

Unit 2: The Beauty of Ugly Food

Ron Clark: They could be a little sunburnt, they could be a little too big, a little too small. There's just a lot of produce that, uh, doesn't make it to market.

Narrator: There's nothing wrong with this produce except that it's ugly.

Jordan Figueiredo: Most produce standards are grocery chosen. So they think that their customers want to see produce that looks like a perfect size, a perfect shape. Approximately 26 percent of produce in the US gets rejected based on these specifications. The cosmetic standards don't affect taste or nutrition at all.

Narrator: And those cosmetic standards are pretty strict. California pears, for instance, are sorted in massive packing sheds. Each pear is examined for looks, size, and shape. The perfect looking pears are boxed and shipped to retailers. A pear with nicks and bruises will be sent to canneries and juicers. But then there is the fruit that breaks the rules: Too big, too small, or just goofy looking. Those pears are tossed right in the trash.

Chuck Baker: When I see pears that I've grown, it makes me sad that they're going to throw it away. Nothing real wrong with it. I think it's got a mark on it from rubbing the bark. The mountains of fruit that we waste is amazing.

Narrator: Every year, farmers throw away 6 billion pounds of ugly or misshapen produce simply because grocery stores won't buy it. But one businessman thinks consumers would actually buy ugly food, if they had the choice.

Ron Clark: It's up to us to put pressure on the retailers and use all of the food that farmers grow for us. We're trying to introduce this whole new concept to American consumers.

Narrator: Ron Clark co-founded a start-up called Imperfect that sells slightly flawed produce at a steep discount. The company buys produce that would otherwise be tossed from farms.

Ron Clark: I spend many, many years walking orchards like this and identifying sort of the sweet spot in the distribution system where it's just a little below market grade but way above processor grade.

Narrator: Since July, the company has rescued 11 thousand pounds of California pears.

Ron Clark: You wouldn't believe the number of growers that are calling us right now because there's such a pent up demand out there. As far as scalability, this could just blow up. We're in a great California chain called Realies, and we're doing a pilot program with them and ten other stores. They've agreed to be the first major grocery chain in America to feature this kind of produce. If American consumers embrace this, then other chains start to pick it up. I think the floodgates are going to open.