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Lukxmi Balathasan [00:00:07] Welcome back to The Food Fight podcast. I'm Lukxmi Balthasan.

Matt Eastland [00:00:10] And I'm Matt Eastland.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:00:11] And we're both from EIT Food. Europe's leading innovation community working hard to make the food system more sustainable, healthy and trusted.

Matt Eastland [00:00:23] In this episode, we want to get back to the phrase waste not want not. So if you're a picky eater as a child, you may have been, you might have heard that phrase quite a bit, but its origins actually date back hundreds of years ago. So it's a parable to remind us that food is precious and that leaving something on your plate is absolutely inexcusable. Today, though, we want to channel some of that old school thinking to see if we can learn any tricks from the past to help us today.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:00:53] So with us today, we're very excited to welcome the celebrated food historian, author and broadcaster, Dr. Annie Gray. Hello Annie, welcome to The Food Fight podcast.

Annie Gray [00:01:02] Hello, thanks very much for inviting me on.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:01:04] And alongside Annie, a warm welcome to Alice Gilsenan. Alice is a restauranteur, a food activist who has started a number of brilliant zero waste food projects. And today she's the director of Nature London, the Sustainable Food and Events Company.

Alice Gilsenan [00:01:20] Thanks for having me. Lovely to be here.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:01:21] Thanks very much.

Matt Eastland [00:01:22] Alice we first met back in twenty eighteen, I think it was. So you were helping support one of our EIT Food events. We had a big food waste event at Somerset House, and you actually trained up a whole load of chefs to sort of cook with food waste or surplus food. And then we sort of had all that back out to, what, really about a hundred guests? And the food was delicious and it was actually amazing and it totally blew my mind. So could you just sort of tell us a little bit about your story? How did you get into sustainable food in the first place?

Alice Gilsenan [00:01:58] Yeah, my story is kind of I'd say I've taken a bit of a scenic route, really. Originally, my background was advertising, so I found myself moving over to London, aged twenty five, from Dublin, working in a lot of big London art agencies on a lot of food brands. Mars was one of my brands, cores brewers. It was very exciting and very adrenaline-fuelled. But then after a few years, I guess, you know, I started to mature a bit and I kind of started thinking, you know, well, what's my legacy? You know, if if, God forbid, I died tomorrow, what would I have actually? What impact would I have had? So I left advertising. I kind of slowly ease my way out. I started working for a guy called Paul Lister, who's a very interesting guy, who is a conservationist and philanthropist. His big aim in life is to, you know, protect the Carpathian Forest region in Romania. Also, he's quite ambitiously trying to bring back bears and wolves to Scotland. Well, I was taken on to kind

of, you know, bring my marketing prowess into the charity, but I became just engrossed in and it was a real eye opener. And finally, I was working on selling a product that was actually really interesting. So, yes, I worked with Paul, really enjoyed it. And then in about twenty sixteen, January, a friend approached me and talked about doing a zero waste restaurant, which was basically inspired by a restaurant in Amsterdam called In Stock. In Stock, had been very cleverly put together by a couple of guys who were working for one of the main food retailers. And they noticed the kind of amazing amount of surplus that was being produced each day by the food system. So they said, you know, let's let's open up a restaurant, let's do something with this food waste. So me and my friend, we basically got together, pulled a team together in very short space of time, found a space in Notting Hill, stripped it all out. You know, on the basis that, you know, less is more, there's inherent beauty in things. And there was also inherent beauty in the food that we took on board from local supermarkets. We were working with people Planet Organic Whole Foods. And then some of the main retailers, we were just basically taking in tons of food each day to turn into kind of beautiful dishes. And this food would have ordinarily been wasted. The big kind of insight to all of that was that if this food had gone to landfill, which was its original destination, we would have been in a really bad place because that's happening across the world on a daily basis. thirty percent of what we produce, that happens to and you know that that causes massive problems for the environment. So, you know, it was about transformation of our food that would be waste into something that looked beautiful, tasted beautiful and that people could appreciate, but kind of also at the same time spreading the message that food waste is something that we really need to get our hands on and deal with once and for all.

Matt Eastland [00:04:41] Love that. What a journey.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:04:42] Yeah. And it's really amazing, really inspiring to hear. Thanks for sharing that with us. And Annie, looking to you. You're a specialist on the history of food and dining from around sixteen hundreds to the present day.

Annie Gray [00:04:54] Yeah.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:04:54] So broadly speaking, how do you think attitudes towards food waste has changed over the past couple of hundred years?

Annie Gray [00:05:02] Well, within Britain, I think we have become very blasé about it, is the kind of the key thing now. Back in the past and obviously this differed very much between classes. But the idea that you would throw away perfectly good food or even food that was on the way out would simply be anathema. And it wasn't a question of oh well you know, there are poor starving, so we should think about them, it was just built into systems that you would not waste food. So that's on a lot of different levels, both in terms of the domestic. Which I suppose is the thing most people think of when you think about food waste. But also at a level of sheer agriculture as well so even before product entered into a domestic situation, you would be looking at much more holistic way of eating. Take meat, for example. There's absolutely no way that you wouldn't consume every single part of an animal. And today, while those parts are still consumed, we don't see what goes into sausages or dog food or any of the other areas that do use things that we wouldn't want to eat in the West today. Those things are not being celebrated by people. And I think there was a lot more acknowledgement of the fact that it took money, it took time and it took effort to produce food and therefore it should be both celebrated and also used. And the idea that there were inferior products in a way that we have today was much less ingrained. So, of course, there were foods that were cheaper that the rich wouldn't eat.

There were foods that perhaps if they entered into a household, especially if they were not gorgeous, would not be displayed upon the table of the wealthy, but they would still be used. And some of this comes down to people knowing how to cook, obviously, which is another facet which is very much linked to food waste. Some of it comes down to the fact that we produced less as well. So farmland in particular is much more productive today than it used to be. We imported less as well, partly because we couldn't import it and partly because it wasn't built into our global food supply systems. You know, there's a whole range of factors that went into things. And part of it as well was a pride. Certainly it was deemed a mark of a good housekeeper not to have waste of any form, but food was a big part of it.

