Tartu Foodsharing: Turning Surplus Food into Community Action

City of Tartu, Estonia
Tartu County Tourism Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story

In Tartu, Estonia's second-largest city, founder Kerly Ilves discovered after returning from Germany that perfectly edible food was routinely thrown out behind local shops — not because it had lost value, but because no simple system existed to connect surplus food with people who could use it. Starting with one public foodsharing cupboard at a community bar called Barlova in 2019, the entirely volunteer-run, unfunded Tartu Foodsharing movement grew to five active points across the city (Barlova, Aparaaditehas, Turuhoone, Nõlvaku and Veeriku), with around 40 volunteers collecting food, maintaining cupboards and organising roughly 10 weekly public distribution events, supported by partnerships with COOP stores, the Estonian Food Bank, cafés and local producers. The movement has rescued at least 9,000 kilograms of food, deliberately framing itself as an educational and political movement rather than a charity, and has since inspired similar initiatives in Elva and Viljandi connected through a shared national platform. The lesson: community trust can substitute for formal structure and funding — but running a volunteer movement is fundamentally social work requiring patience to coordinate people with very different motivations and expectations.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Tartu is Estonia’s second-largest city and a historic university town, known for its active civil society, strong neighbourhood identity and compact, walkable urban space. Daily life here

unfolds through markets, cafés, cultural venues, student communities and residential districts where people often know and trust local initiatives.

This makes Tartu a natural setting for a grassroots foodsharing movement. The city is small enough for volunteers, businesses and residents to connect directly, yet large enough for food waste to be a real urban challenge. Shops, cafés, producers, schools, kindergartens and households all generate edible surplus food, while many residents are increasingly aware of sustainability, responsible consumption and community-based solutions.

The Tartu Foodsharing story belongs here because it grows out of this local reality: practical, trust-based and citizen-led. Public foodsharing cupboards placed in familiar urban locations turn the issue of food waste from something hidden into something visible, shared and solvable.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

The need for change became clear when Tartu Foodsharing's founder, Kerly Ilves, realised that edible food was being wasted in large quantities in Estonia. After living in Germany, where the foodsharing movement had already grown into a broad volunteer network, she returned with the impression that food waste might not be such a serious issue in Estonia. But when she looked into the bins behind local food shops in Tartu, she saw the opposite: clean, safe and perfectly edible food was being thrown away.

This was the moment of realisation. The problem was not that the food had lost its value, but that there was no simple system connecting surplus food with people who could use it. Shops, cafés and producers were discarding food because it had been written off, while the resources behind it - water, land, energy, transport, labour and packaging - were wasted as well.

What was at stake was both environmental and social. Food waste meant unnecessary pressure on nature and climate, but it also revealed a gap in the local community: edible food existed, people were willing to take it, yet there was no trusted public space where the two could meet. The conflict was between a culture of abundance, where waste often remains hidden, and a growing awareness that this practice is no longer acceptable.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The vision was to create a simple, public and trust-based system where edible surplus food could be shared instead of wasted. The idea was brought to Tartu by Kerly Ilves, who had lived in Germany and seen how the foodsharing.de movement, started in 2012, had grown into a large volunteer-run network.

After discovering that perfectly good food was also being thrown away in Tartu, Kerly first began rescuing food directly from bins behind shops. The food was clean, safe and quickly found

people who wanted it. This showed that the problem was not a lack of need or interest, but the absence of a practical place where surplus food could be passed on.

The first step was therefore to create open foodsharing cupboards in public community spaces. People, cafés, shops and producers could leave edible surplus food there, and anyone could take what they needed, free of charge and without bureaucracy. The first cupboard in Barlova was built with this idea: to make rescued food accessible to others.

From the beginning, the aim was not only to save food, but to change attitudes. Tartu Foodsharing did not define itself as a charity, but as an educational and political movement that challenges everyday food waste and encourages more responsible consumption.

The Journey: How change happened

Tartu Foodsharing grew gradually, without a budget and almost entirely through volunteer action. After the first food was rescued from shop bins, it became clear that there needed to be a visible and accessible place where surplus food could be shared. The first foodsharing cupboard was created at Barlova, a local community-minded bar, and soon other urban locations followed, including Genialistide Club, Aparaaditehas, Turuhoone, Nõlvaku and Veeriku.

The model was deliberately simple: anyone could bring edible surplus food, and anyone could take what they needed. Volunteers cleaned and maintained the cupboards, collected food from partners, shared information on social media, contacted new businesses and organised public food distributions. Today, around 40 active volunteers support the movement in different roles.

Partnerships helped the initiative grow. Cooperation with COOP stores, the Estonian Food Bank, cafés such as Caffeine, local producers, kindergartens and one school made it possible to rescue larger amounts of food before it was thrown away. The food shared has included bread and pastries, fruit and vegetables, dairy products and prepared meals such as potatoes, rice and buckwheat.

The journey also brought obstacles. Because the movement has no formal organisation, no regular funding and generally does not accept money, everything depends on trust, motivation and practical goodwill. Even finding physical locations for the cupboards was sometimes difficult. When the Annelinn foodsharing cupboard had to be moved, finding a new place proved challenging, and the team eventually asked Tartu City Government for help.

There were also human lessons. Managing a volunteer movement turned out to be a kind of social work: people joined for different reasons, with different expectations, abilities and motivations. The organisers had to learn how to coordinate people carefully, avoid conflict and keep the atmosphere respectful.

