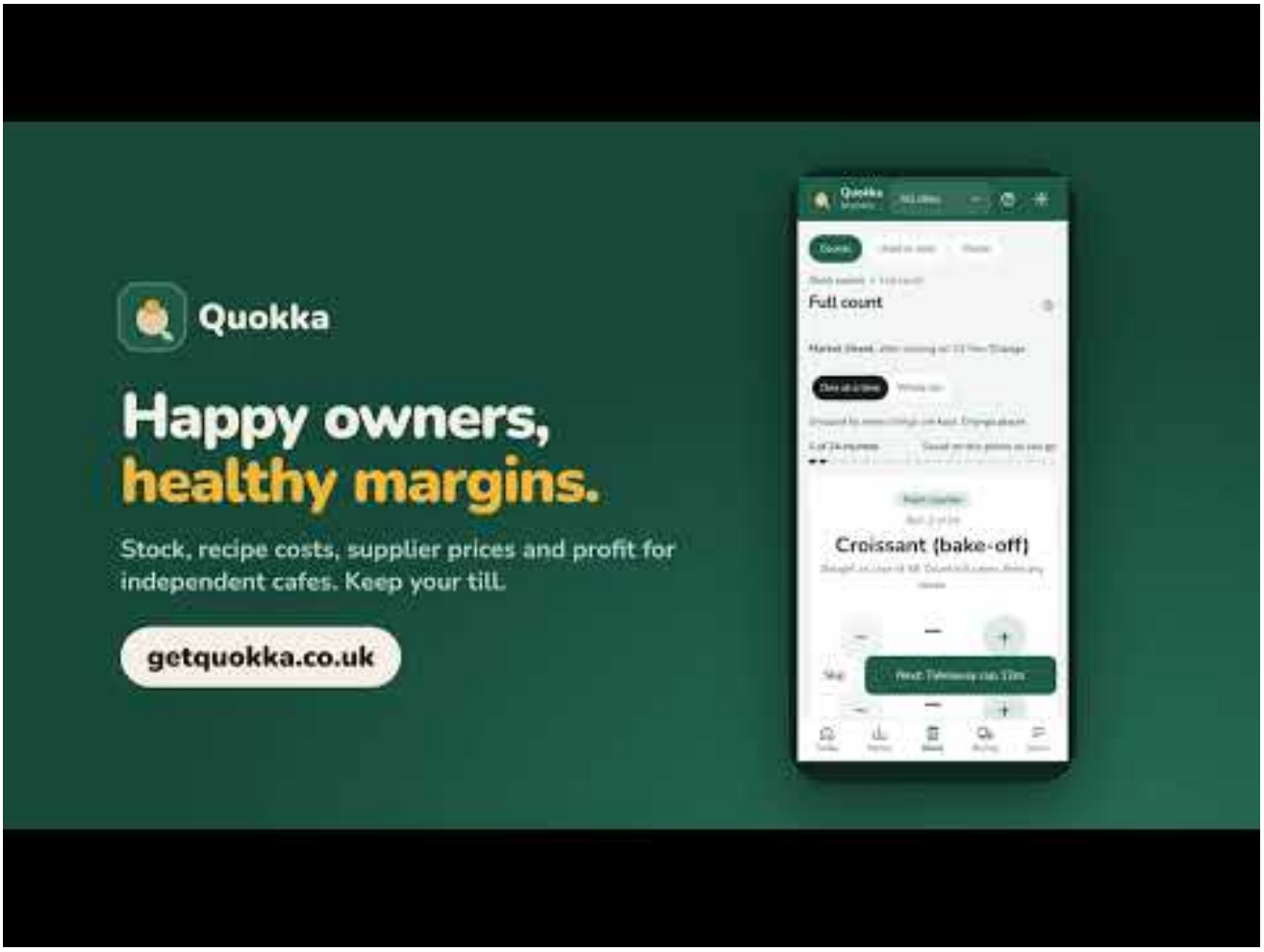
Understanding Food Waste in Cafes and How to Track It

Where cafe food waste really comes from

Walk into any busy cafe and you will see a lot of activity. Baristas pulling shots, cooks assembling sandwiches, and customers coming and going. It is easy to think that the main challenge is keeping up with demand. But behind the counter, there is a quieter problem that eats into profits and fills bins: food waste. Most cafe owners know they waste some food, but few have a clear picture of where it actually comes from. The waste may feel like a small, inevitable part of running a cafe. In reality, it is often larger than expected and comes from specific, fixable sources.

The biggest share of waste in a cafe is not what customers leave on their plates. It is what happens before the food ever reaches a customer. Spoilage from over-ordering, incorrect deliveries, and poor stock rotation accounts for a large part of the total. A case of avocados that looked fine on delivery but turned brown two days later. A box of salad greens that wilted because the fridge was set a degree too warm. Milk that passed its use-by date because the Monday order was too generous. These losses happen regularly, and they are easy to overlook because each one seems small. But added up over a month, they represent a real cost.



Another hidden source is the mismatch between what a supplier delivers and what you actually ordered. A delivery note might show the right number of units, but the unit price might have changed, or the quantity might be slightly off. A supplier invoice that does not match the delivery note can mean you pay for stock you never received. Over time, these small variances add up. Checking every invoice against the delivery note sounds tedious, but it is one of the most direct ways to stop paying for waste you did not create.