Matt Eastland [00:07:05] That's really interesting.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:07:06] And that's something that you just said earlier about, you know, people valuing the effort that went to food. Do you think historically people were closer to the farm and seeing the effort to actually produce a carrot and produce the fruits and vegetables? Do you think that has anything to do with it, with us being so disconnected from that process?

Annie Gray [00:07:22] Very much so. People are very much more disconnected than they used to be. And sometimes it can be brought home to you in a very solitary fashion. I was dressed as a Victorian at one point in a museum in Great Yarmouth, which is one of Europe's most deprived areas. It receives a lot of EU funding and we are the markers of deprivation. And I was plucking a pheasant and this child came in, he must have been about six or seven and said, What are you doing? I said, why, plucking a pheasant! He said, it whats a pheasant? And I said, well, gosh, well, it is a bit like a chicken. And he just looked at me and his scathing expression came across his face and said, don't be stupid, chickens don't have feathers.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:08:00] No.

Annie Gray [00:08:01] Oh, yes.

Matt Eastland [00:08:02] So disappointing.

[00:08:02] And even though I am well aware of the general lack of knowledge amongst a lot of people, and I don't I mean, while it can be seen as deplorable or it can be seen as a terrible thing, you know, I am very, very wary of blaming people for the fact that they are not knowledgeable in a way that I am because everybody has different sets of knowledge. But that what shocked even me, the idea that chickens don't have feathers on. So I think we have become very, very divorced or some people have become very divorced and the means of production. And it's not helped by things like the fact that we now habitually buy meat in plastic packaging with a little nappy underneath so that we don't see blood. It's very rare to get potatoes with dirt on, even though they last longer. And some of that is practicality. People are very busy, you know. Not everybody wants to be scrubbing dirt off the potatoes. Not everybody can scrub dirt off potatoes. But the fact we don't even see these things anymore means that it's very easy if you choose to to be very, very divorced from the means of production. And that's in some ways not that new in Britain became the first urbanised nation in the world in eighteen fifty one, according to the census of that year. So that move towards living in towns, being away from seeing stuff being grown, but also towards buying for convenience, buying from shops in an ever more packaged manner that's been going on for about a hundred and fifty years.

Matt Eastland [00:09:16] So going from there to where we are now, I guess this is one of the things that always confuses me about. So today we've got fridge freezers, we've got advance food packaging. We've got, you know, lab design, preservative ingredients, you know, all these things that weren't available a hundred years ago. And yet it seems that we're doing worse now than we were then. So why do we think that is?

Annie Gray [00:09:38] In a nutshell, I suspect it's because food is so much cheaper than it was. It would be lovely to see people pay more for their food, but we cannot pay more for our food while we are paying vast quantities of money on mortgages and for other things that are necessities for life as well. In the past, you would be looking at spending around anything above really sort of a fifth of your household income on food. Obviously, if you're wealthy, you would be spending a smaller proportion of your income on food because you'd be spending it on other things and because you have the money to burn. But if you are on the poverty line, you might well be spending a third of your income every single week on your food supplies. Food was more expensive and it was more expensive as a proportion of what you spent overall. So, of course, you want to devalue it more. Of course you wanted to use every single part of it, because, frankly, you would starve without it. So that at its most basic level is one of the reasons we do not spend that much on food. And when we do spend money, those that money tends to go into the pockets of the suppliers and not necessarily into the pockets of the farmers. So even with the best will in the world, if we want to, if we are affluent enough to spend extra money on food, we may well find it is not going to the source of production as well. So really, a lot of it is about what we value and how we value it. And we live in a capitalist economy where value a lot of the time is dictated by price.

Matt Eastland [00:10:55] That's a really good point. And I wanted to pick up on the value piece. I mean, you know, Alice, do you agree with Annie that, you know, I think basically what you're saying is there that we don't really value food enough today. Is that something that you find from your experience?

Alice Gilsenan [00:11:08] Yeah, I do. I mean, I think we need to look at on a very holistic level, how we organise ourselves and society as a whole. You know, we don't value the food that we have. We don't value the time. We don't have time to value. You know, what Annie points to is really, really important. And I think, you know, in order to kind of start fixing all of these things, we need to look at society from a top down perspective and start kind of really unpicking it. And I think now we've got more of a willing audience than ever before to start actually doing that. And I think when we have more time, we will be more considerate about what we're doing and more considered, because, you know, we will have time to dwell on where did this come from? Why does it look like this? But really, you know, what was the lines of production like? You know, what about welfare? What about welfare of workers? What about you know, it's one of the most important things I think we can nurture right now in society is is kind of that time to ponder because we kind of lost that, you know, pre-COVID. You know, we lost that time to ponder. Everyone was, you know, cash not necessarily rich, but definitely time poor. And that has a knock on effect into the kind of well-being of our lives and well-being of society as a whole I think.

Matt Eastland [00:12:17] Wise words.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:12:18] Yeah. No, I agree. I think the current situation now is really made us who take it for granted that food is just going to be there, and then, you know with what we see now where there is empty shelves, we realise actually it is quite fragile and

we don't appreciate it. So I guess, Alice, really coming back to you as someone who works in the restaurant and catering industry. Where do you see is the biggest problem areas for food waste? And I guess really I'm talking about specifically in the kitchen.

