

# A simple way to reduce food waste

The ‘use by’ recommendation has the potential to significantly decrease at-home food waste, baked goods included, while sell-by dates still result in perfectly good foodstuffs being discarded.



**+** Twenty-five years ago, my associate and esteemed Garbologist Dr. William Rathje wrote that “There are several specific behavior patterns that are associated with high rates of food waste. Most are obvious. It should come as no surprise, for example, that fresh produce is wasted at 10 times or more than the rate of processed fruits and vegetables, and foods that are used frequently (such as the slices from standard loaves of bread) find themselves in the trash much less often than foods which are used only sporadically (e.g., hot dog buns or muffins).”

Wasting food that we don’t consume on a regular basis is probably a part of human nature. We see something novel in a store. We buy it. We put it in our pantry or in the fridge. We take one bite or eat one slice. And then we forget about it.

**“ In a survey of over 2,000 adults by the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, 56% stated that they believe food should be thrown out after the ‘sell-by’ date.**

As Dr. Rathje pointed out, specialty baked goods are particularly prone to waste, thanks to their novelty value. Retailers take advantage of this novelty by merchandising muffins, buns, and pies in ways that maximize consumers’ impulse purchase behavior. These items are thus found throughout the store, stacked on tables and end caps, waiting for recognition, interest, and purchase.

## A plan to follow

Does packaging have a role to play in improving the use-up rate for perishable foods, especially in the baked goods aisle and end caps? The South Korean government thinks so.

They just revealed plans to overhaul regulations on food labeling by replacing the current ‘sell-by’ dates with ‘use-by’ dates, which are longer (use-by dates signal to consumers that there will be no safety problem until that date, if the food product was stored properly).

Why is this a big deal? Many consumers misunderstand the label information and dispose of food products too early. In a survey of over 2,000 adults by the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, 56% stated that they believe food should be thrown out after the ‘sell-by’ date. Thus, they are throwing away perfectly safe and edible food.

Using the ‘use-by’ date gives consumers a far more accurate measure of when food will actually spoil, thus enhancing shelf life and potentially reducing at-home food waste. Such a change will have positive implications globally, since most of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries employ ‘use-by’ dates instead of ‘sell-by’ dates.

There are additional positive ramifications of moving to ‘sell-by’ dates for both producers and retailers. Firstly, in-store shelf life will be longer, reducing food waste at the store level. Secondly, inventory management should be simpler, both in terms of ordering cycles as well as on shelf merchandising and rotation.

My advice? Follow this trend and if possible, make ‘use-by’ information prominent on the packaging of your baked goods. Doing so will enhance consumer interest in-store, while also increasing product usage and thus decreasing food waste at home. +++

*By Robert Lilienfeld, president, Robert Lilienfeld Consulting*