

Why a sustainable future means shopping like our grandparents

From Hackney to Halifax, packaging-free shops could help cut plastic waste, reduce emissions—and save us money

by Georgina Wilson-Powell Prospect Magazine August 7, 2017



If we want to make our future sustainable, we need to ditch the packaging.

Forget the out-of-town supermarkets and the monthly, or weekly, shop. If you're interested in helping reduce your impact on single use plastic and food waste, **it's time to revisit** the way our grandparents used to shop: fresh, local and without packaging.

"Zero waste" stores **have been popping up** all over Europe for a while. Malmo has one, and so does Luxembourg, Amsterdam and so on. And, from August, London will have its first zero waste store, Bulk Market. Ingrid Caldironi will launch her zero waste concept with **a three month pop-up** in Dalston before moving to a permanent home in Hackney—along with a nut grinder, commercial-grade composting machine and a recycled container-greenhouse for **DIY classes**.

Although they're not yet widespread, zero waste food shops help tackle several problems. There's the overuse of single use plastic, and our lack of recycling of all the packaging **we lug home** as part of our food shop. The UK is trailing behind other European countries on this: we only recycle 43 per cent of packaging, while the target set by the European Union is 50 per cent. According to an EEA report in 2016, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Sweden all recycle at least half of their municipal waste. Single use plastic is

clogging up our oceans—if we carry on at our current rates, **it's projected that** by 2050 there'll be more bits of rubbish in the sea than fish.

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And then there's the cost. Of every £50 spent in a supermarket, £8 pays for the packaging needed to store food or transport it long distances.

"The average household in the UK produces about a tonne of waste per year; the whole country about 30 million tonnes," says Caldironi. "If only 5 per cent of the population adopted a zero waste lifestyle, we would see a reduction of at least 10,000 tonnes a year. Imagine the impact if even only 5 per cent of UK households created a maximum of **a carrier bag** of waste per year? We would be able to even beat the EU target of 50 per cent recycling."

And then there's the food itself. We all buy more than we need, which wastes food. Throwing away **the odd carrot** or half a bag of salad might seem pretty small scale, but replicate it millions of times, and it adds up. According to food waste charity Feedback, it takes a **staggering** 1.4 billion hectares of land to produce just the food **that ends up in the bin**.

By shopping for only what you need, when you need it—taking your own container; buying two carrots instead of a bag—you should be creating less food and less plastic waste. This is the way we shopped in the past.

To return to it, Caldironi says we would only need a change of perspective.

"We need to change the perception of what is clean and acceptable. For example our salad and veggies grow in the dirt, so they need to be washed anyway, they don't need to be in plastic."

But a zero waste store isn't possible without a huge network of local suppliers. Based in Hackney, Caldironi is working with urban farms like Grow Up, who have changed their model to help her, delivering **cardboard boxes of salad to measure out** rather than prepackaged bags, and community gardens along with bakeries, **delis** and breweries. The beauty of a short supply chain is there's much less need for packaging.

"If we're all in the same community, **we can do away with** a lot of packaging. People can deliver by bike or we can pick up small packages to sell in the shop, things are fresh and coming locally. People then don't need to go to supermarkets and buy bread from Yorkshire when they can get it **from down the road**," she explains. "I think the secret of success for this kind of business is work around great suppliers and support the local economy. This way you can keep the supply chain as short as possible, wherever you are based."

Which is fabulous for people in Hackney, but how about people in Halifax or Hastings?

"I see the zero waste movement as the craft beer movement 20 years ago," Caldironi explains. "Craft breweries were set up by people tired of drinking bad beers, who wanted to make the

beers they wanted to drink. **They worked together to create a demographic and a demand for their product.** Now you see craft beer in every mainstream supermarket. I think in 10 years time, every supermarket will have **a zero waste aisle**, and you will see a lot of independent shops popping up with the concept.”

Where 30 years ago the future seemed to be about chains, convenience and **cookie cutter town centres**, devoid of difference, the zero waste food concept **thrives on celebrating what’s local**, and not expecting everything and everywhere to be the same. If it’s anywhere near as successful as the craft beer story, we’ll soon be enjoying the future—**raising our local brewed ale to the past**, on a plastic-less beach.

Explain the following words and phrases from their context:

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