

Changing awareness of food waste in Swiss restaurants during COVID-19

Uncertainties and existential fears could jeopardise sustainable development in restaurants

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Introduction

Our nutrition is responsible for 21 percent of the total environmental impact and thus makes a decisive contribution to climate change (Jungbluth et al., 2012). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2021), one third of food is lost between field and plate and is therefore wasted unnecessarily. According to the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN, 2019), 2.8 million tons of food are wasted annually in Switzerland alone. Restaurants contribute to 7 percent (ibid.).

Some restaurant owners want to tackle food waste and have already developed strategies, such as cooking classes with sorted vegetables or the offering of smaller portions with the possibility of a second helping (Markoni & Götze, 2019). However, as on 16 March 2020, the Federal Council declared the 'extraordinary situation' for Switzerland due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to adjust and change their strategies and faced new challenges. Eating inside restaurants was no longer possible, and food and drinks could only be offered as takeout. The shutdown also changed consumer behaviour (e.g. cooking more at home) (Götze, 2020).

Research Questions and Methods

We were interested in the impact of the crisis on sustainability strategies of restaurants, like food waste prevention, and asked the following research questions:

1. How do restaurant owners in the German-speaking part of Switzerland perceive their individual food waste prevention strategies changing because of Covid-19?
2. How do the interviewed experts respond to the crisis? What are their individual challenges and strategies?

To answer our research questions, we pursued an exploratory approach to understand the lifeworld of restaurant owners in Switzerland who consciously address the issue of food waste. For this, we conducted qualitative expert interviews according to Gläser und Laudel (2010). The evaluation was based on the Qualitative Content Analysis according to Mayring (2010). Due to Covid-19, the interviews had to be conducted online which presented researchers with some data privacy challenges.



Results, Discussion & Conclusion

In general, less food waste during the lockdown:

- New takeout concepts.
- More fresh produce and products in storage.
- Distributed food among employees and discounts.

Challenges due to Covid-19:

- Covering rental costs and running cost.
- Keeping staff motivated due to short-time work.
- Reopening after the end of the lockdown (financial losses).
- Increased digitization.

→ Sustainability strategies might be neglected.

Future studies should investigate how restaurants can be more resilient in times of crises. Governments could create incentives and create a political framework that helps restaurants to further develop their business in a sustainable way. Financial support from governments could be linked to demands for more sustainability-oriented business models in restaurants.

References

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