Alice Gilsenan [00:12:45] The biggest problem areas for food waste, I guess, is an existing structure within the industry, an expectation that food waste is still okay. You know, we really need to market this as a campaign that it really isn't OK. There's been a lot of traction in the last few years, and I've been involved in a lot of campaigns to try and change this. But, you know, on the grand scheme of things, it's restaurants pre what's happened now, were already under a lot of pressure, especially in big urban centres like London, because, you know, you need an awful lot of money in your pocket to even launch a restaurant. You know, the costs are crazy. And that's kind of partly the reason I went into catering. But, yeah, it's pressure on restaurants. It's pressure on staff in restaurants. I think, you know, food waste comes when you've got a head chef in a restaurant who thinks it's OK because there is quite a hierarchical structure in the kitchen. That tone and that philosophy and that teaching will come from that head chef and everybody who works below them so that we need kind of it really to come from top down from the people with their feet on the ground, which is the kitchen staff. You know, there's a lot of great, let's say, technological innovations that are happening at the moment with regards to food measurement. So we need, you know, perhaps we need governmental intervention and support so that kitchens can actually start measuring their amount of food, waste and plate waste. I think, you know, we need funding from government and we need real strong momentum from government to really tackle this problem. You know, our economy is going to be more challenged than ever now. So it makes sense to start saving where we can. And one way that we can save is definitely food waste, but it has to come from within the system. I think we need to give more support to the restaurant industry in general. I think the chefs by trade are under an awful lot of pressure and we see that in a lot of the kind of, you know, mental health problems that that happen. And they're higher in that industry and in that particular job than anything else than a lot of other industries. And, you know, there's a reason for that. So how do we expect a system to change when the people who are in that system are so up against the grain they can barely get through a day's work you know, so, yeah, I think it's a lot of big picture.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:14:50] And I guess at the end of the day, it's about profits, right? For businesses to survive.

Alice Gilsenan [00:14:54] Yeah.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:14:54] And, you know, in your opinion, is there an element where reducing food waste is sort of contribute to the bottom line of restaurants?

Alice Gilsenan [00:15:02] Yeah, absolutely. I mean, when I've been doing research on the restaurant industry as a whole. You know, when you look at the profit margins that restaurants are looking at. It's crazy that a lot of restaurants are still in business at all. You know, restaurant margin, profit margins are somewhere between five and fifteen percent. So all it takes is a few things to go wrong in a year to mean that you're basically, you know, you're breaking even if at all. So, you know, definitely fine tuning and refining within the restaurant to reduce waste wherever possible is key to kind of eking off that profit margin little by little.

Matt Eastland [00:15:37] Great yeah. Thank thank you both for that's really useful. And just let me be let's talk a little bit about cooking techniques and how to give our listeners

some practical tips. So, Annie, if we go back a couple of hundred years, say, what sort of techniques would cooks of use to avoid wasting ingredients then or making food go further? So I'm thinking of things that maybe have gone out of fashion a bit today. Like you mentioned, cooking with a whole animal, pickling, preserving, salting, smoking, fermenting, those sorts of things.

Annie Gray [00:16:08] Yeah, I mean, I think some of the preservation techniques that great, that really brilliant, they're also deeply impractical in a modern environment. In it, no one is going to make their own ham out of their scraps or regularly set and make terrines out of all the bits that are fallen off their animals. It's just...something I would do, but I'm not normal. Not from that point of view. There are things that we can do. There are things that we can learn from the past. Some of them are easier to do than others. And a lot of it comes down to education and also time and the desire to do these things. I mean, one of the easy ones, for example, is to save vegetable scraps and make stock out of the vegetable scraps rather than buying a stock cube. And that's easy, especially if you got a pressure cooker, the same with any form of bones from meat or indeed scraps. I mean, the best stock is not really made from bones of a stock is made from meat itself. If you've got a chicken carcase, the obvious thing to do is to render it down and make it into stock. Again, that requires time and knowledge and the desire to do so. And somewhere to store it. Because the best thing to do then in the modern context is to store it in a freezer, labelling it carefully. I speak from experience. Things like bread. Bread is one of the most wasted things that we have with we habitually buy bread. A lot of it is not particularly good bread. It's got to be admitted. So your average supermarket white slice, which is using the Chorley Wood process. The problem with that process is that the bread becomes very, very moist. It's very difficult to use it or reuse it in other dishes because the moisture content's too much. But it can be used. You can blitz into breadcrumbs and keep those breadcrumbs in the freezer. Don't try and dry them out, they will go mouldy. You can slice the bread up and you can make it into puddings. There was a huge range of starchy puddings and puddings that were designed to use up, especially bread leftovers in the past. They are unfashionable now because, of course, we have demonised sugar. We've demonised fat. We've demonised anything that's pleasure in life. So those things, again, I'd love to say, everybody should make bread and butter pudding all the time. But it's not a practical solution. It can be a practical solution. It's a great thing for kids, the lunch box. But realistically, no one's going to do that. So there are things to be done. There are lots of things to be done. But actually, I think the biggest thing people can learn is careful meal planning. So if you were to look at the you know, it's not a very useful context. In some ways it's a minority context. But the big country house or perhaps the middle class home employing a cook in the past. One of the things that would happen on a daily or weekly basis would be a conference with the cook on behalf of the mistress of the house. They would sit down together and plan that week's menus to quite a detailed degree. So are you planning breakfasts, plan out your lunches youor dinners plan out the servants meals. And from that planning, you would have an absolutely spot on list of what would be bought that we will be ordered from the butcher, what would be ordered from the grocer, and so on and so forth. So you can cut down on a lot of waste by knowing what you're cooking in advance and shopping for only what you need rather than the habit, I think, which a lot of us fall into of I don't want to think of dinner tonight, I'm going to nip down to the supermarket, grab what looks fun and bring it back, get to the end of the week hey presto, oh, my goodness, i've got one tomato left, a little bit of pre cooked potato, I've got that bit of pasta my child didnt eat you know little bit of this little bit of that. What am I going to do with it? Oh, let's not worry about it. Oh, I'm also obsessed with sell-by dates, I'm going to throw it all in the bin. And it actually nearly all of those things could probably have been put together, made into a curry, and that is what would have happened in the past. So a lot of

it is about planning. And I would go further than that and say not falling back on things like sandwich lunches. So planning your dinners and your lunches together to make use of whatever is left from dinner to go into lunch boxes and so on and so forth. But again, that requires time and forethought and it will probably realistically require an hour out of your week on a Sunday evening to sit down and plan the menus for that week. For some, that's an easy sacrifice to make because it saves time every evening. For others, it's an hour they don't have.

