt Singapore turns food waste into fertiliser



1. Food waste is fed into chutes (above) and transported in pipes to a grinder and a de-watering system, before reaching the digester. ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR



2. In the digester (above), a natural enzyme turns the food into fertiliser.



3. The fertiliser (above) is used for the plants on the hotel's premises, including its herb garden.

The mindset of many businesses is that it is all right to have some leftovers. But the accumulated amount is staggering.



MR PRESTON WONG on why he and his Treatsure co-founder Kenneth Ham came up with the app as a way to reduce food waste in Singapore

ahyoke@sph.com.sg