

PROJECT TAKEOUT

Should your takeout packaging go in the recycling bin, compost pile, or trash can? Here are some tips

If you've brought your restaurant routine home during the pandemic, you may be wondering what to do with all of those disposables. We were wondering, too, so we checked with the experts.

By **Jenna Pelletier** Globe correspondent, Updated March 2, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



There has been an uptick in domestic trash during the pandemic, and takeout packaging is a big part of that. How much can be recycled? VITALII MATOKHA/VITALIYMATEHA - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Sushi trays, cocktail cups, clamshell containers. If you've brought your restaurant routine home during the pandemic, you may be wondering what to do with all of those

disposables.

“We have seen an uptick in residential waste in general, and we have definitely seen an increase in the volume of takeout materials coming through our streams lately,” said Jeremy Walters, sustainability ambassador for Republic Services, a national recycling and waste disposal company that operates in many towns and cities in New England.

So, should the packaging from your next takeout or delivery meal go in the recycling bin, compost pile, or trash can? Here are some tips.

How do I figure out what’s recyclable and what’s not?

First, keep in mind that the acceptance of materials can vary from state to state and city. In general, paper, cardboard, and many types of plastic containers are collected by curbside recycling programs throughout the country.

As for takeout trash in particular, “unfortunately, not much of it is recyclable,” Walters said.

Disposable food containers are made from a wide range of materials. Commonly used for takeout, expanded polystyrene (also known as Styrofoam), black plastic, and coated paper containers are typically not accepted by single-stream recycling facilities.

If the container is aluminum, it’s easily recyclable and therefore gets a green light for the bin. Just make sure it is empty, clean and dry. For a clear plastic container, look for a “chasing arrows symbol” and a number indicating which type of plastic it is. Then check if your residential recycling program takes it — if it’s No. 1 or No. 2 it’s typically good to go. No. 5 plastic containers are also often accepted.

Search for other types of containers in the “Recyclopedia” on the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection’s Recycle Smart Website (recyclesmartma.org).

If the town or city the restaurant is located in has not banned them, your takeout food may have arrived in a plastic bag or two. They are generally not accepted in curbside recycling programs because bags have the tendency to wrap and tangle around sorting equipment. Your best bet is to bring it to a plastic film drop-off location. Go to plasticfilmrecycling.org, a website maintained by the American Chemistry Council, to search for a location.

Plastic straws and utensils are also a no-go for residential recycling programs. “They are too small to get sorted by our facilities and sometimes they’re made of a low-grade mixed plastic that is not widely accepted around the US,” Walters said.

It may look similar to polyethylene, the material used for plastic bags, but the clear plastic wrapper commonly used to hold plastic takeout utensils is not accepted in store drop-off bins for recycling, said American Chemistry Council spokeswoman Sarah Lindsay.

Pizza box recycling is a “hot topic,” Walters said. Anything splotted with grease and food, including boxes and paper napkins, cannot be recycled. But if the top part of the pizza box is clean, you can rip it off and toss it into your recycling bin.

Sorting things properly matters. “Never throw something in the recycling bin if you’re unsure because that material can potentially do more harm than good,” Walters said. “It can jam the machinery and it can actually ruin the recyclables.”



There has been an uptick in domestic trash during the pandemic, and takeout packaging is a big part of that. How much can be recycled? [STOCK.ADOBE.COM/PIXEL-SHOT](https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/stock-photo/food-takeout-containers-on-wooden-table/131888888) - [STOCK.ADOBE.COM](https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/stock-photo/food-takeout-containers-on-wooden-table/131888888)

What about compostables?

The use of compostable takeout containers on the rise. They can be a good option, but only if they end up in the right place after they're used, said Michael Oshman, founder and CEO of the Green Restaurant Association, a national nonprofit based in Boston.

If the item is made out of plant-based polymer, often referred to as "bioplastic," it typically needs to be processed in a commercial composting facility. The containers will not break down in a backyard or small-scale composting operation.

"We allow bioplastics into the buckets, however no composter prefers this type of material," said Adam Jankauskas, owner of City Composting, which operates throughout New England.

However, fiber-based containers, bamboo utensils, paper plates and boxes that do not

have a glossy coating, and paper napkins are easily compostable in noncommercial settings, he added.

If a label on a container says it's compostable, avoid putting it in the trash, as landfills also do not have ideal conditions to break it down. "It's just going to sit there," Oshman said.

My favorite restaurant's takeout packaging isn't eco-friendly. What should I do?

There are a few different ways you could go about approaching this with a restaurant owner or manager, Oshman said.

One option: after you've paid for your food, politely share your preference for patronizing restaurants that use sustainable practices. "Just very nicely say, 'We'd love to continue giving you our business, but we're trying to support restaurants that are doing the right thing,'" Oshman said.

You could also decide to eat elsewhere. "You walk into a place with Styrofoam, and the biggest message you can say is, 'I don't feel comfortable about coming back to the office with this packaging — here's my number and please contact me when you're starting to use better stuff because I'd love to come back here again,'" he said.

The easiest way to reduce your impact while ordering takeout is to ask the restaurant to leave out any optional disposables such as plastic utensils, straws and ketchup packets. "Believe it or not, restaurants can save thousands of dollars by doing that, so it's a win-win," Oshman said.

You could also mention your preference for reusable takeout containers, which are the best option if they are available, Oshman said. He envisions scalable, community-wide reusable container programs becoming common in the future.



Some small-scale operations have already popped up. The fast-casual restaurant Grainmaker, for instance, offers its customers the option to purchase meals in glassware containers. If you bring the container back, you get your next bowl in a clean, sanitized container someone else had dropped off previously. The program replaces 3,650 disposable containers a year at the restaurant's Boston and Somerville locations, said Grainmaker owner Chris Freeman.

Another model: OZZI, based in North Kingstown, R.I., supplies universities, hospitals, and military bases with durable reusable containers and a patented system for collecting and preparing them for sanitation after every use.

Is the trash the only option for my nonrecyclable and noncompostable items?

If you can reuse the item safely, that's probably your best option. Black plastic containers, in particular, are usually sturdy enough to reuse.

And if you're willing to pay to be green, you can buy one of TerraCycle's [Zero Waste Boxes](#) (prices range from about \$80 to \$240) and ship it back to the company filled with Styrofoam or straws.

If you're interested in learning more, check out some of these resources:

recyclesmartma.org, www.mass.gov/info-details/how-where-to-recycle,
www.plasticfilmrecycling.org, how2recycle.info/check-locally,
recyclingpartnership.org, dinegreen.com, recyclingsimplified.com,

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