Matt Eastland [00:19:55] Yeah, absolutely. I agree. I personally struggle with this myself. I mean, just going back to the sort of the techniques. Do you have any favourite examples of historic recipes that tackle these sorts of problems?

Annie Gray [00:20:11] One of my favourites is it's an early Edwardian vegetable curry and it's really good for both the kind of opposite of glut in the garden because people always talk about gluts. But in my experience. It's more likely that you end up with a handful of broad beans or one courgette that didn't really work or half a sort of radish or something. But it's also very, very good for using up both small amounts of raw and cooked vegetables. Being Edwardian, it starts off with a cucumber and an apple chopped up with some onion and garlic and fryer.

Matt Eastland [00:20:40] Of course, of course.

Annie Gray [00:20:41] Absolutely. Well, it's a substitute for the tamarind and things like that, which weren't very easily available. And then you throw in a load of curry powder, some tomato puree, in go all your vegetables, whether it's small or large amounts, a load more curry powder, some stock, and you simmer them down till cooked through, which, if it's cooked already, really doesn't take very long. And then chuck in loads of cream at the end. And it's a surprisingly lovely recipe because the fruitiness of the cucumber and apple mixture are really just round out and make it quite unusual. And it's one of my go to recipes. So where some people have a kind of back at the vegetable drawer soup, I have back at the vegetable drawer curry and I would say I probably cook that certainly in the winter, sort of once or twice a month just to use up any bits of vegetables that are going manky cause you can literally put anything with it. And Curry was very much used as a leftover dish in the nineteenth century to any leftover meat used to be carried in. Or you could chop up and use it as a rizzle. I mean, there's things like toad in the hole as well as the ultimate leftover dish. It was invented really to use beef,.

Matt Eastland [00:21:40] Love toad in the hole.

Annie Gray [00:21:40] But you can use anything in it. Vegetables, meat, apple. You can do a sweet toad in the hole and call it a batter pudding. It doesn't matter what it is, stick it in batter, chuck it in the oven and it will be nice. And you will have eeked out with cheap ingredients as well but very filling. So there's almost nothing that you can't use up as long as you actively let it go green and start talking to you.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:22:03] Ahahaha.

Matt Eastland [00:22:03] Love that and also my total ignorance here on the fact that I didn't actually even know that curry was a thing back in Edwardian times.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:22:10] That's exactly what I was thinking I was like ahhh it actually made me think I wonder whether in some cultures, I guess, you know, when you

think of career, you do think of it being, you know, a cultural meal from the Indian subcontinent. It's got to be I wonder whether that's how that came about. It's really about making use of the food that was available in the local household. I don't know if you have any historical input on that or whether this is just an interesting thing?

Annie Gray [00:22:36] Well, I mean, curry is a really weird thing because it's so British and yet all the British think it is Indian and yet curry itself is a word that was coined for it as it started to emerge out of India. So it's a bit like British people saying, I'm going out for an Indian. I'm not sure how many cultures were seen going out for a British before. To be fair how many would want to. Yeah well I think if they did it would probably be fish and chips. But when the British started to embrace curry, which was in this sort of the eighteenth century, it was originally it was reasonably authentic, although I hate that word in that it was people who had lived in India coming back to England and wanting to eat the food that they had grown used to while being in India. So the early curries were often not called curry. They were, some of them were, but they were given names like pilaf or pilau or various other the names that you would see on a menu in India. And then slowly in the nineteenth century, it kind of became bastardised, partly because people couldn't get the ingredients, partly because then as a help they were all reliant on kind of readymade curry powder. So they weren't really worried what the spices were, and partly because they liked the exoticism of it, but not necessarily the heat or the flavour. So it became this kind of separate branch of cooking here, which I tend to refer to as kind of Anglo Indian cookery, because those Indian cooks I've spoken to or who dared to feed some of this stuff are inevitably appalled by its prolific use of Sultana's. And things like that is just like it causes massive outrage. But if you take it as a sort of branch of cookery in and of itself, which is very much the earliest form in some ways of real fusion food where you can see two different implements really crashing together, then it becomes a really interesting branch of cookery in its own right. And it's lovely.

Alice Gilsenan [00:24:21] You mentioned there about the kind of the joining up and the kind of influence that goes back and forth. But I mean, you started making me think about coronation chicken there, which must be the example of that that was nationwide, you know, famous for doing that. But a bit later on by but it kind of reached its peak exactly.

Annie Gray [00:24:40] In that tradition where you'd look at it and go - seriously? The addition of turmeric does not make this an Indian dish. Just because it's yellow doesn't make it a curry. But I mean, it's still the same in some cultures. I lived in France for a while and so-called Indian food or curries in France are universally yellow with absolutely no spice whatsoever. And it's the colour that almost dictates the fact that it is a curry. It's really interesting.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:25:05] That is a really good way to use up some leftover chicken. So very clever.

Annie Gray [00:25:10] Exactly.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:25:10] And I guess you know Alice, we really hear, be really interesting to hear from you in terms of these preservation techniques for ensuring that we don't have any food waste. You have any dishes?

Alice Gilsenan [00:25:20] Yeah, well, I think one that's been of particular interest, I think, for a few years now, but I don't see enough people doing it is kimchi. I've been doing some online cookery classes for people, would you believe, through lockdown. And it's been

really interesting getting people to get their head around kimchi because I just think it's just one of the most tastiest things you can make. And it is such a good food waste condiment, basically.

Matt Eastland [00:25:46] What is it exactly Alice, how to explain it?

