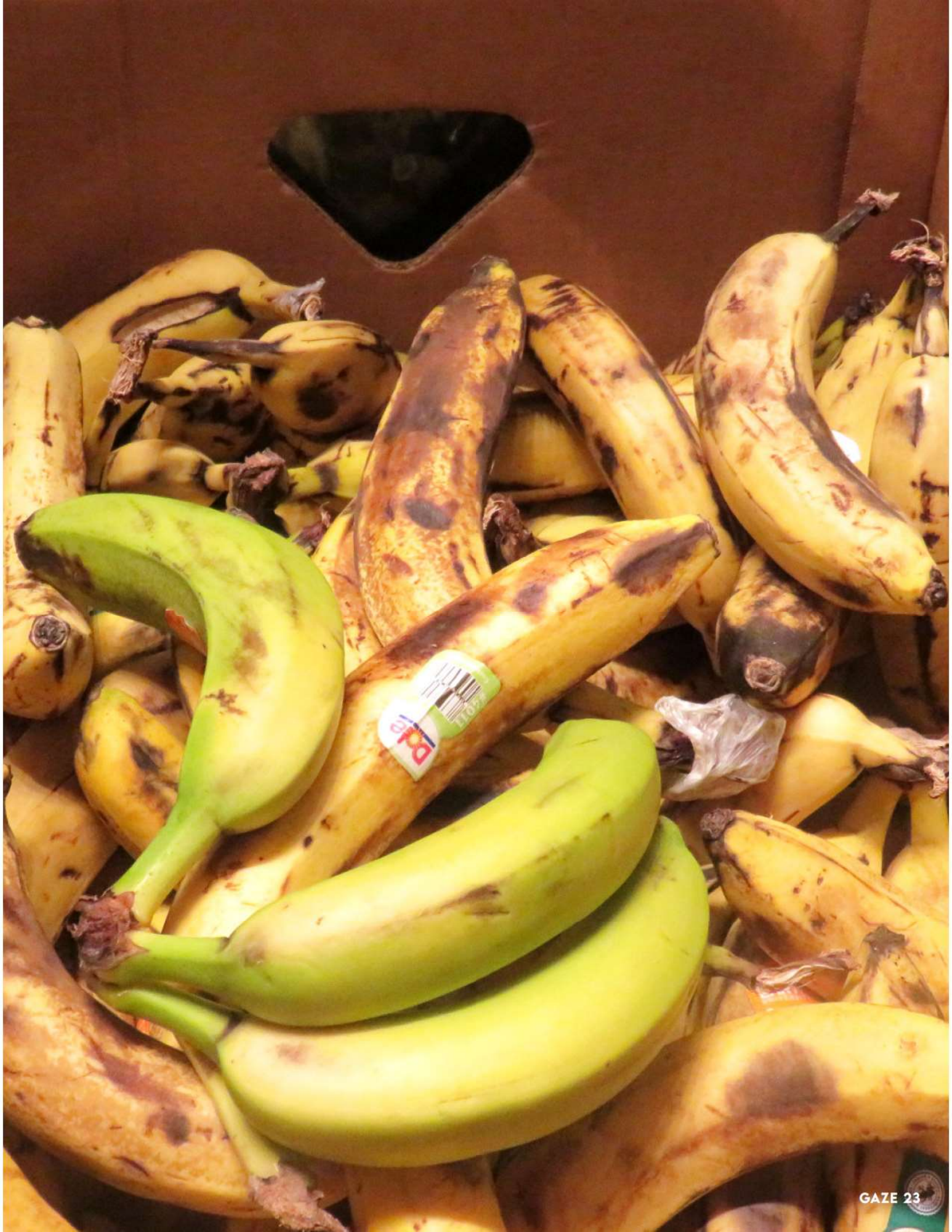


FROM FARM TO FLIES

Canada wastes half of its annual harvest every year
while millions of people struggle to buy groceries

By Evan Loree





When Lori showed me her warehouse, it was half full of potatoes once destined for a landfill. I've worked in ten different restaurants in my life and that warehouse could've supplied them all with potatoes for two to four weeks.

It upset me, but it didn't surprise me. I've seen a lot of food come back from dining rooms to feed big, black garbage bins. It has made me a little numb.

My Mom and I stack our leftovers in plastic containers after every meal. Still, I throw out half of it every other week with fuzzy green friends caked all over it. Almost 58 per cent of the food we produce in this country ends up lost or wasted.

How does this happen?

Perhaps a chef has the answer. So, I reached out to Jagger Gordon at Feed it Forward with a couple questions.

A professional chef, philanthropist, former serviceman and seasoned traveller, Jagger looks like a superhero as he poses for a photo next to one of his trucks.

His pay-what-you-can grocery looks a little less heroic though. When I first stepped inside I was met with splashes of green and yellow. The smell of fresh bread beckoned me deeper into the store. Much of the produce I found was bruised and blemished.

