

Module 11, Lesson 5 Handout:

Ugly Produce

First, let's agree that *ugly produce* is the worst name. We're talking about twisted carrots, misshapen peppers that look like a funny face, and tomatoes photographed to look angry. Just because produce isn't picture perfect doesn't mean it's ugly - and certainly not unhealthy!

It can be tough to convince clients that there's nothing wrong with ugly produce. We're actually hardwired to prefer the brightest red, roundest apples and tomatoes, and the most symmetrical, evenly green squash. There is old research where toddlers were put in a room and given several apples to choose from. They all reliably chose the most symmetrical and richly colored fruits. The researchers hypothesize that the preference is because more richly colored, symmetrical fruits are more likely in nature to be rich in nutrients, calories, and properties linked to survival. We mistakenly perceive that damaged and misshapen foods are less likely to be ripe or as nutrient dense.

While we may have a biological preference towards beautiful foods, the lopsided pear and the indentation on the radish do not mean they aren't nutritious. As a matter of fact, when studied, they're just as full of nutrients and antioxidants as their more aesthetically pleasing counterparts.

According to the USDA, about 30 to 40 percent of our food supply ends up wasted. Globally, it's estimated that nearly half of fruits and vegetables go to waste. Food waste is a multifaceted issue caused by numerous factors in the supply chain and society, and one of those factors is our expectation for what fruits and vegetables are "supposed to" look like. We're leaving lots of perfectly good produce on the farms and putting them into landfills, often because maybe the cauliflower is a little more orange than white, the onions are a little smaller this season or there are other imperfections that cause the markets to reject them based solely on aesthetic criteria. Hence the name ugly. Big sigh.

People are realizing this isn't right. It's wasting perfectly good food and there is something we can do to be a part of the solution.

- First, make it a point to buy the funny looking fruits and vegetables at the markets you visit. Leave the perfect looking ones for other shoppers and feel good doing your part. I mean, you're chopping, slicing or biting into it anyway, what's the big deal?

- Participate in the ugly food movement. There are home delivery services where unconventionally shaped, perfectly good produce is shipped to your door, often for significantly less than grocery store prices. You get what is harvested in season in a pre-fabricated box and some of the sources allow you to make some selection. The movement is looking to decrease food waste and rescue food that would otherwise end up in landfills. Most are organic and while the packaging and shipping are not good for the environment, these subscriptions do ensure that you are eating tons of fruits and vegetables and practicing what you're preaching.
- Talk to your clients about this issue and encourage them to choose imperfect produce. Sometimes awareness sets off a landslide of behavior change.