Starting a food-waste log in a small café

Use a consistent food-waste log to identify a practical change the café can make and check whether it helps.

Practical staff guidance; adapt the suggested workflow to your venue and current procedures.

Choose a manageable starting point

Begin with one part of the operation, such as unsold display food or preparation waste. Define what will be counted and use the same units each time. Keep the process separate from food preparation and follow the site's hygiene arrangements. WRAP provides measurement resources for hospitality businesses; a small consistent dataset can support a focused first discussion.

Record the reason as well as the amount

Record the item, quantity and reason. Distinguish overproduction, spoilage, preparation waste and returned food where those categories suit the operation. Use observations the team can explain. An unlabelled total gives little help when deciding whether to change ordering, batch size, preparation or service information.

Compare like with like

Look at waste alongside an appropriate activity measure, such as covers or items prepared. A busier Saturday may generate more waste in total while wasting less per cover. Choose the measure that fits the task and keep its definition consistent. When adding a cost estimate, use known purchase costs and label the result as an estimate.

Try one practical change

Select a change within normal food-safety controls, give it an owner and review the same measures afterwards. For example, adjust the size of the final preparation batch while monitoring demand and waste. Keep the operational context in the record. The aim is a useful decision grounded in the café's own figures.

Worked example

Illustrative figures: 6 kg of waste across 120 covers equals 0.05 kg per cover. A later comparable service records 4 kg across 100 covers, or 0.04 kg per cover. The team would still check menu, weather and service differences before attributing the change to one action.

Your next steps

- Choose the waste stream and unit.
- Record amount and reason consistently.
- Add a relevant activity measure.
- Choose one action and owner.
- Compare a similar later service.

Use a consistent measurement method

Choose the types of waste you will record and keep the categories stable long enough to compare services. Distinguish preparation waste, spoilage and plate returns if those categories support useful decisions. Record the amount and the relevant activity measure, such as meals served. State the measurement method and avoid comparing unlike services without explanation. Staff should understand that safe disposal and food safety remain part of the process.

Turn a pattern into a small action

Fictional example: repeated plate returns suggest one garnish is rarely eaten. The manager checks the observation across comparable services and tests a portion or menu change while maintaining the required information and preparation controls. Record the change, period and results. A lower total may simply reflect fewer customers, so compare a suitable rate as well. Treat the numbers as local evidence and avoid claiming a guaranteed saving from one example.

Can waste reduction justify keeping food longer?

Food-safety controls and date instructions still apply. Waste improvement should come from planning, purchasing, preparation and service decisions that preserve safety.

Food waste exercise: what changed when the buffet got smaller trays?

A café changes buffet tray size and waste weight falls. The manager wants to repeat the change across every service. What would make the comparison useful?

Compare your decision

Compare similar services, noting covers, menu, production quantities and where waste arose. Separate preparation waste from unserved portions and plate returns. Keep food-safety and holding procedures in place while testing a change.

Calculate waste per cover for each service and note any stockouts. A lighter bin after a quieter lunch alone cannot tell the manager which change worked.

Sources and editorial basis

- WRAP — Measuring and reporting food waste in hospitality

Guidance checked on 19 October 2026. Examples and worksheets are original suggested workflows; adapt them to your operation.

Use this on shift

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