The Tao Of Dumpster Diving

Why scavenge? You get a lot of really good food that’s really, really free.

by RYAN BEILER

“What is this—some kind of school project? You guys aren’t homeless, are you?” asked the clean-cut young policeman with well-gelled hair. His confusion was understandable. Actually, the first thing he said was, “You’re eating out of the garbage? That’s disgusting.”

Indeed, why would four middle-class guys be pawning through garbage bags looking for food? Officer Hair Gel vainly tried to fit us into a category that made sense to him. “Is this for some kind of frat thing?”

His squad car was soon joined by another, and then another. Soon five cruisers surrounded us, making blue and red disco effects on the strip mall alley walls. Must have been a slow night in Fairfax County. We suppressed giggles as we sat on the rear bumper of my station wagon and had our IDs checked.

We must’ve looked pretty shady prowling behind the bakery with our flashlights and bags of loot. But all we were looking for was the bounty of discarded bagels, breads, and pastries we’d come to expect there. We offered the officer a choice muffin. He declined with a smirk. “I can’t stop you from doing this, but a bunch of guys sneaking around behind these stores looks pretty suspicious. Next time you might get shot.”

Thanks for the advice, officer, but at these prices it’s worth the risk.

Dumpster diving has always been a respectable way for penniless students and group houses to acquire furniture and appliances. But why run the risk of harassment, embarrassment—and yes, illness—to scavenge food?

Reason number one—you get a lot of really, really good food really, really free. I often come away with a decent segment of the food pyramid: vegetables, meat, milk, eggs, and almost always lots of bread. And we’re not talking Wonder Bread—we’re talking sprouted wheat berry, pita, ciabatta, focaccia, and any number of Mediterranean-themed baked goods.

Though I’ll occasionally supplement my dumpster bounty with a trip to the natural foods co-op for some local produce or organic oats for homemade granola (bring on the stereotypes), I’ve come to rely mostly on society’s waste for my provision. As Jesus taught, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’...Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matthew 6:32). In this spirit, dumpstering’s spontaneity is both liberating and satisfying. Instead of the anxiety of bargain-hunting among the throngs at corporate supermarkets, I enjoy the surprises of late-night expeditions and never worry about finding enough to eat.

BEYOND BASIC NECESSITIES, there’s also the allure of the big score. On my very first dumpster run, I went into Homer Simpson-drool mode at finding several pounds of smoked salmon—a delicacy I could never justify buying in real life. I ate it three meals a day for a week. It’s really great with eggs.

On a subsequent trip, I found six jars of caviar. I’ve also developed an addiction to grocery-store sushi (all pre-cooked or veggie). Just tonight I had a simple dinner of dumpster fare: soup and bread. But the soup was lobster bisque,
and the bread was a lovely sourdough boule.

Ready to dive in? Dumpster diving works best in pairs. One person climbs into the dumpster or stands on the side, tossing aside bags of regular trash while searching for the mother lode—bags full of overstocks discarded en masse. These are handed to the partner, who begins separating the proverbial sheep from goats—or, if you’re vegetarian, wheat from chaff. Fortunately, most stores are diligent about dumping food when it reaches its “sell by” date—three hours earlier, they’d have sold it to you. So the only guesswork is in deciding whether or not it has gone bad in

the meantime. This is simpler in colder months, when the entire outdoors is a walk-in fridge.

Dumpstering isn’t for the dainty—that bag of smoked salmon may be hiding under a pile of overripe avocados. But excessive packaging usually keeps the food itself grime-free. I’ve liberated many a shrink-wrapped eggplant from its little plastic prison.

The fact that dumpster divers benefit from the overpackaging we’d otherwise avoid illuminates a point of tension: I’m eating food that’s more luxuriously produced and presented than I would buy as a conscientious consumer. One example is meat. Some of my friends skip this category altogether, whether it comes from a dumpster or a deli counter. My pre-dumpstering quasi-pseudo-vegetarian ethic was to eat whatever was set before me (1 Corinthians 10:27) but to almost never buy meat at the grocery store, mostly out of health and environmental concerns. But I’m now leaning toward a “freegan” (rhymes with “vegan”) lifestyle, which allows me to eat poultry and seafood more often as long as I don’t pay for them.

The point is to eat sensibly while withdrawing financial support from an unsustainable agribusiness industrial complex that ravages the environment with factory-farm waste and the fossil-fuel consumption needed to ship those shrink-wrapped eggplants all the way from Chile. But just because you’re scavenging surplus doesn’t mean you can’t be discerning. Because I target higher-end grocery stores, many of the items are organic and hormone-free as well.

It’s like thrift shopping, through which I can afford higher-quality clothing without lining corporate pockets at the expense of sweatshop workers. The point isn’t to self-righteously enjoy the fruits of exploitation without personally paying for them. (Though I have had cake I found dumpster diving, and eaten it, too.) It’s just one way of minimizing my complicity in unsustainable corporate economies by not giving them my money. If I don’t have the land or time to grow my own food, recycling gourmet garbage is one subversive option for living a frugal yet abundant life. As long as our consumer society refuses to eat all it takes, I’ll be there to help clean its plate.

MY DUMPSTERING mentor, Preston Winter, began my initiation with this mantra: “No shame. No greed.” Once I could taste and see that the food was good, shame wasn’t a problem. But I still struggle with greed. Like the Israelites, I’m always tempted to gather more manna than I really need.

I try to balance this hoarding tendency with hospitality. But when laying out a spread of dumpster treats, I never know
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what to say about where the food came from. I now follow a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy—mostly because my initial “full disclosure” policy made me weary of always having to answer the same questions (though it also meant that I didn’t have to share my smoked salmon with the squeamish).

But despite easy hospitality toward friends, I fall woefully short of Jesus’ admonition: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors… [I] invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:12-13).

Though I’ve never encountered direct competition with poor or homeless foragers, I’ve pondered whether I should take the more radical step of redistributing my gleanings to folks who need food more than I do. But my home has never functioned as a food bank, and dumpstering hasn’t changed this. As a soup kitchen volunteer, I was frustrated by the paternalistic power dynamics present. I now choose to do ministry in other areas and to let the pros negotiate the ethics, legalities, and logistics of distributing surplus food to the poor with safety and dignity.

A local ministry picks up food at one of our regular destinations. Store employees set out donated items beside in carts, which we happily bypass on our way to the dumpster. And my church has done volunteer work with the Washington Area Gleaning Network, which does more traditional gleaning at farms and orchards. There’s also America’s Second Harvest, which annually distributes $43 million pounds of food from donors such as restaurants and grocery stores.

Another question is whether dumpster diving is legal. Laws vary by state and county, as does enforcement. Generally, it’s not trespassing unless there are posted signs, and even unfriendly cops like Officer Hair Gel have never suggested that we were breaking any law. Once a manager politely asked us to leave, mumbling something about “liability.” We figured it had more to do with employees being freaked out by the weirdos climbing around on their dumpster. That store now protects its precious garbage with padlocks and chains.

Fortunately, we have a reliable location where relations are much friendlier. There, the employees respond to our friendly hellos and warn us about hazards such as broken glass and rotten bananas. Even the cops are nicer there: A bike-riding squad of gender- and racially-diverse officers got a good chuckle out of our operation, but they didn’t ask us for IDs or threaten to shoot us. It’s a regular Big Rock Candy Mountain. Of course, it helps that we know the night manager. He’s told his employees not to mind us and even pointed us to bags of food that have yet to be dumped—asking only that we toss them in the bin once we’re done.

At these prices, we’re happy to pitch in.

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