



# *Waste not, want not*

*Kate Farr* meets a Hong Kong family who are living proof that you CAN live a zero waste lifestyle in this consumer city.



**H**ong Kong boasts many unique and wonderful features: a thriving business culture, rapidly emerging arts scene, beautiful greenery within a stone's throw of the city and world-class education. However, newcomers to the city are often shocked at how eco-negligent our city is. With no government-mandated recycling, landfill sites at near-capacity and talk of a huge new incinerator to be built just off the coast of South Lantau (one of the SAR's most beautiful natural areas), it's clear that Hong Kong has a long way to go to meet its residents' needs for effective management of all that waste we generate. But what

meaningful action can we actually take in a city where potatoes come individually wrapped in cling film?

For one family, the answer was clear – a complete change of lifestyle to embrace zero waste living. Mum-of-three Claire Sancelot, founder of the website Zero Waste Hong Kong, is passionate about the benefits that reducing our output of rubbish can have for both our environment and our family life.

### Food for thought

As a busy working mum, it's even more astounding that Claire and her family are able to plan and sustain a zero waste way of life; after all, it's convenience that is often responsible for the excess packaging and processing of our purchases, particularly when it comes to food. But for Claire, husband Prasad, their daughters Lucie aged four and a half, three-year-old twins Charlotte and Emilie, their helper and even family pet Daphne the dog, mindful eating is more than just a weight-loss buzzword.

Claire explains, "It was a bit challenging at the beginning but now we know where to source our food and cleaning products, it is extremely easy. We get our fruit, vegetables, eggs and honey delivered once a week by a local organic farmer who also works with a local organic soap maker who refills our detergent containers." As well as delivering their groceries, local farmer Ki King-shing collects the family's food waste in the form of compost; a cyclical process that Claire appreciates; "We eat the food that our waste fertilises, the way that nature intended."

This appreciation of where their food comes from also extends to the younger members of the family. "My children love farmer Ki King-shing and he knows them so well now. He knows that Emilie eats all of the strawberries in our order before the end of the day that they're delivered,

and that Charlotte loves his cherry tomatoes. Outside of the family, he is one of the most important adults in their lives. What is more important than knowing the person who feeds you?"

Around five per cent of the family's food is grown in their very own vertical garden, carefully cultivated on the apartment's small balcony area. "The kids help a lot in planting the seeds, keeping the plants bug-free and harvesting. They recognise salad leaves, kale, mint, basil and so on." She adds, "Life without packaged food is often healthier. I am so happy to eat seasonal products and local vegetables and fruits that are delivered without packaging. I cook with a lot of spices and herbs... and I promise you it is never boring!"

### Conscious clothing

And it's not just food that is mindfully sourced; the family's wardrobes and even Claire's beauty routine have been given a zero-waste makeover. "We have the unbelievable good luck of getting all the girls' clothes second-hand from the same family who, like us, have three girls, including a set of twins who are just two years older than my eldest daughter. The quality of the clothes is really good, so when they have been used by all three of our daughters, we pass them on again to our neighbour. A minimum of seven kids use those clothes, and I love that on the label of Lucie's raincoat, for example, there are a few other names already crossed out!"

But in our designer-obsessed city, does Claire ever encounter raised eyebrows at her all-used clothing policy? "Find a family who has similar taste and kids with the same gender a few years older, and break the taboo! Mention that if they are not already passing their stuff on that you will be willing to buy outgrown clothes over the next few years."

She also believes that extending her zero-waste policy to clothing



has important ethical benefits too. “Clothes are often made in factories where workers live in deplorable conditions, and the environment around those factories is often so polluted that drinking the local water or eating food grown nearby would make you sick. My children are too young to understand that yet, but they are so happy when I come home with a large bag of ‘new’ clothes and shoes!” As for her own clothing, Claire advocates buying quality over quantity and avoiding those all-too-familiar “I have nothing to wear!” moments by rationalising to a more manageable level. However she readily admits, “It is a process, and four years on I am still downsizing!”

When it comes to cosmetics, it’s unsurprising that Claire leans towards a more natural approach, eschewing chemicals wherever possible in favour of multitasking household staples. “I learn how to use my kitchen to take care of my hair, body and face, using avocados for face masks and apple cider vinegar to remove shampoo residue from my hair once a week. An olive oil hair mask once in a while is great, too.” She adds, “Many of these recipes are as good as – if not better than – what cosmetic companies sell to you heavily packaged, full of chemicals and for a very high price.”

And increased awareness of the need for cosmetics can have a rather unexpected positive effect on your self-image. “Don’t get me wrong, I still love makeup, but our bathrooms are filled with products that are expensive, and that ultimately make us feel bad about ourselves because they sell us an image of eternal youth, rather than ageing with grace.”

### Positive play

Most parents have felt like they are drowning in a sea of brightly coloured plastic at one time or another, with each new addition needing to be housed somewhere in our restricted

Hong Kong living space. Extending her philosophy to the children’s toys has ensured that Claire’s daughters’ have an appreciation for what they have at home, and has created some unique family traditions. “They get second-hand toys wrapped in beautiful old saris that their grandma gave us to make furoshiki (Japanese cloth wrapping). It’s great to upcycle and adds special memories.”

With the newest playground fad always just around the corner, “used” toys are often barely that. “Our second-hand toys are in excellent condition and some of the toys, books and accessories that the girls have received are really treasured! Someone sold us an entire set of My Little Ponies, Strawberry Shortcake and Hello Kitties. The hair of the dolls may not have been perfect any more, but the girls did not care at all.”

Claire also says that birthday parties can be just as fun without the inevitable piles of giftwrap and soon-to-be-forgotten presents. “We invite all their friends but always ask guests not to bring a present. The kids always have so much fun during their parties that they have never asked for gifts!” She adds, “We usually give the grandparents’ (second-hand) presents the next day, once they have calmed down and can really appreciate them.”

And Claire is keen to stress that zero waste doesn’t have to mean zero fun. “We are very social and have lots of friends over. Adults know if they want to bring something, then a bottle of wine or champagne is always welcomed without packaging. These are enjoyed together and easy to recycle!”

With green living becoming an increasing concern for many of us, Claire believes that there is a reduced consumption lifestyle to suit every family. “Zero waste living encompasses so many different concepts, including minimalism, simplifying your lifestyle, dedicating



more time to your family and your community, and purchasing from local businesses.”

And the benefits to family life are something that we can all appreciate. “I believe that we live a fuller life and have more time for hobbies. We save money and time, and make sure our planet is respected.” Sounds like a win-win to us. ♻️