

KILLING WASTE IN THE KITCHEN

Turning Food Waste into Margin

By Brandon Willey

Food and beverage programs operating inside bowling or entertainment centers don't run like traditional restaurants; that's where food waste can quietly get out of hand. There are no reliable reservation schedules or predictable rushes, just weather shifts, birthday parties, league nights, and group events that can swing demand from "dead" to "wrecked" in half an hour.

David Wallace, from Turfway Entertainment, puts it simply: food waste goes far beyond COGS. It shows up in labor spent setting up and breaking down the kitchen, prep time for product that never sells, and the ongoing demands of hiring, scheduling, inventory, cost controls, and oversight. It also ties up storage with slow-moving inventory, creates spoilage and quality rejects, and kills throughput when the line gets slammed, and staff are fixing inconsistencies instead of cooking to a standard.

The good news is that this chaos is manageable and can be highly profitable when systems are built for reality. If you tighten the system, you don't just throw less away; you generate more profit from the same volume.

Wallace says many teams talk about waste in vague terms, "We toss a lot of produce," or "Wings are killing us," but that kind of information isn't actionable. "To reduce waste," he explains, "you have to define it in a way managers can communicate, and kitchens can control." In entertainment center kitchens, waste typically falls into three categories:

- **Spoilage:** Expired, improperly stored, or over-prepped product that quietly builds up and often isn't discovered until someone cleans out the walk-in.
- **Trim or Production Waste:** Poor yields, recipe variance, sloppy portioning, and avoidable prep errors, such as inconsistent trimming or managers' "freestyling" recipes.
- **Plate Waste:** Over-portioning, unpopular menu items, remakes, comps, and returns—often driven by expectation gaps, unclear menu descriptions, unrealistic photos, or inconsistent execution.

TRACKING SYSTEMS THAT HOLD UP UNDER PRESSURE

The biggest mistake in waste reduction is building a tracking system that only works on slow days. If it falls apart during a Saturday rush, a birthday party wave, or a short-staffed shift, it's not a real system. That's why the smartest approach is to keep it simple with a one-page daily waste log that lives in the kitchen, not buried in a spreadsheet no one opens.

The log should capture only the information needed to make better decisions: the item wasted, how much, why it happened, where it happened, which shift, and a manager's initials. If logging takes more than 20 seconds, it won't happen during real service. Ownership also matters; one person logs the waste, another reviews it, and a third acts on it. When everyone owns it, no one does it.

Competitive Strategies

STANDARD WASTE REASON CODES

- **Over-prep:** Points to par levels and forecasting issues
- **Expired:** Signals purchasing, rotation, or storage breakdowns
- **Quality reject:** Highlights execution or product handling problems
- **Wrong hold temp:** Flags training gaps or equipment issues
- **Returned:** Often tied to expectation mismatches or consistency problems
- **Dropped:** Indicates workflow, speed, or line organization issues
- **Over-portion:** Signals missing controls or unclear standards
- **Event no-show:** Reflects forecasting and communication breakdowns

The final piece is cadence and should mirror how the operation actually runs. Quick daily checks, weekly pattern reviews, and monthly menu and purchasing adjustments to adjust pars and ordering based on what the data is really showing.

CROSS-UTILIZE INGREDIENTS

Food menus tend to grow over time, and before long, the kitchen is full of one-off ingredients that only serve a single item. That's where waste hides. The goal of cross-utilization is to reduce unique SKUs by building flexible menu components, without making the menu feel repetitive. As Wallace notes, "Being deliberate about cross-utilizing products when building your menu allows you to buy in bulk and save real money on the front end."

Start by defining a core set of ingredients that can naturally span shareables, handhelds, salads, kids' items, and party platters. Cross-utilization works best when it feels purposeful, not forced. Think sauces, proteins, cheeses, pickles, slaws, and fried items that belong in multiple places. This improves sell-through, simplifies ordering, and reduces the risk of inventory that moves only when a specific item is ordered.

A practical framework for menu planning:

- **1 protein → 3 applications**
e.g., grilled chicken for salads, wraps, and sliders
- **1 sauce base → 4 variations**
A base aioli that becomes garlic herb, chipotle, lemon pepper, etc.
- **1 prep → 5 placements**
Slaw, pico, or pickled onions used as a topping, side, garnish, platter component, and salad add-on)

STOP OVER-SERVING YOUR MARGIN

Generous portions don't build loyalty, but consistency does. In entertainment environments, portions often vary by cook, shift, and rush, and that variance ends up as waste. As Wallace explains, "When someone heavy-hands cheese, sauces, or protein, you're not just losing margin, you're creating inconsistency that leads to remakes and returns. Tight portion control improves food cost, ticket times, training, and execution."

Portion control only works when you rely on tools that hold up in real operations. That means recipe-specific scoops and ladles, pre-portioned bags or cups for high-volume items, and clear visual standards at the line using photo build cards. Then aim those controls at the items that drive the most loss—high-cost, high-variance products like proteins, cheese, sauces, fries, and wings.

TIP: Verify portion weights daily. Over time, scales get ignored, and portions creep. A little extra here and there adds up fast, and fixing it delivers immediate savings.

MAKE THE PAR SHEET A PROFIT TOOL

Waste often starts the moment someone says, "We always prep X." Wallace warns that this mindset doesn't work in entertainment centers, where demand swings by daypart, league, party, weekend, and seasonal spikes. "Pars shouldn't be tradition," he says. "They should be living forecasts, built around those patterns."

He recommends a two-tier prep strategy: keep true high-velocity items ready to sell when speed matters and hold everything else ready to fire—proteins portioned and marinated, sauces batched, and vegetables prepped so items can be finished quickly without overcommitting.

Pars should be reviewed weekly, taking into account school schedules, promotions, parties, events, and last year's trends. Managing prep at this level requires clear control points: smaller batches made more often, defined hold-time and discard rules, refresh triggers that signal when to cook again, and last-call prep limits that prevent end-of-night over-prep. When pars reflect reality, kitchens stop cooking out of habit and start cooking to demand.

THE PROFITABLE PRODUCT MINDSET

Wallace stresses that weekly inventory reviews are the foundation of controlling food costs. He recommends tracking a simple formula each week:

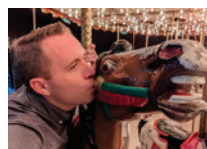
Beginning Inventory + Purchases – Ending Inventory = Product Used

When compared against sales, this snapshot shows where food dollars are really going and quickly exposes shrinkage or process breakdowns. Used consistently, this approach turns waste reduction into a margin-expansion strategy rather than a one-time cleanup.

"Better forecasting leads to smarter prep. Smarter prep reduces spoilage and remakes. Tighter portioning improves consistency and speed. Cross-utilized menus simplify inventory and improve sell-through. Purchasing gets cleaner. Storage gets lighter." And suddenly, more of what you buy becomes what you sell.

The best operators don't treat waste as an occasional cleanup project. They treat it like any other KPI: track it, review it, adjust the system, and repeat.

It's time to dig in.



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