

# “You can't possibly be in favor of food waste,” says the boss of Too Good To Go

Mette Lykke, investeerder en CEO van Too Good To Go. Bron Veerle Haan



About a third of our food ends up in the trash. Mette Lykke, CEO of the Danish tech company Too Good To Go, turned reducing waste into a business model. "Everything you earn from food you would otherwise throw away is profit."

*This article was written by Maarten Albers, economics editor of de Volkskrant. He writes about agriculture and food, among other things.*

Food waste wasn't a topic Mette Lykke had given much thought to until that one day in 2016, when she boarded a bus in her hometown of Copenhagen. That bus ride would change a lot. Sitting next to her was a woman who told her she was about to become the very first investor in Too Good To Go, a then eight-month-old startup.

Through the company's app, restaurants and supermarkets offer leftover food at a low price, which they won't be able to sell the next day. A godsend for bargain hunters who can live with slightly less fresh bread. The woman showed the app to Lykke, who was immediately impressed. A year earlier, she had sold the fitness app she co-founded, Endomondo, to sports brand Under Armour for \$85 million. The story of Too Good To Go resonated with her so much that she invested some of that money in the startup. A quarter later, she became CEO, at the request of the five founders.

"I've always been someone who doesn't like throwing things away, no matter what they are," Lykke (44) says this summer in the Danish company's Amsterdam office, with a panoramic view of the water. "Yet, I didn't know that food waste was bad. It seemed absurd to me to throw away good food, but I never realized the scale of the problem."

These days, she effortlessly rattles off the facts: 30 to 40 percent of all food produced worldwide is wasted. That accounts for 10 percent of total global CO2 emissions, equivalent to the total food production of a country like China. Together, all that wasted food is worth \$1.1 trillion, equivalent to the combined GDP of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. A quarter of all wasted food would be enough to feed all the hungry people.

Why do you think food waste is such a forgotten problem?

"I don't think it's the sexiest topic. People generally care more about whether their food is organic, about what they put into their bodies. This isn't an individual issue, but a macro issue. People don't really empathize with that.

"That's why our ambition is to raise awareness. It's impossible to be pro-food waste. It's a very silly problem, and it's perfectly logical that we have to do something about it. Yet it's also difficult, because you're dealing with a long chain, many different players, and many different reasons why food is wasted." So you need all sorts of different solutions.

Too Good To Go started with surprise packages, which could be picked up at bakeries, sushi restaurants, and supermarkets, among other places. Since the app's launch, 450 million of these have been sold. Providers pay a subscription fee to Too Good To Go plus a fee per package sold. Recently, the company also offers delivery packages containing food that would otherwise be thrown away in factories.

This generated revenue of the equivalent of €193 million in 2024 and a profit before taxes and interest of €1.8 million, the first year of profit; until then, they had been operating at a loss.

Too Good To Go has also been active in the Netherlands since 2018. During that time, 34 million surprise packages have been collected in the Netherlands. The app has 5 million users and 5,500 affiliated companies in the Netherlands.

With its own look-smell-taste logo, Too Good To Go also aims to reduce food waste in consumers' homes. Many products whose "best before" date has passed are still edible. The idea is that those who look, smell, and taste first throw away less.

Lykke, once again, has her facts at the ready. "We once came across a statistic that most consumers in the EU don't understand the difference between 'use by' and 'best before'. Just to be safe, they throw the food away. Ten percent of all food waste in the EU is due to this. While 'best before' often means: good after that as well. So: look, smell, taste, don't waste."

The logo now appears on 6 billion products annually, from 500 food brands, in 15 countries. "We thought: if we can educate consumers, we'll really make an impact."

Do you think awareness of food waste is increasing?

"I think so. Several things have happened in recent years. First came inflation. Even now that it's gone down a bit, food is still more expensive than it was three years ago." So we see that it is a necessity for more and more people, and a wish for others, not to throw away valuable food. ien.

"The same applies to food companies and shops. Raw materials are more expensive, as is food. At the same time, wages and electricity costs have risen. So companies need to

become more efficient. Food waste is a good place to start, because everything you earn from food that you would otherwise throw away is profit.”

One of the UN Sustainable Development Goals is to halve food waste by 2030. The European Union recently set much lower targets: a 10 percent reduction in food companies and a 30 percent reduction in shops and households.

Is the UN target achievable?

“I think it's a good target. But it will be difficult if the EU member states don't commit to it now. 2030 isn't that far away. We need to commit to these targets now and make plans to achieve them. It's up to the private sector now, because it won't come from legislation.”

Too Good To Go has actively advocated for more ambitious targets. You also have a financial interest in that.

“That's right. But no one wants to waste a large portion of their produce. Everyone is committed. There is ambition, but it could be a bit higher.

Who's putting the brakes on?

I don't know. In general, there's been a slowdown in environmental legislation lately. For example, the CSRD (a European directive that requires large companies to report on their sustainability performance, ed.) has been weakened. Some of those regulations were very bureaucratic and had no real impact on the environment. We also had to report a lot. We could have invested that time and resources in new initiatives.

After launching in Denmark in 2016, Too Good To Go initially expanded primarily in Europe. In 2020, they expanded to the United States, recently the company also opened in Australia, and Japan will soon follow.

Do you encounter the same attitude towards food waste everywhere?

We offer consumers three things that have proven to be quite universal: the environmental aspect of preventing food waste, the surprise element when you open a package, and the fact that it's simply a good deal. There are countries where the weighting of these three factors differs. In Scandinavia, the environment and sustainability are higher on the agenda, while in the US, we focus more on surprise and affordability.

“Conquering the American market is a major challenge for most European tech companies. It took us a few years. Today, it's one of our fastest-growing markets.”

The success of Too Good To Go comes at the expense of food banks, which receive fewer donations. Does that worry you?

“Food banks do good work, but every second, 80,000 meals are still wasted. So, we haven't solved this with what existed before Too Good To Go.

"Many supermarkets we work with also donate food. In addition, there's a lot of food that isn't suitable for donation. Hot food, for example. Most of the shops we work with are smaller: bakeries, cafes, restaurants. They have two or three leftover bags a day. Logistically, it doesn't make sense to have a food bank pick that up. That's where we come in." "And in many places, we also collaborate with food banks. For example, we currently have pilots where people receive vouchers to pick up food from the stores we work with."

You also offer delivery packages these days, with food that would otherwise be thrown away in factories. Why?

"Stores are actually the most efficient link in the food chain. Much more food is wasted before and after that. At the same time, we see that our users in some areas are literally hungry for more, but that not enough food is being offered. Especially in rural areas, there are often not many shops nearby. With the magic packages, we can better serve these people.

"There are several reasons why food is thrown away in factories. Often, the expiration date is so close that supermarkets don't want it. Or a pallet has fallen over, and the cost of repackaging it all is too high. Sometimes the packaging changes, or there's a cosmetic defect. For example, there was once a beer where a new CEO or chef came, and they didn't want to sell the old name anymore.

Relatively minor shortcomings. Shouldn't we start thinking differently about which foods are still good to eat?

"That's why we create those labels and also have educational materials. In the last few generations, our perception of food has changed enormously. Both my grandmothers are still alive. One is 101, the other 96. They both lived through World War II and have a completely different mindset around food. When I go there for lunch, they pack everything up afterwards and put it in the fridge. Even half an egg.

"My parents are less inclined to do that. And I think my generation is even less inclined to do that. We order things on an app and throw away what we don't eat. Most of us have never been hungry. That's why we want to teach children that food is something valuable. Hopefully, they can then raise their parents, because that's a bit more difficult."