At the same time, the community response showed that the system worked. Food placed in the cupboards often disappeared quickly, proving that people trusted and used them. In one memorable moment, during a TV interview at the Aparaaditehas cupboard, Kerly Ilves opened the fridge expecting it to be empty, as it often was, but instead found dozens of bags of cardamom dough waiting to be shared. It became a small but powerful sign that the cupboards had become part of the city's everyday life.

Over time, attitudes also began to shift. Businesses that once replied, "we do not waste anything," started explaining in more detail how they calculate, use and reduce surplus. What began as a practical act of rescuing food became a wider community process: making waste visible, building trust and showing that ordinary residents can change the way a city treats food.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The breakthrough was that foodsharing became a visible and trusted part of everyday life in Tartu. What started with one cupboard has grown into a network of five active foodsharing points across the city: Barlova, Aparaaditehas, Turuhoone, Nõlvaku and Veeriku. Around 40 active volunteers now help keep the system running, from collecting and transporting food to cleaning cupboards, sharing information and organising public distributions.

The measurable results show the scale of the change. Tartu Foodsharing has built cooperation with around 10 partners, including COOP, the Estonian Food Bank, cafés and local producers. At least 9,000 kilograms of food have been rescued, and every day volunteers save tens to hundreds of kilograms of edible food from being thrown away. In addition, around 10 public foodsharing events take place each week in urban spaces, often bringing together 40 to 120 people at a time.

The impact is not only environmental, though that is central. Every rescued loaf of bread, bag of vegetables or tray of prepared food also means less wasted water, energy, land, labour and transport. For the community, the cupboards have created a culture of trust: people bring food, take only what they can use and understand that surplus food is a shared resource, not waste.

Tartu is different now because food waste is no longer only hidden behind shops or treated as an unavoidable part of daily life. It has become something people notice, discuss and act on together. The movement has also spread beyond Tartu, inspiring similar foodsharing iniatives in other Estonian cities.

The emotional change is just as important. Residents see that small, practical actions can matter. The city has gained a grassroots model that connects sustainability with everyday solidarity.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of the most important lessons from Tartu Foodsharing is that community trust can work. The movement has no formal legal body or regular funding, yet the cupboards and public food distributions continue to function because people understand the purpose and take responsibility for it. Another key lesson is that foodsharing is not charity. The goal is not simply to provide food aid, but to show that edible food is a valuable resource that should not become waste. This distinction matters, because it keeps the focus on sustainability, awareness and shared responsibility.

The biggest surprise was how much human coordination the work requires. Running a volunteer movement is not only about logistics; it is also social work. People join for different reasons. Some are motivated by environmental concerns, some by access to food, and others by community or curiosity. Coordinating these expectations takes patience, sensitivity and self-control. The challenges also taught important lessons. Finding locations for cupboards can be difficult, especially when a cupboard needs to be moved. Without stable funding, even small practical needs such as fuel, cleaning supplies or printed materials depend on goodwill and occasional support. For others starting a similar initiative, it is important to build relationships early: with local businesses, community spaces, schools etc. The advice from Tartu is simple: start small, make the system easy to use, and trust the community.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Since the first foodsharing cupboard was placed in Tartu in 2019, the idea has grown beyond one city. Tartu Foodsharing has inspired similar initiatives in Elva and Viljandi, now connected through the shared foodsharing.ee platform. The model is simple enough to copy, but powerful enough to change how communities think about edible surplus food.

The wider impact is visible in everyday attitudes. More people now recognise that food close to its expiry date can still be saved and used. Businesses are also more aware of their role in reducing waste, and conversations about surplus food have become more open and practical.

For Tartu, the lasting impact is a stronger sense of community pride and responsibility. The initiative shows that meaningful change can begin with a small, trust-based action and grow into a wider culture of care. Looking ahead, Tartu Foodsharing points toward a future where good food feeds people, not bins.

Awards or Certifications

Tartu Foodsharing has received several recognitions for its community impact. In 2021, it was named Civil Society Inspirer of the Year by the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organisations.

In 2024, the student organisation OLE ROHKEM recognised Tartu Foodsharing as Cooperation Partner of the Year.

In 2025, the idea to expand foodsharing cupboards across Tartu won the city's participatory budgeting competition with 1,188 votes. The proposal aimed to place foodsharing cupboards in neighbourhoods where they did not yet exist, so that the opportunity to share or rescue food would be closer to everyone, and to upgrade existing cupboards to make them more functional and durable. As a result, Tartu City Government is now also providing financial support for new foodsharing cupboards.

Web Articles
https://eeter.err.ee/1609476824/prugikasti-visatud-toidu-paastja-igauks-saab-oma-kodus-toitu-paasta

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGTCiEgyG1Q

https://reporter.kanal2.ee/8483698/tartus-jagatakse-igal-ohtul-mahakantud-toitu-ja-muidugi-taiesti-tasuta

Other Relevant Links
Website: https://www.foodsharing.ee/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/foodsharingtartu
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/foodsharingtartu

Quotes or Testimonials
Kerly Ilves: "When I gave an interview to Kanal 2 before the participatory budgeting vote at the Aparaaditehas foodsharing cupboard, I had to open the fridge as part of the filming. I was very surprised to find dozens of plastic bags filled with cardamom dough, because the cupboard is usually empty. It became a great moment in the video and a strong confirmation that the cupboards really work." Video: https://www.facebook.com/reel/1347429170307612