

CASE STUDY

NASHVILLE CHEFS PREVENT FOOD WASTE IN “WASTE NOT” COOKING COMPETITION



In 2015, NRDC selected Nashville as its pilot city for developing high-impact local policies and actions to address food waste by preventing food from being discarded, rescuing surplus food to direct to hungry people, and composting and digesting food scraps. Today, the [Nashville Food Waste Initiative](#), led by Urban Green Lab with support from NRDC and the Environmental Law Institute, engages governments, consumers, businesses, nonprofits, and communities, developing and implementing strategies and tools as models for cities around the country.

The average family of four in the United States spends \$1,800 annually on food that goes uneaten, and an [NRDC study on residential food waste in Nashville](#) found that approximately two-thirds of that wasted food could have been consumed. Consequently, NRDC and the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI) prioritized finding creative ways to communicate to

Nashvillians that prevention is the most effective approach to addressing food waste. As part of its food waste prevention education efforts, NFWI teamed up with the [James Beard Foundation](#) to host the [Waste Not Cooking Competition](#), a *Chopped*-style contest among local chefs, educators, and culinary students.

The cooking competition demonstrated ways to creatively repurpose food “scraps”—in this case, parts of food that are edible but commonly discarded—into dishes that could be made at home. During the event, four teams of contenders were given a box of items with which to create a trio of appetizers. Ingredients included pineapple cores, potato peels, celery hearts, carrot tops, and broccoli leaves and stems. The public was invited to watch the timed cooking competition, enjoy some of the food that was prepared, and learn about new ways to use these food parts in their own cooking.

“The James Beard Foundation is really doubling down on its commitment to food waste reduction,” says Emily Rothkrug, the foundation’s Impact Programs associate. “Being able to plug in to a city that already had this structure in place and already had a network of people committed to working on this issue made the entire event super easy,” she continues. “Our relationship with NRDC and the Nashville Food Waste Initiative really helped make this whole event come together.”

The competition, on [Vanderbilt University’s](#) campus in June 2019, was held on a Monday, the day of the week most restaurants are closed and chefs generally have more availability. NFWI and the James Beard Foundation used their networks to recruit chefs to compete and serve as judges. “It was important to have diversity in the types of restaurants participating because we wanted people to know that creatively repurposing food scraps is not something only cool, pricey, farm-to-table restaurants can do—it’s something everyone can do,” says Linda Breggin, project director for NFWI.

The event was free and open to the public, but tickets were required to ensure adequate room for the audience to observe the chefs’ work. During the event, NFWI interviewed chefs and attendees, including some food waste advocates in the audience. The interviews were incorporated into a [short video about the event](#) that was shared on social media. Educational materials about how to reduce food waste were also available to attendees.

Chefs from some of Nashville’s most well-known restaurants, including Miel, Etch, Boulevard, and M Street Hospitality’s Kayne Prime, either participated in the competition or served as judges. After the judges deliberated, the mayor announced the winners. Including the mayor in the event helped to promote the [Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge](#), another NFWI initiative.

Plans were made to donate any surplus food, but once everyone in attendance had a chance to taste each team’s creations, there were few leftover appetizers. “The event was a fun, high-profile way to raise awareness of food waste prevention,” Breggin says. “It showed people that food that they would typically throw away could actually be used in a constructive and delicious way. It was a really powerful way to reach the public.”

For other cities considering hosting similar events, Rothkrug advises the organizers to be flexible as details come together, particularly when working with chefs and their variable schedules. She also recommends forming partnerships with local restaurants and organizations to help in planning and promoting the event. For example, Morton Salt and Kroger co-sponsored the Nashville competition and provided gifts for the participants.

“Find good partners and advocates in the community to serve as ambassadors for your program or event,” Rothkrug says. “The James Beard Foundation has to identify strategic partners who are known in their communities to help us achieve success for our programs.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[Waste Not Cooking Competition Event Video](#)

[James Beard Foundation Waste Not Initiative](#)

[Tennessean: Imperfect apples. Smushed berries.](#)

[A cracked egg. Want to reduce food waste? Here’s how](#)

[Food Recovery Hierarchy](#)