How to measure waste in a cafe

Measuring waste sounds simple: throw less away. But to actually reduce it, you need to know what you are throwing away and why. The first step is to categorise waste. Most cafe waste falls into three buckets: spoilage (food that goes bad before you can use it), preparation waste (trimming, peeling, or over-portioning), and plate waste (what customers leave uneaten). Each bucket requires a different fix. Spoilage points to ordering or storage issues. Preparation waste suggests portion sizes or recipe specs need adjusting. Plate waste might mean a dish is not popular or the portion is too large.

Once you have categories, you need a way to record what is thrown out each day. This does not have to be complicated. A simple log on a clipboard or a spreadsheet can work, as long as it is used consistently. The key is to record the item, the reason it was wasted, and the approximate quantity or cost. After a week or two, patterns will emerge. You may notice that a certain vegetable is always thrown out on Thursdays, which might mean you are ordering too much for the weekend rush that never comes. Or that a particular sandwich ingredient spoils quickly, suggesting you should switch to a smaller pack size or a different supplier.

For cafes that want a more systematic approach, a dedicated waste tracking system can help. This is where tools like **Quokka** come in. Quokka is a phone-first cafe management app that combines stock control, recipe costing, sales tracking, supplier invoice checks, waste monitoring and profit analysis. By logging waste directly in the app, you can see not just what was wasted but also the cost of that waste in relation to your sales. This turns waste from a vague concern into a measurable metric that you can act on.

What the numbers tell you

Once you start tracking, the numbers often reveal surprises. A cafe might think it wastes around five percent of its stock, but a month of data can show the real figure is closer to fifteen percent. That difference is significant. It means that for every hundred pounds of stock you buy, fifteen pounds worth ends up in the bin. Finding and fixing the biggest sources can quickly recover a large part of that loss.

The data also helps you see the difference between waste that is unavoidable and waste that is not. Some waste is inherent in running a cafe. Trimmings from vegetables, the last bit of soup left in the pot, or the occasional burnt batch of cookies are hard to eliminate entirely. But over-ordering, poor stock rotation, and incorrect deliveries are avoidable. Tracking helps you separate the two and focus your efforts where they will have the most impact.

Another insight comes from comparing waste to sales. If your waste is high on a day when sales are low, it may indicate that you are ordering to a fixed schedule rather than to actual demand. If waste spikes on a certain day each week, you can adjust your ordering for that day. Over time, you can tune your ordering to match real customer demand, which reduces waste and frees up cash that was tied up in excess stock.

Practical steps to get started

If you are new to waste tracking, start small. Pick one category, such as spoilage, and track it for two weeks. Use a simple method: a notebook near the bin, a shared spreadsheet, or a note on your phone. Record the item, the reason it was wasted, and the approximate cost. At the

end of each week, review the log. Look for patterns. Is the same item appearing over and over? Is the waste happening at a particular time of day or day of the week?



Once you see a pattern, make one change. If a specific ingredient is always going bad, try ordering a smaller quantity or a different brand that lasts longer. If preparation waste is high, check your recipes and portion sizes. Make the change and track for another two weeks to see if it helps. This cycle of measure, change, and measure again is the core of effective waste reduction.

For cafes that want to go further, linking waste tracking to your stock control and sales data gives a more complete picture. This is where an integrated system like **Quokka** can help, because it combines waste monitoring with stock control, recipe costing, sales tracking, and supplier invoice checks in one place. Instead of juggling separate spreadsheets and logs, you can see how waste affects your overall costs and profitability. The data becomes a tool for making better decisions about what to order, how much to prepare, and which menu items are worth keeping.

Trade-offs and judgment

Waste tracking is not about eliminating every gram of discarded food. Some waste is part of running a cafe, and the effort to eliminate it completely could cost more than the waste itself. The goal is to find the biggest, most fixable sources and address them. A small cafe might find that the time spent on detailed tracking is not worth the benefit. In that case, a simpler approach, such as checking invoices against deliveries and doing a weekly stock take, may be enough to catch the main problems.

For larger cafes or those with multiple locations, the economics change. The more stock you handle, the more waste is costing you, and the more a systematic approach pays off. The key is to start somewhere and adjust as you learn what works for your specific operation.

Waste tracking also requires honesty. It can be uncomfortable to see how much you are throwing away, but facing the numbers is the first step to improving them. The cafes that do this well treat waste data as a normal part of running the business, not as a source of blame. They use it to make better decisions, not to point fingers.

What it means for the reader

If you run a cafe, food waste is probably costing you more than you think. The good news is that most of it is avoidable, and the first step is simply to measure it. You do not need a complex system. A notebook and a few minutes a day can reveal where the problems are. Once you know that, you can make small changes that add up to real savings. Over time, tracking waste becomes a habit that keeps your stock costs under control and your operation running more smoothly.

The cafes that manage waste well are not necessarily the ones with the fanciest tools. They are the ones that pay attention to the details: checking delivery notes against invoices, rotating stock properly, and adjusting orders based on actual sales. If you can do those things consistently, you will be ahead of most. And if you want a tool that ties it all together, there are options designed for exactly that purpose.