

Chapter 1: The Trash Can Tells the Truth

Last Thursday I pulled a container of chicken stock out of my refrigerator, sniffed it, decided I wasn't sure, and poured it down the drain. It smelled fine. There was nothing wrong with it. I threw it away because I couldn't remember what day I made it, and not remembering felt like a reason.

That stock cost me about two dollars in bones and vegetables and an afternoon of low simmering. I have been cooking for more than fifty years. And I still threw out good food because a small voice said *you're not sure*.

That voice is expensive. Before we do anything about it, we are going to find out exactly how expensive it is in your house. Not nationally. Not on average. In your kitchen, this week.

One week of counting what you throw away

Here is the only assignment in this chapter, and it costs nothing.

Tape a sheet of paper inside the cabinet door under your sink, right above the trash can. For seven days, every time you throw away something that was once food, write one line: **what it was, roughly what it cost, and why it went.**

That's it. Don't change your habits. Don't try to do better this week. If you start behaving well for the paper, the paper stops being useful. We want the honest week, not the company-is-coming week.

- ✓ Tape one sheet of paper inside the cabinet door above your trash can
- ✓ Write three things per line: the item, the rough cost, the reason
- ✓ Include what goes down the disposal and into the compost, not just the bin
- ✓ Do not change what you normally throw out — this week is measurement, not reform
- ✓ On day seven, add up the dollars and read your reasons out loud

The reasons matter more than the dollars. When my sister-in-law did this, she found she had written the words "wasn't sure" eleven times in seven days. Eleven. She had thrown away half a pound of cheese, a bag of spinach, four eggs and a quart of milk on nothing but a feeling.

Reading your own handwriting back to yourself is the whole exercise. Nobody can argue you out of your own list.



What the average household actually loses in a year

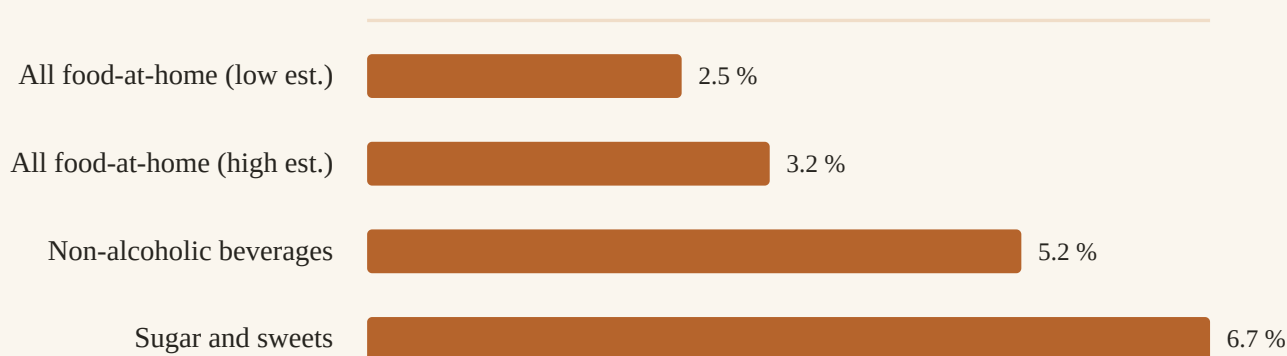
You may be wondering whether you're unusual. You are not.

The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that food loss and waste runs at **30 to 40 percent of the entire food supply**, and a large share of household waste comes down to spoilage — the very failure that cellaring, drying and careful storage were built to prevent (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025). The Environmental Protection Agency has published its own estimate of what that waste costs American consumers, which gives us a federal dollar figure rather than a guess (U.S. EPA, 2025-04).

30–40% of the U.S. food supply is lost or wasted, with household spoilage a major contributor (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025).

Now put that against what is happening at the register. USDA's Economic Research Service expects grocery prices to keep climbing through 2026, with mid-year projections running in the range of **2.5 to 3.2 percent**²⁷. Sugar and sweets are forecast to rise fastest, around 6.7 percent, with non-alcoholic beverages near 5.2 percent⁶.

Projected 2026 US grocery price increases



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Here is what those two facts mean sitting together. Food is getting dearer at the same time that a third of it never gets eaten. If your income is fixed, you cannot do much about the first number. You can do a great deal about the second.

I want to be plain about something. I am not going to tell you that you can eat anything if you're brave enough. There are foods that will make you sick without ever warning you, and we will spend a whole chapter on them. What I am telling you is that the line between *good* and *gone* sits much further out than the printed date suggests, and almost nobody has ever shown you where it actually is.

The three kinds of waste: spoiled, suspected, and forgotten

When you add up your week, every line on that paper will fall into one of three piles. Learning to sort them is the first real skill in this book.

Spoiled

The food actually went bad. The berries furred over. The milk turned. The lettuce liquefied in the crisper drawer. This is real loss, and it is honest loss. Something failed — usually storage, sometimes just time.

Spoiled food is the pile most people assume dominates their trash. In my experience, it is usually the smallest of the three.

Suspected

You threw it out because you weren't sure. The date had passed. It looked a little different from yesterday. It had been in there "a while." Nothing was wrong that you could name, and that is exactly the point: you didn't name anything, you just decided.

My chicken stock lived in this pile. So did eleven items in my sister-in-law's week.

Forgotten

You never made a decision at all. The container went to the back of the second shelf and stayed there until it became a science project. The half bag of carrots went behind the pickle jar. You didn't reject this food. You lost it.

Forgotten waste is a storage problem and a memory problem, and both have cheap fixes — labels, shallow containers, a weekly sweep. We'll build those habits together in later chapters.

Every wasted item is spoiled, suspected, or forgotten. Spoiled is a storage failure. Forgotten is a system failure. **Suspected is a knowledge failure — and it is the one you can fix tonight.**

Why the suspected pile is the expensive one

Sort your week's list into those three columns and something uncomfortable usually appears. The suspected column holds the good food.

Think about what actually lands there. Spoiled food is rarely expensive, because it is usually produce — the cheapest things in the cart, gone soft in a drawer. Forgotten food is leftovers, which you already paid for once and were getting for free the second time.

But the suspected pile is full of **eggs, meat, cheese, butter, milk, deli items, and yogurt**. The protein and dairy case. The most costly square footage in the entire grocery store. These are precisely the foods that carry prominent printed dates, and precisely the foods we have been trained to fear.

So the pattern runs like this. You throw away your cheapest food when it genuinely rots. You throw away your most expensive food when you are merely uncertain. Uncertainty costs more than rot.

A typical week, sorted: A wilted bunch of celery and a half-bag of salad greens land in *spoiled* — perhaps a dollar fifty. Two containers of unidentified leftovers land in *forgotten*. And in *suspected*: six eggs, a wedge of cheddar with one spot on it, a pound of ground beef that looked brown in the middle, and most of a quart of buttermilk. Nothing in that third group was tested. All of it was guessed.

Notice what that means for your effort. You do not need to become a homesteader to stop losing money. You need to learn how to make a confident decision about roughly a dozen foods. That is a small, learnable list, and your grandmother had it memorised before she was twenty.

She did not have better food than you. She did not have a better refrigerator; as we'll see later, her cold storage was nothing but earth, stone and ventilation. What she had was the confidence to decide for herself.

So here is the question that ought to nag at you tonight. If most of what we throw away was never spoiled at all, who convinced us it was? That little date stamped on the carton was not written for you. It was never written for you. In the next chapter, I'll show you exactly who it was written for, and what those three familiar phrases legally mean.