Consumer Swaps: Reusable Containers vs. Brown Bagging or Dining Out

Eating more meals at home is a fantastic way to cut down on costs, create more time in your schedule, and drive down your environmental impact. But when you're heading into the office, packing a healthy lunch in a reusable container can seem like a hassle when you already have a lot on your plate. With proper preparation, however, a home-prepared salad or sandwich can be a breeze to assemble and comes with a myriad of benefits. Cutting down on even just a few brown-bagged lunches or trips to your local restaurants can massively reduce waste and costs over the course of a year.

Brown Paper Bags

Brown-bagging your lunch is favorable to dining out, but their transportation racks up the use of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gasses. While many tout recyclability, they can't be processed if they get soaked in oils or food residue. Also, with cheap, insulating, reusable, and stylish options on the market, upgrading from paper bags is easy and saves you the hassle of adding paper bags to your grocery list.

The Environmental and Financial Cost of Dining Out

The clunky, non-recyclable packaging your food is served in at drive-thrus is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to restaurant waste. In fact, "restaurants generate 2-4 times the waste of grocery stores" (Fork). In addition, home kitchens require far less energy to run than a commercial one.

Eating out often also incurs a hefty cost. "[For] the first time in history, Americans are spending more at restaurants and bars than they are at grocery stores." (NGPF) With restaurant markups, that means we are spending more on what amounts to a quarter of the quantity of food. So if the environmental benefits don't sway you, perhaps the financial aspect will convince you to slim the amount you dine out.

Tips for Packing Your Lunch

1. **Set Realistic Expectations:** There's no point in packing something that will spoil in the office fridge while you go out to eat instead. Be sure that whatever you plan to pack is palatable enough to dissuade you from other options. Also, if you omit going out wholesale you may find it hard to keep up the habit. Instead, work on cutting down rather than cutting out going out so you don't give up on your sustainable efforts.

2. **Plan Ahead:** You can't pack that nutritious, delicious meal if your fridge is bare. Be sure to include lunches and snacks on your grocery list before you go out. Save sandwich, salad, and other lunch ideas that you've enjoyed so you can rotate through a roster of enjoyable options if taking the same lunch every day sounds unappealing.

3. **Create a Routine:** If you wait until the last minute to throw together your lunch, you may bow to the temptation of going out to eat instead of stressing or making yourself late to work. Instead, carve out some time in the evening before or morning to prepare your lunch and stick to the habit.

Works Cited

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