Jagger was proud of that. Everything in his store had been rescued from local restaurants and grocery stores. If



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not for him, and 2,000 dedicated volunteers, everything in his store would have gone to the worms.

Now, it can feed a hungry family at whatever price they can pay.

When I met him for the first time, Jagger wore a camouflage T-shirt and black scarf. He had the air of a serious man doing serious work. I could tell that he'd been busy for hours. He told me he'd be busy for hours more.

Jagger started Feed it Forward back in 2014 to address food insecurity and reduce food waste. He grew up around food insecurity. And, as an adult, he saw some of his daughter's friends were living out of empty fridges.

So, he did something about it.

"The only way things are gonna change is to take a stand and be a rebel," says Jagger. "When I'm told no, I'm gonna say yes to it. And I'm gonna show you how to find a way to say yes to things."

Feed it Forward collects squandered food from local stores, farms and restaurants, and redistributes it to households in need.

"If I can feed every single belly in that community, I will," he says.

But why? Why is it necessary? And why does so much food go to waste before it ever sees a plate?

Jagger suggests that consumers want the pristine produce and won't pay for a blemished tomato. I wasn't so sure. There had to be more to it than that.

One of Jagger's partners is Second Harvest, which happens to be the largest food rescue organization in Canada. That's where I met Lori Nikkel. Nikkel, the CEO of Second Harvest, painted a slightly different picture. Consumers were wasteful, yes, but they were only a part of that system. Industry was part of that system, too.

"The reality is, in industry waste is just the cost of doing business," Nikkel says.

That cost adds up in Canada. Second Harvest released a report in 2019 mapping out the different stages of the food supply chain and how much food gets wasted at each stage.

First, there's the production stage, where the food is grown. For example, the potatoes in Lori's warehouse were destined for the landfill because of an outbreak of potato wart.

Earlier this fall, The Canada Food Inspection Agency discovered it at a farm in PEI. While the fungus is not poisonous, it reduces crop yields and the best way to contain it is to restrict its movement.

The CFIA closed the international border to PEI potatoes to stop the spread, leaving the entire crop without a market. Unexpected events like these can lay waste to a lot of food before it gets to the shelf.

Farmers can insure their crops, but that insurance often prevents them from donating the unsold crops to charity.

Food retailers also over-estimate their needs, so farmers often produce more than what retailers can sell. Six per cent of avoidable food loss occurs at the farm.

After the harvest, products get sorted, but only the best produce gets sold. Some of it won't be packaged properly, leading to even more waste. Approximately 20 per cent of food loss occurs at this point.

Next, at the processing stage, the food gets turned into

different products. Ketchup, for example, is made at this stage.

Jagger told me a story about how he once received a donation of truckloads of ketchup. The manufacturer was unable to sell the product because a mistake with a food dye made it unmarketable. Jagger laughs at how he and his chefs turned the product into a barbecue sauce.

Mistakes like that account for about 23 per cent of Canada's food waste.

At this point, food usually makes it to the grocery store, but not all of it will be bought. Blemishes and imperfections may turn off a potential buyer. Near empty shelves may give consumers the impression that the remaining product is no good. Inevitably, this excess stock gets thrown out. This makes up another 17 per cent of food loss.

Restaurants and hotels are notoriously wasteful, too.

A chef may order too much food from his supplier. Whether it's a chef throwing out a couple dozen baked potatoes after dinner service, or a waiter scraping a nine-ounce portion of French fries off a plate, it's all going to the same place – the bin

Restaurant and hotel waste accounts for another 13 per cent of what we throw out.

Finally, there's the household. This is where legions of consumers treat the best before label like a hard cut-off date.

"It's put on by manufacturers. It doesn't have anything to do with food safety, it's about peak freshness. Whatever that is," says Nikkel. Households account for about 21 per cent of lost and wasted food in Canada.

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All this takes place in a country where one in every eight households is food insecure. What's more, rotting food releases methane, and methane is a greenhouse gas with 25 times more heating potential than carbon dioxide.

The issue of food waste is at the intersection of world hunger and climate change. Addressing food waste can help to kill two proverbial birds with one proverbial stone.

So, what's stopping us?

Chef Jagger thinks it's complacency. Like a career chef who loses his spark and opts to cook the same menu for 20 years, the problem is complacency. It is a system that lacks the wherewithal to redistribute extra food to a secondary market. It is a consumer who reaches for the two for one deal, even though he probably won't ever open that second brick of orange cheddar.

Despite all the doom and gloom, Nikkel and Jagger remain optimists.

"I'm passionate about people first," says Nikkel. "And I have a huge belief in all of us. That together we can make a change."

When I hear Nikkel say that, I think of all the food I've dumped into the garbage over the years. I think of all the complacent chefs I've met while working in the industry, and I picture the overflowing dumpsters we used to fill up every night.

"There has to be hope. There is hope. Don't you think?" she asks.

Yes, I say. There has to be.











