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Lawmakers and greens are trying to get Europeans to stop wasting food

http://www.economist.com/news/ europe/21705593-how-dissuade- homes-restaurants-and- supermarkets-squandering- leftovers-lawmakers-and# 14720303752612&%7B%22sender%

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A CULINARY tour of Europe offers copious delights: a perfectly thin pizza slice from Naples, a glistening paella on Valencia's beachfront, a fresh Parisian croissant. Indeed, the continent seems to turn out more treats than its people can eat. The latest estimates say Europeans threw out 88m tonnes of food in 2012—173 kg per person. The wasted food was worth €143 billion ($162 billion).

Such wastefulness is bad for the planet. Europeans pride themselves on being green, yet in fact they squander only slightly less each year, per head, than North Americans or Australians. Throwing away food means wasting the resources used in its production, such as water. This is especially foolish in dry countries such as Spain. The problem is set to get worse as climate change makes rainfall patterns less predictable.

Governments are now trying to help. In Italy, until recently, a supermarket that tried to donate items to a charity would find itself entangled in red tape as thick and twisted as a plate of spaghetti. But on August 2nd lawmakers made it far easier by passing reforms to tax incentives. In February France passed legislation to fine shops for throwing out food instead of giving it to food banks or other charities. Measuring the success of such laws is becoming easier, too. A new

protocol launched in June, with co-operation from UN agencies and other groups, defines reporting requirements to ensure that food waste can be measured consistently across countries.

It should not be impossible to work out what to do with leftover food. Technology can make it easier: Matsmart, a Swedish website, allows shoppers to buy surplus food at a discount. Several apps exist to connect outlets with too much food to groups with too little. One such, FoodCloud, based in Dublin, links up local homeless shelters and food banks with a nearby supermarket. About 740 stores across Britain and Ireland are involved. FoodCloud keeps track of precisely what type of food needs collecting, where, and when—so that it remains safe to eat.

Shops and restaurants are not the worst wastrels: more than half of the food that is tossed away is tossed away by households. In part, this is because consumers don't know what is safe to eat. For example, the EU rolled out "best before" and "use by" labels in 2014. But according to a study conducted for the European Commission last year, less than half of those asked know what "best before" labels actually mean. Most Greeks and Romanians think anything past the "best before" date should be thrown out; in fact, the food may still be edible, if past its prime. By contrast, the strong-stomached Swedes tend to assume that even when the "use by" date has passed, an item may just be a little over-ripe. (Perhaps this explains the existence of Matsmart).

The Swedes are an exception. According to Selina Juul, a Danish activist, the general trend across Europe is that richer countries are more wasteful than poorer ones, with the British among the worst offenders. Ms Juul suggests that people eat off smaller plates to help cut down on waste. Just possibly, this might have the happy side-effect of making Europeans—most of whom are too heavy—a bit slimmer.