

# Finding homes for food that's not perfect, but too good to toss

Startups aim to tackle the challenge of using food that would otherwise be wasted.

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 27, 2021, 4:36 p.m.



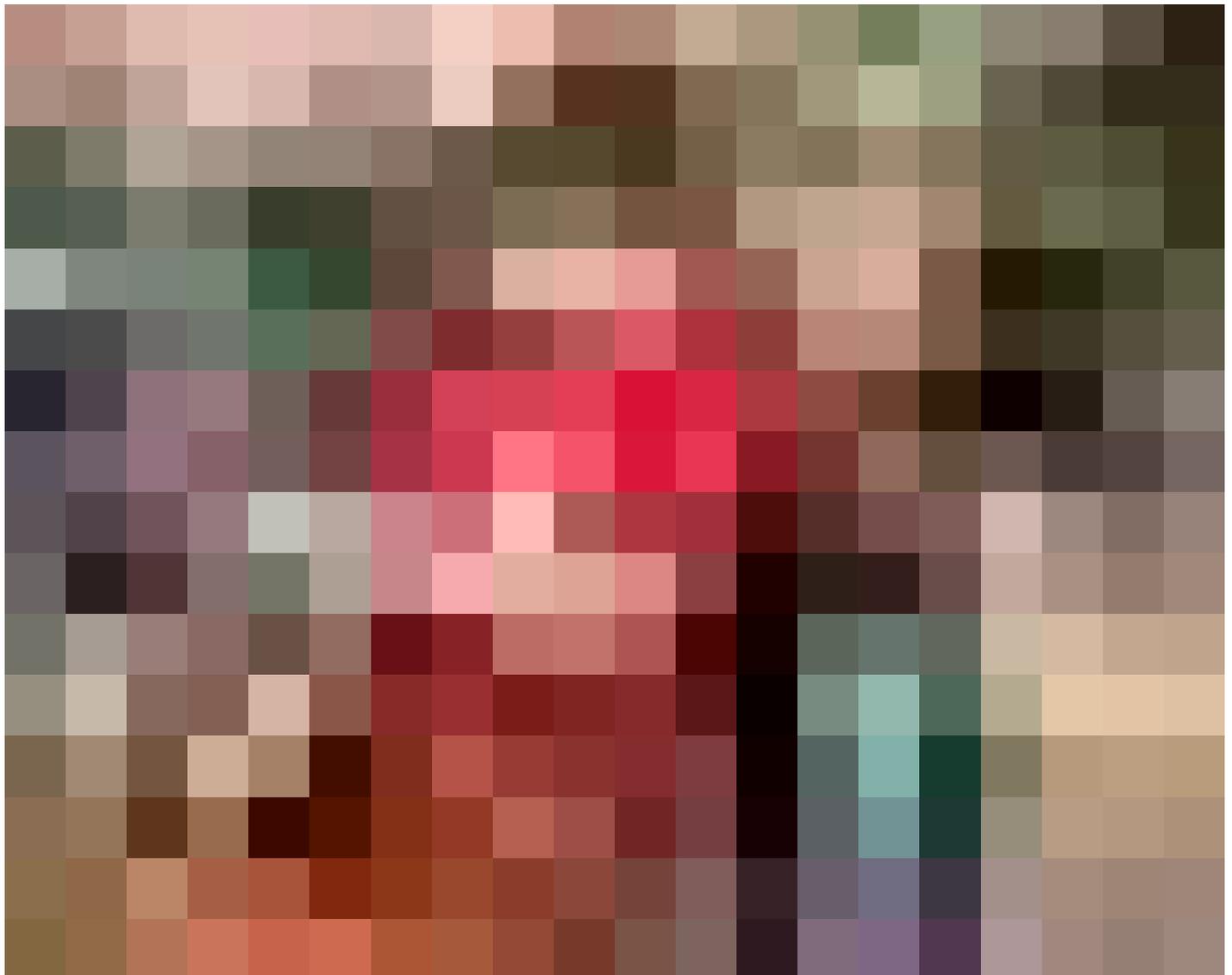
A bruised apple from Red Apple Farm which they sell on the app Too Good To Go at a discounted price. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

At Red Apple Farm's stand inside the Boston Public Market, hungry passersby can pick up a "surprise bag" of misshapen doughnuts, minidoughnuts, bruised apples, or just leftover food for about one-third of retail cost.

