
SALVATION ARMY KITCHENS TO GET A MAKEOVER

Good meals from leftovers

The Salvation Army in the Netherlands cooks millions of meals every year for groups including elderly people, teenage mothers and drug addicts. Wageningen researchers collaborated on a plan to make more use of surplus products from the food industry.

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You certainly cannot call it rubbish, say chain researcher Joost Snels and John Jalving of the Dutch branch of the Salvation Army, an evangelical Christian organization. Food companies sometimes have large quantities of food left over that they cannot sell. Sometimes due to a production error, and sometimes due to disappointing demand. Snels: 'A good example would be a worker at a soft drinks factory who sets the carbonization pressure just a little bit too low, so that the drinks are not fizzy enough; or a filling machine that puts that bit too much or too little in a pot or bag. There is nothing wrong with the product in terms of quality, but because of a small fault it cannot go on

the retail shelves.'

Every now and then the Salvation Army gets a call from a food company to ask whether it could use a load of salami, soup, or even fresh products such as tomatoes. John Jalving researched whether this could be done more systematically. His main objective was to create more jobs in the kitchens. Jalving heads the Work for Everyone project which is part of the Salvation Army's work in the Netherlands, and aims to create jobs for people who cannot get work easily. Up to now, the organization's kitchens have been stocked primarily with readymade meals. Cooking from raw ingredients – of which the food industry often has leftovers – would be far more labour-intensive. And

it would have the added advantage of doing something to combat food wastage.

The Salvation Army received 25,000 euros from the former ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality to research the potential for a 'matching kitchen' that processes waste food.

MORE FLEXIBLE

Joost Snels of Wageningen UR Food & Biobased Research worked on the research project too. 'Our recommendation is to work more flexibly in two senses. Firstly, by processing the ingredients that are delivered in a way that makes them usable for longer. Meat can be roasted and vacuum-packed, for example. And secondly, by



Joost Snels, Wageningen UR (left) and John Jalving, Salvation Army.

being more flexible about menus and what you offer Salvation Army clients. If you approach the process differently, you can offer them more choice.'

Elderly people in a Salvation Army nursing home could indicate their preferences in advance on a form, for example. Snels: 'By taking a different approach to serving food, by letting them help themselves for example, you give them more of a feeling that they have some choice. That way they enjoy their food more.' Jalving: 'We don't need to make money from it. What we save on purchasing, we'll give back to our clients. You could do that by serving more luxurious food – ice cream once in a while perhaps – and above all by offering more choice.'

Besides the advice on flexibility, the Wageningen researchers designed an optimization programme for processing the 'non-commercial waste products'. The programme takes account of the use-by date, the product's processing potential, and storage capacity. It should make it possible for the Salvation Army to respond more quickly to offers of food. Snels: 'If companies have to wait too long for a clear answer, they won't call again.'

Snel says that many companies like working with the Salvation Army. 'It is a large, professional and reliable organization with which you can make clear arrangements.

For example, some companies want to be sure that their waste product will be made unrecognizable, or that it won't end up for sale by some other route.' Jalving: 'That was a big eye-opener to us. We didn't realize beforehand that companies would be so keen to work with us on this professional basis.' He hopes that he will soon be able to give one of the Salvation Army's kitchens a makeover so that it can be used for this new approach to cooking.' ■