Alice Gilsenan [00:25:49] Basically, it's fermented cabbage. First and foremost. And you basically make it with a kind of a chilli paste, which is called gochujang. And it originated thousands of years ago, basically, but it was a means of preserving vegetables throughout the winter period. And it basically because of it, there's quite a high salt content in it. That salt helped preserve what I put in usually things like carrots, cabbages, things like that. So a lot of food items that people find at the bottom of their fridges that are quite common basically, a lot of people buy cabbage and carrots in this country. Making the chilli paste is really, really good fun as well. All of this stuff is online as well now. So we've got no excuses for not looking for these recipes. But also, you know, there's an off the shelf version that Waitrose do so you're just putting it in with the cabbage, the carrots, massaging it all and a little bit of water, some salt, and you're getting the juices coming out of the vegetables and then you're mixing in the paste and then you're just simply preserving it in sealed jars. It couldn't be more simple, really. And it's a great compliment to a meal. You know, I've been making some very nice grilled salmon with a bit of kimchi mayo on top and then some kimchi on top of that. And it's absolutely delicious. And, you know, a lot of people start thinking, oh, God, I have to be mindful about food waste. You know, that's not exciting for me. But like things like kimchi, you couldn't get more exciting if you asked me and everybody who tries absolutely loves it. It's a completely different flavour combination as well. So I think, you know, now that we've got the great worldwide web at our fingertips, you know, we should be really exploring the continents and getting as much inspiration as possible.

Matt Eastland [00:27:21] Okay, you've inspired me Alice, I'm going to make my own kimchi. I have a cabbage, which I'm sure is about to go off in the fridge. I want to give that a whirl.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:27:30] I have a feeling now I'd be interested to you know, since I feel like the whole pickling, at home picklinis becoming quite trendy.

Alice Gilsenan [00:27:39] Absolutely. Yeah, I mean it has been for a number of years, but still I don't think it's had that kind of tipping point level of appreciation that happens when it goes really mainstream. You know, when you're making things like kimchi, it's it's just so bloody good for you, you know?

Matt Eastland [00:27:54] Love that. So going from sort of using and preserving ingredients, which is definitely one way of making things go further. I mean, I suppose sometimes inevitably we just end up making too much food for a meal and we end up having leftovers. So do we all need to fall in love again with leftovers? Is there a way to make this fun for people rather than sort of arduous?

Annie Gray [00:28:19] I've never understood why leftovers have been demonised. Leftovers are great, leftovers are just ready cooked ingredients. The whole notion that leftovers something kind of dodgy to be left in the back of the fridge and used up is so modern. I mean, really, it comes around when you start to get fridges and therefore you can keep things for a long time. Previously, these things were just called cold meats or broken meats, and we would just use them as a matter of course. I mean, I've got a book

on myself called What to Do with the Cold Mutton. And another one called Cold Meat and How to Disguise It. So, yes, alright there is a certain level of kind of dodginess to go with those. Clearly, it's slightly inferior. But the idea that it was bad. They wouldn't just be something quotidien that you would just process is really weird. Most of the time because dinner was the prestige meal in the past above a certain level of wealth. If you had things that were cold, that were leftover, you would use them up for lunch the next day. So if you had made load and load of rissole, which is sort of little balls, which are probably themselves using cold meat or leftover meat, you'd serve them up for dinner and you have three or four rissoles left, you might chop them up and then use them as the basis for a pancake or a salad or something like that. If you've got bread leftover that you've already fried up for salad, for soup, sorry to go with soup as croutons, then those croutons again could be used the next day, thrust onto a salad. So you just builtin the idea of left. I mean, the ultimate way the country house worked, for example, was that you would have your top layer of meals that which the family ate in aristocracy. And then what they didn't eat would either be processed into their lunch and the next day, or it would go for the servants dinner and they would get first dibs. And then what the servants didn't eat would then go to the bottom servants and then what they didn't eat. And by this point, you sort of three days on at that point, it would either go to feed the poor because this was pre welfare state. So the idea of feeding the poor of the parish was kind of built in is one of the big duties of the country house or. Really, really wasn't edible by anybody. It would go to the pigs and the pigs would eat the waste. And I think one of the other facets that so slightly to the side of this particular debate, but is certainly something that I would be interested in seeing more debate over is the government regulations against pig swill. I mean, they would pass for very good reasons to do with sort of disease within animals, to do with the funded things, with creeping into the food chain that shouldn't have been there. But even when I was little, I think I remember schools habitually sending their own food waste off to local farms to be processed at high heat, to be fed to pigs. And ultimately, of course, that's the reason pigs and humans have coexisted together for so many thousands of years because a pig will eat anything. So the ultimate problem with leftovers is bring back properly regulated, properly cared for, properly looked at pig swill because we all like bacon.

Matt Eastland [00:31:16] ahaha an innovative solution. I love it. Bring back pigs.

Annie Gray [00:31:19] Innovative, but also old. You know, it's it's not not that innovative. It's just a source of learning from the past, really. That's the problem.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:31:26] As I was saying to you, I was thinking there could be a really good Downton Abbey food waste episode. So, Alice, I guess, bringing back this question of left overs to you. So in restaurants setting, probably it's probably viewed as a less than desirable, people might think they're getting lower quality meat, but do you think we should really be challenging this perception and you know informing customers and get them really excited about leftovers?