The Phillipston farm sells about 100 bags a month this way, said owner Al Rose, food that would normally have gone to the landfill. He does it through the app Too Good To Go, which sells surplus food from restaurants and other suppliers directly to customers at a fraction of its normal price.

It's a partnership that helps food sellers like Rose manage their extra inventory, which has proven "extremely challenging" amid the fits and starts of postlockdown life. It's also a good way to move food that's too close to its expiration date to appeal to food pantries, where it might sit. Through the app, food reaches a local resident almost immediately.

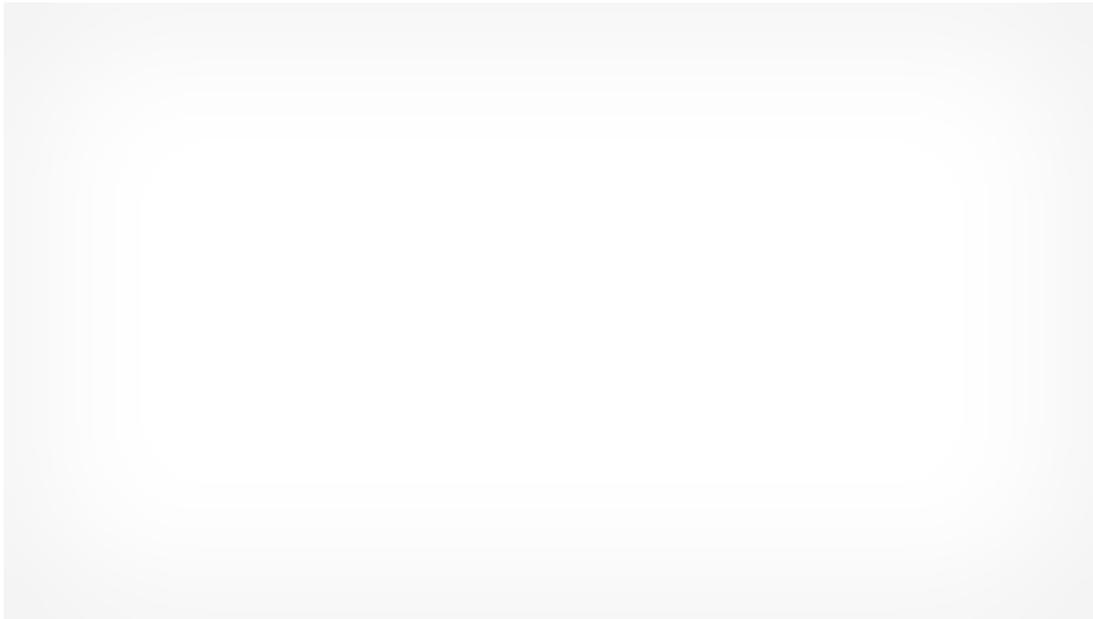
"The functionality and just the consumer accessibility and acceptance of it just made it a win-win for us to incorporate it into our efforts to reduce food waste," Rose said.



Graham Owens, an employee at Red Annle Farm's, loads a bag of imperfect apples. MATTHEW I | FF/GI ORF STAFF

And it's something that's becoming more common all the time, as pandemic-induced job losses have pushed more households into food insecurity and a worsening climate crisis generates demand for sustainability. Several rapidly growing companies are stepping in to help.

ADVERTISING



## **An app for discounted meals**

One is Too Good To Go, a six-year-old startup that redirects food when restaurants prepare more than they need — as they often do to avoid being sold out. Food pantries will take fresh or shelf-stable food, but many turn away cooked food because of complex rules around temperature and safety that often discourage restaurants from donating excess product.

“That’s really where Too Good To Go comes in,” said Lucie Basch, its cofounder and chief expansion officer. “We complement them and take all the food that food banks can’t really utilize because it’s dairy products or because they don’t have fridges to keep them.”

