
ZERO WASTE GUIDE

FOR FOODSERVICE ESTABLISHMENTS
IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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City of
Philadelphia



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INTRODUCTION

Foodservice establishments generate a significant amount of wasted food and packaging. Between 4 and 10% of food purchased by foodservice operations in the U.S. is thrown out before reaching the plate. By reducing the amount of food and packaging discarded, foodservice establishments can significantly reduce the volume of their waste stream and save money (EPA, pg. 1). Packaging also makes up a majority of the litter that ends up in waterways, harming fish, birds, and other aquatic wildlife that ingest plastic bags and other debris from packaging (EPA, pg. 3).

The City of Philadelphia aims to become a "Zero Waste" city, wherein the city diverts at least 90% of its waste away from the landfill and commercial incinerators. Much of the waste currently produced in the city stems from eating and drinking, like single-use hot beverage cups from coffee shops and Styrofoam takeout containers from food trucks. Best practices for reduction and reuse in the foodservice industry are a critical component of Philadelphia becoming a zero waste city. **This guide aims to educate both employees in and customers of the foodservice industry on how to implement zero waste practices while still complying with local and national health and safety regulations.**



WHAT DOES THE FDA FOOD CODE SAY?

Reusable Food Containers

Empty containers returned to a food establishment for cleaning and refilling with food shall be cleaned and refilled in a regulated food processing plant, except:



A take-home food container returned to a food establishment may be refilled at a food establishment with food if the food container is:

1. Designed and constructed for reuse and in accordance with the requirements specified under Part 4-1 (Materials for Construction and Repair) and Part 4-2 (Design and Construction) of the FDA Food Code;
2. One that was initially provided by the food establishment to the consumer, either empty or filled with food by the food establishment, for the purpose of being returned for reuse;
3. Returned to the food establishment by the consumer after use;
4. Subject to the following steps before being refilled with food:
 - a. Cleaned as specified under Part 4-6 (Cleaning of Equipment and Utensils) of the FDA Food Code
 - b. Sanitized as specified under Part 4-7 (Sanitization of Equipment and Utensils) of the FDA Food Code; and
 - c. Visually inspected by a food employee to verify that the container, as returned, meets the requirements specified under Part 4-1 (Materials for Construction and Repair) and Part 4-2 (Design and Construction) of the FDA Food Code.



Want to learn more about reusable containers? Find guidance for choosing a compliant container, proper sanitization and storage in the Appendix.

WHAT DOES THE FDA FOOD CODE SAY?

Reusable Drink Containers

Empty containers returned to a food establishment for cleaning and refilling with food shall be cleaned and refilled in a regulated food processing plant, except:



A take-home food container returned to a food establishment may be refilled with beverage if:

1. The beverage is not a time/temperature control for safety food;
2. The design of the container and of the rinsing equipment and the nature of the beverage, when considered together, allow effective cleaning at home or in the food establishment;
3. Facilities for rinsing before refilling returned containers with fresh, hot water that is under pressure and not recirculated are provided as part of the dispensing system;
4. The consumer-owned container returned to the food establishment for refilling is refilled for sale or service only to the same consumer; and
5. The container is refilled by:
 - a. An employee of the food establishment, or
 - b. The owner of the container of the beverage system includes a contamination-free transfer process as specified under Section 4-204.13(A), (B), and (D).

Consumer-owned, personal beverage containers, such as thermally insulated bottles, non-spill cups, and promotional glasses, may be refilled by employees or the consumer if refilling is contamination-free as specified under Section 4-204.13(A), (B), and (D).

WHAT DOES THE PHILADELPHIA FOOD CODE SAY?

All existing foodservice establishments in Philadelphia may offer reusable containers effective July 2021.

Inspections will occur at the next regularly scheduled annual Department of Health Food Establishment Inspection. All new businesses will be required to check off that they are using reusable containers on their Food Establishment Plan Review and will be inspected during the first inspection. All food establishments will be expected to follow the FDA guidelines for container types, sanitizing, and storage. **Full guidelines are available & linked in the Appendix.**

Local Case Study: Parks on Tap

Since 2019, the City of Philadelphia's Parks on Tap program has offered reusable plastic and silicone pint cups. Guests who reuse the cups receive \$1 off their drink each refill. The team at Philadelphia Parks and Recreation came to PDPH with the idea and worked with PDPH staff to address all stages of the refill process to ensure safety and sanitation.