Alice Gilsenan [00:31:52] Yeah, exactly. And I think, you know, the restaurant experience historically and up until recently has all there's been a slight air of pomposity about it when it comes to, you know, serving customers. You're you're trying to position the produce as kind of the best and the most well sourced and the kind of top of the pyramid of food, you know, and it's been sourced from all the best places and it's really expensive to try and justify the price. I think we need to kind of turn that psychology on its head, really. And, you know, ultimately what should determine the price is the taste of the food and the presentation of the food and the experience of the restaurant on a physical level as well. So, yeah, it's all about turning this kind of very antiquated way of consumption of food on

its head and seeing how we can play with that. And I think with Tiny Leaf, our original restaurant, it was all about doing that. And, you know, it was the first time that I'd ever worked on a product or a brand that went absolutely viral. You know, I'd spent all those years an ad agency land, and yet I never had as much appreciation or interest from worldwide media. So, you know, I think if restaurants really want to have cut through this in this new even more difficult period, we need to start thinking about how we position our food, our narrative, you know, what is what are we trying to tell customers? How are we trying to make ourselves stand out from the crowd? And I think by turning all those old historical kind of preconceptions about sourcing and ingredients and provenance and all of these things on its head and actually making food waste be a platform to shine, you know, and being making resourcefulness be something to be really appreciated. And making efficiency of food management within a kitchen to be something really appreciated I think is key for things to change. You know, one of the key parts of that is having staff that are real ambassadors for this new way of looking at food, you know? And I think it's all about, you know, having waiters that can actually really talk about it with enthusiasm. You know, we find a lot of people in the hospitality industry are going to these jobs as an add on to the other thing that they really want to do in life. So I need to I think we need to even look at how we educate people within the system. There is a high turnover of staff. Why do we have such a high turnover? You know, we need to look at every little detail of the system to try and pick it apart and rebuild it, to try and make it work in this in this new light of food efficiency and other kind of a better food future, really.

Alice Gilsenan [00:34:12] Thanks for that, Alice. And just for the people listening, can you bring some of this to life in terms of, you know, how you approach leftovers in your kitchens? I mean, I've been privileged enough to see that in action. But what, you know, on a commercial scale, we what are we talking about? I mean, I know that I saw surplus veg and things like that, but what does that look like for people? How do you take these things and turn them into something that could be fit for people to think yeah, you know what, I'm happy to pay for that.

Alice Gilsenan [00:34:41] Yeah, exactly. I mean, it's a really interesting question because I'm kind of harping back to what Annie was pointing towards as that, you know, it's what we are ultimately trying to do and we're designing menus is to aim for not having any waste at all. That's that's the first way to kind of start fighting food waste is to not have that waste in the first place. Another way that we we approach aiming not to have any food waste is basically circular menu design. So when we're designing our menus, you know, we're thinking about the ingredients on where they can be used on a menu wide level, you know, M ingredients. You know that we're getting in like apples, you know, which are very adaptable. You know, can we dehydrate them? Can they be used as garnish in the bar area? You know, pureed. You know, I'm just kind of using ingredients that can be implemented in each element of the dishes. So starter, main course, dessert. You know, it's it's kind of intelligent menu design. Basically, it's looking at things. It's assessing what sort of surplus you have and knowing what sort of surplus might be coming up. And then basically looking at your menu and having certain dishes in there that can actually be quite flexible. We looked at basically menu design from a point of view of having very flexible dishes. So, for example, obviously curries are a very good example of that. It's a flexible dish that can have a lot of different inputs, basically in order to make it taste great. And then you're not so restricted. So it's all really stuff that needs to happen in the very early stages of planning menus. It's almost before you even open the door to all of this, you need to start doing the real complex thinking.

Annie Gray [00:36:14] We used to do that the same when we when I ran a team at one point of Victorian cooks. And obviously, most of that was for the public. So quite a lot of what we could never got consumed because it is sat out all day with people poking it going, is that real? And then wiping their hands on our tablecloths. But we would design those menus so that we knew that say on a Saturday we would be cooking sponge cakes. On the Sunday, we would be doing cabinet pudding, which is basically bread and butter pudding, but using sponge cake. On the Monday, we would be cooking trifle using the offcuts of those sponge cake. By the time we got through to about Wednesday, we were cooking sort of the equivalent of crumbles using the breadcrumbs left from the sponge cakes from the bottom of the tray. So it was designed as well. I mean, we weren't a really tight budget at that point, so it was very much designed so that whatever we bought would really, really work for its money. We would do a chicken and then we would take the meat off that chicken and we would make that into a basic steamed chicken pudding that kind of thing as well. So I agree with you completely. A lot of it is about thinking the basics and thinking, well, I'm going to have to make X number of these things. I'm not going to sell them all. What can I therefore do with an undefined number which I really can't work out until the end of the week of them left over and things like jams as well? We found very, very useful for doing this because they were so, so versatile. So if we suddenly realised that we hadn't planned a dish and we suddenly had three hours left and we needed something to show in front of the public, but we'd run out. Well, you can always, always put something together with jam. I mean, jam and water and a bit of lemon juice plus and ice and salt you can make ice cream and you can hang that out for three hours in front of public, trust me. So a lot of those things without having really very, very good ingredients that were budget friendly that we knew that was just a few other things we could whip up into something magical very, very quickly.

Matt Eastland [00:38:06] Amazing.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:38:06] Alice, you were talking about, you know, planning and planning to prevent food waste in restaurants. But in terms for yourself, do you shop with a specific list for yourself personally?

Alice Gilsenan [00:38:17] I do. And I'm also fortunate to have a partner who seems to have a never ending stomach. So we have very little food waste in our house anyway. But yeah, I do. I definitely you know, I think, you know, I don't beat myself up about it when I get it wrong, I think is one of the things as well, because I think when people are starting to think about food, waste it, it feels quite restrictive and self policing and kind of a daunting task. And I think, yes, it's all about the planning, but it's all about the kind of testing and learning as well. It's the trial and error. And, you know, if it doesn't go to plan and the first few weeks and months of taking on this new approach, you know, don't beat yourself up about it. You know, one of the things I've done because there's only two of us in our home is get a composter. Now, we live on a little houseboat in London and it obviously doesn't have a back garden or anything like that. But, you know, it's amazing how small composters can be these days. And I think on a domestic level, you know, it's actually quite a fun thing to do. It's like a tombola. You kind of turn it around and, you know, and especially with kids in the house, I imagine they did really enjoy that. And also, you know, then that's the circular approach to food waste in the home. You know, you're using that compost to grow the herbs that you're going to use in the cooking. Yeah, it's all about planning, not beating yourself up. And then, you know, if you do and if if well, if you do have that food waste, you know, can you look at something like a composter to try and actually harness that into something that goes back into creating more food? I think there was a lot of schemes across London whereby food cadies were being left out and, actually

the local councils were scooping all that food waste off as well. It hasn't hit my borough. But I think, you know, a lot of campaigns like that have been very active and very successful. So be great to see more of that happening as well. But, you know, even on a micro level, you can you can combat all of this in the home. It just takes a lot of creative thinking, I think.