Boston’s Nectar and Green, which sells organic, cold-pressed almond milk, teamed up

with Too Good a few months ago.

Owner Laurel McConville said she has been reusing, recycling, and composting surplus byproducts for years. But that can get pricey, she said, and while McConville donates extra product to food pantries and community fridges, selling to customers on the app helps her make some money back.

It also helps Nectar and Green reach new customers.



Laurel McConville, founder and CEO of Nectar and Green, packs fresh-pressed almond milk and almond pulp into surprise bags to sell on the app Too Good To Go. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

“I really love the element of surprise,” McConville said. “We try to change up what we’re offering in the surprise bag every week. It’s just fun to give people a treat that they enjoy getting.”

## An app for community sharing

Six years ago, Tessa Clarke was packing up her home in Switzerland when the movers told her to toss all her uneaten food. Having grown up on a farm in England, Clarke knew firsthand the work that goes into producing food and developed a “pathological hatred” for wasting it.

So she bundled up her toddler and newborn infant and set out onto the streets to find someone to give her leftover food. She failed that day, but at least smuggled her nonperishable food into packing boxes when the movers weren't looking. And she had an idea.

“I knew there was an app for everything,” she said. “I just couldn't believe there wasn't a simple app where I could advertise this food to my neighbors and whoever wanted it could request it.”

So she created one, along with business partner Saasha Celestial-One. That now-six-year-old app, dubbed OLIO — the name defined as a miscellaneous collection of things — serves 4.3 million users globally and has shared 25 million portions of food plus 3 million nonfood items.

Users can list anything they no longer need for others to pick up, including home-cooked, home-grown, and opened food as long as they haven't surpassed their “use by” date. For a monthly or yearly subscription fee, they can access additional features within the app.

“Often, especially with food, a lot of people think, ‘Well, would anyone really want my head of broccoli or my two tins of soup or my three limes?’” Clarke said. “And we just have to say to people, ‘Yes. Just take the 10 seconds to add it to the app because there is almost certainly someone living near you who would love to pop around and pick it up.’”

COVID-19 posed a challenge; running such a business during the pandemic was “extremely nerve-racking” for Clarke and her team.

“It was pretty unclear whether a neighbor-to-neighbor food-sharing app could continue to exist,” she said. “But there was just absolute consensus that we had a responsibility to

keep operating.”

OLIO pivoted to no-contact pickups, and in one year grew fivefold — seeing an explosion of neighborly sharing worldwide as the pandemic dragged on. To date, the UK-based app has about 200,000 users in the United States, including in the Boston area, with a cohort of ambassadors to spread the word.

## **A delivery service for “ugly,” unsellable foods**

Then there's food that just kind of looks funny. Delivery service Imperfect Foods has made a whole business out of that, saving foods considered unsellable, often because of physical deformities that don't impact taste or nutritional value.

“We find product that's too big, too small, too large, has a little blemish, maybe had some weather damage, like a sun-kissed cauliflower or a little yellowing on the kale or some spots on an apple,” said Maddy Rotman, the company's head of sustainability. “And we make sure that food has a home.”

Launched originally as Imperfect Produce in 2015 for Northern California only, the company now operates in more than 40 states and serves more than 300,000 customers. And it has expanded beyond fruits and vegetables to other treats like Rotman's favorite midnight snack: Chocolate-covered pretzel bits sourced from the broken-off chunks at the bottom of the pack line in a pretzel processing plant.

The American food industry places antiquated expectations on groceries, Rotman said. Produce must meet such a meticulous beauty standard to be placed on a grocery display that fruits with even minor imperfections get tossed aside.

Customers often expect their Imperfect Foods box to be full of “super wonky” produce, such as eggplants protruding with nodes or apples the size of a thumb. Instead, what they see is more likely to be an apple the size of one's palm rather than the size of a softball.

“There’s a disconnect between the perfection that we are providing America in grocery stores and what consumers are actually willing to consume,” Rotman said. “So if we can just share the message that these are all delicious, nutritious, and incredible, and build a marketplace, we’ve seen that customers are excited and willing to relearn flavor.”

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