Local Case Study: Tiffin Indian Cuisine

In 2021, after a long search for a more sustainable to-go container, Tiffin launched the *Return 2 Tiffin* program. The restaurant gives its customers the option to select durable, reusable plastic containers with each to-go order, and uses an electronic tagging system to keep track of the containers. With most customers returning their boxes on time, Tiffin has not often needed to charge customers for using their returnable containers.

REUSABLE WARES

Oftentimes, foodservice establishments assume that customers want their food to-go or default to packaging food to-go. Be sure to train your staff to ask the question "for here or to-go?" with each order placed.

For Here

For customers who are eating in, reduce the amount of single-use disposable waste produced by serving them in reusable wares, including:

- Ceramic mugs and glass drinkware
- Reusable dishes and bowls
- Metal silverware and straws

Not only does providing reusable wares reduce the amount of waste your establishment produces, but they also give your establishment a more upscale feel that customers will notice and appreciate.

To-Go

Guests who bring reusable containers for to-go orders or for packing their leftovers can save you money on disposables and waste. If a staff member is filling a reusable container, they should either place a physical barrier down or sanitize the surface after filling.

DID YOU KNOW?

Customers cannot transfer food directly to their reusable plate/container from shared food sources like buffets. This must be done by a trained staff member. Make sure the kitchen utensils you use to make the transfer do not touch the customer's container.

MINIMIZING SINGLE- USE DISPOSABLES

Reduction and Reuse

- Use a reusable lid on food storage containers on your food prep line instead of disposable plastic wrap (ex. invest in stainless steel food containers with lids for storing and preparing food)
- Use health department-approved refillable condiment dispensers instead of individual packets
- Implement a reusable to-go container program that allows customers to take and bring back durable containers to be sanitized and reused
- Don't automatically put to-go food in a bag or give customers single-use items like coffee sleeves or straws; rather, have these items available upon request
- Use a sneeze guard display case for customers to see baked goods while protecting the food instead of baked goods individually wrapped in disposable plastic wrap

Single-Use Disposable Alternatives

- In general, paper wares are preferable to plastics and "compostable bioplastic" wares. Packaging materials labeled "compostable" or "biodegradable" must go in the landfill stream unless your compost hauler allows otherwise; they cannot be disposed of in single stream recycling
- Use butcher, waxed, and parchment paper when possible in place of plastic wrap

DID YOU KNOW?

One \$5 reusable container can be used over 1,000 times, while a business might spend hundreds of dollars on 1000 single-use plastic containers. Many of these single-use containers will display the universal recycling symbol, but this doesn't mean they can be recycled everywhere. In 2020, the U.S. produced 14.5 million tons of plastic packaging, and only 14% was actually recycled! (EPA)

LEFTOVER FOOD AND ORGANIC WASTE

In Philadelphia, nearly 17% of trash sent to the landfill is wasted food. To encourage recycling and composting, Ordinance 10-722 was amended to state that grindable food waste (such as produce scraps, small bones, and leftovers) **cannot** be disposed of in refuse/waste dumpsters. Here are some steps you can take to comply with the ordinance and reduce wasted food:

- **Reduce** wasted food before it's created. You can do this by measuring wasted food, rethinking your purchasing practices, reducing consumption, and repurposing extra food.
- **Donate** leftover food to local organizations. A variety of foods are eligible for donation, including those that are not readily marketable. Work with a local food rescue organization to learn what they accept.
- **Compost** food scraps and opened food that cannot be donated. Composting turns organic waste into rich fertilizer.
- When there are no other options for reducing or diverting food waste from the landfill, grindable food waste must be disposed of **using an in-sink garbage disposal**.



Want to learn more about sustainable food waste management? Find the Food Waste Management Guide for Commercial Properties in the Appendix.



RESOURCES

Resources: Regulatory (click to follow link)

City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health Regulations Governing Food Establishments

FDA Food Code 2017

Resources: Tools & Guidance (click to follow link)

Philadelphia Disposal, Recycling, and Donation Finder

Food Waste Management Guide for Commercial Properties

Reusable To-Go Container Program Guidance by Circular Philadelphia and ECHO Systems

City of Philadelphia Zero Waste Initiatives Page

Sources

“Reducing Wasted Food & Packaging: A Guide for Food Services and Restaurants.” United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 2015, www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-08/documents/

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