Matt Eastland [00:40:05] Great advice. Yeah. Thanks, Alice. And just touching on the challenge of convenience, maybe for a second. So how do we use, like, targeted planned shopping? How do we get people to embrace that without it becoming a bit of a chore for people, you know, how do you get people to stick to it? Annie, I wonder if you've got any thoughts.

Annie Gray [00:40:27] Well I mean, I do. I do it and I enjoy it. I have a little printed out list. In fact, everybody I've ever lived with, all my ex housemates, all have the same menu planning sheet.

Matt Eastland [00:40:38] Really!?

Annie Gray [00:40:38] Which they also print out on weekly basis. It's changed actually, I've just just tweaked one of the categories to cope with lockdown where we needed to have an inventory, but at the top. So my printed sheets got a space for inventory, which is stuff that needs to be used up this week that we still have hanging over from last week. And then it's got a who's in and who's out section. And then it's got a recipe section, the book and the page, any notes and any key ingredients or notes such whats coming out of the freezer.

Matt Eastland [00:41:07] Wow thats so organised.

Annie Gray [00:41:07] But it takes so much of the time and effort out of the week as a result of it. You know, we'll sit down on a Sunday morning and go through recipe books. And I have a few recipe books, just a few. And normally we'll have a recipe book for each month than we're trying to use that exclusively or not exclusive concentrate on that, whatever it is, because there are so many and otherwise we don't cook out of them. So having planned what is being eaten for dinners and for lunches so that we keep that sort of cycle going. Right, so we've had this we're cooking double of that so that we can have it for lunch, they stay and the same the next day or whatever else. Once you then do the shop, it's much, much easier to do it. And it's a real, the balance is getting, striking the right note between what you're buying specifically for those recipes and what you're using up that you've got in already. So if, for example, you have a veggie box, it's more important, I find, to plan those recipes after the veggie box has arrived so you can work out what you've got and plan accordingly.

Matt Eastland [00:42:01] That's a good idea.

Annie Gray [00:42:02] There's no point in buying, infamously, pomegranate molasses if you're only going to use it for one meal. So if you're going to put it down, then make a note and plan it the week after. And actually after a while, it's just so automatic. It's like getting up and brushing your teeth. It really isn't a chore or a hassle. It's just something you do. And exactly as Alice says as well, if it goes wrong and if on a Thursday I forget to do the, I dont know, carbonara I've got planned because actually I accidentally go down the pub and come home late and fish and chips instead. Well, so what? It's okay. The carbonara can go on to the next week. The other thing I would also say is it's important, I think, to

make use of new technologies as well. There's a lot of demonisation of plastic at the moment, and rightly so. But plastic also helps to preserve items and to stop food waste.

Matt Eastland [00:42:49] Absolutely.

Annie Gray [00:42:49] So there is a balance there as well. A few years ago, I was given some excellent little plastic bags that obviously I rinse and reuse that have got silver in or some such thing. Anyway, they do genuinely preserve vegetables for a lot longer than a normal fridge does. They'll keep them for two or three weeks. They are well worth using and reusing. And that's an example, I think, of a really good thing that is coming out of modern technology, which helps us to stop food waste. You just have to get out of the mindset of things either all bad or all good. Or if you fall down in planning, you're a terrible person. If you end up throwing out the Tesco economy herring roe, which I'm probably going to do soon because I found some on the back the cupboard industry three years out of date, it's okay to do that. And we do have a council run food waste scheme, so it will probably go in the green bin and then I'll regret it because I've done it doubtless the day after it's been collected and it was set for two weeks wafting every time I go outside. But I think the secret isn't to try and pretend these things are fun, but they are necessary and they can become automatic.

Matt Eastland [00:43:49] Thanks.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:43:49] You talk, you just were talking a little bit about, you know, modern technology has a role to play. And, you know, we definitely believe that in terms of what we do EIT Food, we have a project right now where we, one of our start ups is using a 3D printer to be able to print fun food shapes using like waste by-products from the fishing industry, which we think is you know, quite a clever way, both to make good use of the food waste and also encourage kids to eat fish because they come in fun shapes. So do either of you have any favourite apps or, any techy food device that you think will help with food waste?

Alice Gilsenan [00:44:27] I've just been reading about one recently actually, which is all about one of the one of the biggest problems with food is when it's being transported soft fruits and things like that can get easily damaged along the way. Actually this particular technological innovation was about mimicking the experience of an apple as it travels and is transported. So you've got this kind of plastic gadget that's kind of apple shaped and it actually basically senses temperature changes and how much it's been shaken about and things like that. So it's actively feeding back to the transporters of this produce the conditions.

Matt Eastland [00:45:05] oh.

Alice Gilsenan [00:45:05] So there's a learning that's taking place and there's also live information going back so then they can refine how they do things the next time. So I thought that was really interesting because I think a lot of, you know, when we look at food waste, it doesn't just happen in the home, its happening on the land that we pick the fruit and vegetables, you know, I think it's thirty percent there. It's thirty percent in the home and then we've got thirty percent in restaurants. So when you think of all the different links and the chains that are happening, you know, these innovations that happen right at the root of the issue, excuse the pun, is kind of really key. And it's just fascinating to see what technology and apps can do when they overlay on this issue. Obviously, you know, we've got a million apps on our phones, but I think ones that are quite interesting are apps like

Too Good To Go, Olio as well for sharing not only food produce, but also, you know, home goods as well. So, you know, the whole sharing economy is great. Again, it's a good connector for people as well, because you're meeting people that you never got to talk to before. So, yeah, those those are a couple that come to mind. Yeah.

Matt Eastland [00:46:06] Yeah. Thanks. I mean, we had Tessa Clarke actually from Olio on the show and she was talking about exactly that, that kind of community apps and technology. And Annie, what about you? Are you all about the traditional stuff or do you have some modern tech to help you along?

Annie Gray [00:46:21] I have a lot of modern tech. I'm very much in favour of not rose tinting the past. in many ways the past was a terrible, terrible place. We can learn from it but at the end of the day, living when we are well, maybe not at the exact moment now, but generally living in the twenty first century, things like you, a modern medicine, democracy.

Matt Eastland [00:46:39] Quite useful.

Annie Gray [00:46:40] Women's rights, those little things like that are really, really good. So generally, I would say let's not get back in the past. There's nothing specific to food waste that I tend to use apart from little green plastic bags. But, you know, let us not diss the fridge and the freezer. I mean, I couldn't live without my chest freezer. And while the heyday of the freezer was really the seventies and eighties, especially the big chest freezer of the type I've got. And I know that, you know, freezers are places where things go to die, but they are also can be incredibly important and incredibly useful if you regard them as a way to keep stuff for longer, but then use it. You've got to just remember what you've got in there. And I do admit most my freezers full of, I've got a whole box of bird lakes for display. But even that in itself is great because those legs, those feet from pigeons and woodcock and other such things would be going to waste if I didn't have them in my freezer so that I could whip them out and use them for displaying on Victorian pies and then take them back out again and back again. So I do admit to having quite a few things in my freezer that you wouldn't want to eat, but it's a great thing.

Matt Eastland [00:47:49] I have to say, I'm with you on the, I'm with you on the freezer and actually my my mother in law is an inspiration to me. So she, they have this amazing working garden and every year she picks raspberries and she individually places them on trays, freezes them layer after layer after layer, and then when they're frozen, she puts them in a bag so that she can use them for the whole of the rest of the year. I mean, it's so time-

Annie Gray [00:48:13] - Its the only way to do it with raspberries. But we did that with strawberries a few years ago and it was worth it. I mean, I adore strawberries and I can quite happily eat tons in a sitting, quite frankly. But towards the end of last year, when they started doing jamming strawberries, I not only made jam, but also knowing that we don't actually eat that much jam. We tend to eat it as a puree instead, froze loads them and we've been living off strawberry puree for a couple of months before strawberry season, which has just kicked in again before it sort of starts again. And it's so easy to just grab a tupperware. We use the leftover takeaway containers that you get, grab a tupperware full of strawberry puree, defrost it in and it goes into porridge in the morning or it goes with yoghurt for a quick pudding in the evening, or it will go into ice cream or it will go into something if I'm making a savoury dish, which happens to involve strawberries. And it's so easy just to have that there and done and think, yes, this is what freezer is all about. And

let's not... Let's not try and sort of say that everybody should be eating seasonally or locally or all those things that are completely different issues to this, but which get bundled up with a lot of other food issues, eating seasonally sucks. If we're in Britain, we're gonna be eating cabbage and potatoes and onions for a lot of the year. There's a reason that it's called the hunger gap in April. So while seasonal eating can be brilliant if you've got the resources to eat well. Basically, it's really awful and very flatulent. So let's freeze things, so we didn't have to eat seasonally.

Alice Gilsenan [00:49:39] I've just been force fed asparagus for the last month because I was up in for Norfolk. So I totally ahaha.

Matt Eastland [00:49:46] Oh dear, I'm going to have to put that as a quote somewhere. You know, eating seasonally is crap.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:49:53] This is quite a fun episode I must say.

Matt Eastland [00:49:55] It has indeed. Unfortunately, we're actually nearly out of time. So if there was one like waste avoidance technique and you could choose from from the past or into the, you know, now or in the future that you'd urge our listeners to try at home, what would that be? So Alice, maybe can start with you?

Alice Gilsenan [00:50:17] Right. Okay. This is kind of nodding to the fact that everything we've talked about today in food waste in general, it's not rocket science. You know that it's about changing an attitude or changing small, easy to change behaviours. So I think I remember reading some stats somewhere on a study of how much people purchase if they've eaten before they go to the supermarket or if they go to the supermarket hungry and purchase intention and actual behaviour goes up something like thirty percent and that has a knock on effect on food waste because you're purchasing things that you think you want, but actually you're over purchasing. So it's it's a really obvious one. It's not a really interesting one. It doesn't have, you know, bells and whistles on it, but, you know, something like that if that was done on on a massive scale, don't purchase when hungry. Fill your belly before you go to the supermarket. I think that would have a huge impact on the amount of food purchased and therefore goes to waste.

Matt Eastland [00:51:09] Yeah I'm guilty of that. Definitely.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:51:12] Absolutely. What about you, Annie? What's your one waste avoidance tip?

Annie Gray [00:51:16] I would say plan properly and embrace pudding's.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:51:21] So that's all for us today. So it's been a really great pleasure to have you both on this show with us today. So where can people find out more about your work? Annie?

Annie Gray [00:51:30] I've got a website, which is www.anniegray.co.uk.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:51:34] And you, Alice?

Alice Gilsenan [00:51:36] Yeah. We've basically launched Nature London as a catering company in the last year and a half. You can find us on Instagram Nature.London. We'll be doing lots of interesting things in the future. So yeah, please check us out there.

Lukxmi Balathasan [00:51:47] Brilliant. Thank you both.

Matt Eastland [00:51:49] Wonderful. Thank you very much both.

Alice Gilsenan [00:51:51] Thank you.

Annie Gray [00:51:52] Thank you.

Matt Eastland [00:51:53] This has been The Food Fight podcast. And if you want to find out any more about EIT Food or anything that Annie and Alice are doing as well, please check out eitfood.eu or hit us up on Twitter @EITFood. Thank you very much everyone, keep fighting for a better future.