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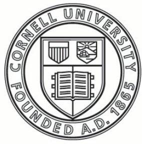

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Behind the Kitchen Door

Saru Jayaraman
University of California - Berkeley

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Behind the Kitchen Door

Abstract
[Excerpt] How do restaurant workers live on some of the lowest wages in America? And how do poor working conditions - discriminatory labor practices, exploitation, and unsanitary kitchens - affect the meals that arrive at our restaurant tables? Saru Jayaraman, who launched the national restaurant workers' organization Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, sets out to answer these questions by following the lives of restaurant workers in New York City, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Detroit, and New Orleans.

Keywords
restaurant, workers, wages, working conditions

Comments
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Behind the Kitchen Door

Saru Jayaraman

With a Foreword by Eric Schlosser

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Foreword

A powerful social movement has recently arisen in the United States, challenging industrial agriculture, questioning the American diet, and calling for fundamental changes in how we grow, process, and think about our food. Organic production has soared, and the need for "sustainability" has become so widely accepted that even companies like McDonald's and Coca-Cola now pay lip service to that worthy goal. The mistreatment of livestock at factory farms has gained enormous attention as consumers express revulsion at the cruelties routinely inflicted to obtain cheap meat. Free-range poultry, cage-free hens, grass-fed cattle, hogs allowed to wander outdoors and wallow in the mud, have all been championed as crucial elements of a healthier, more humane food system. But the food movement thus far has shown a much greater interest in assuring animal welfare than in protecting human rights. You would think that, at the very least, the people who feed us deserve as much attention and compassion as what we're being fed.

The abuses endured by American farmworkers, meatpacking workers, and restaurant employees violate even the most watered-down, corporate-flavored definition of "sustainability." Our food system now treats millions of workers like disposable commodities, paying them poverty wages, denying them medical benefits and sick pay, and tolerating racism and sexism on the job. The hardships of farmworkers and meatpacking workers have been well documented. This book eloquently reveals what is happening behind the kitchen door not only at chain restaurants, but at some of the most expensive restaurants in the United States.

Today it's not uncommon for celebrity chefs to earn millions of dollars a year, while the dishwashers and bussers in their kitchens get a wage of $2.13 an hour, plus a meager share of the tips. The typical restaurant worker makes about $15,000 a year, roughly one-third the annual income of the average American worker. And for decades the restaurant industry has led the battle against increasing the federal minimum wage. Since the late 1960s, the value of the minimum wage, adjusted for inflation, has declined by about 20 percent. For the poorest workers in the United States, that has meant an hourly pay cut of about $1.50.

When people ask what are the most important changes that we could make to our food system right away, I reply: Enforce the nation's labor laws and increase the minimum wage.

For more than a decade, Saru Jayaraman has been defending the rights of those who work hard but nevertheless find themselves at the bottom of the food chain. The organization that she helped found, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, doesn't just represent workers. It seeks to empower them, gain them respect, and give them a voice in the workplace. *Behind the Kitchen Door* describes how Jayaraman got involved in this struggle, places it in a larger social context, and tells stories about individual workers that convey, more powerfully than any statistics, why we must not tolerate these injustices. Too many of our meals are now brought to the table by the misery of others. The problem can easily be solved, once people become aware of it—and that's why this book needs to be read.

Eric Schlosser, June 2012

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank.

First, of course, I'd like to recognize all the staff, restaurant worker members, board members, allies in the food justice and other movements, and other supporters of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, who have coauthored this book through their hands, hearts, and minds. Without their hard work and contributions, the movement for change in the restaurant industry would never have come as far as it has. Many thanks especially to the members and staff profiled in this book and to ROC member, leader, and friend Sekou Luke for producing the extraordinary video trailer; ROC's research staff, Jonathan Hogstad and Teofilo Reyes, for data assistance; other national staff, including Meghana Reddy, Cathy Dang, Rekha Eanni, Juan Carlos Romero, and Christine Saunders, for support and promotion; executive team members Jose Oliva, Bonnie Kwon, Jennifer Dillon, and Sekou Siby for leadership; board members Rinku Sen and Abel Valenzuela for guidance; our film industry partner Joselyn Barnes for videography; our food justice partners

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Finally, I'd like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support: my partner, Zachary Norris; daughters, Akeela Lalitha and Lina Abiani Norris-Raman; and my parents and sisters.

Behind the Kitchen Door

1

The Hands on Your Plate

When you work in restaurants you think the industry is everything. It's being outside, talking to people, serving people. You feel like you're part of something good. People mostly go to eat out for good stuff—proposals, weddings, birthdays—not to fight. You're part of someone's proposal—you bring the ring in an ice cream cake, you watch her reaction. You feel like you're part of their experience, their special moment, even if the people don't care who you are—you're just the server. Everywhere I go, I find restaurant workers are the same. They may move from restaurant to restaurant—maybe they don't earn enough money, or they don't like the way they're being treated. But they always come back. They have a hospitality mentality in their DNA. All over the world, they have it in them.

—Server, Man, 17 Years in the Industry, New York City

The events that forever changed me as a diner—and ultimately led to the writing of this book—happened shortly after 9/11. I had never given much thought to the inner workings of restaurants or the lives of restaurant workers, but a few weeks after the Twin Towers fell I received a call from a union leader representing workers from Windows on the World, the luxurious multilevel restaurant that had been at the top of the World Trade Center. Windows on the World had earned acclaim for its international cuisine and for its staff from almost every nation in the world. The caller wanted me to help build an organization to support the displaced Windows workers and some 13,000 other restaurant workers in New York City who had lost their jobs after the 9/11 tragedy. She knew I had experience organizing immigrant workers, including restaurant workers, on

Long Island and that I'd helped start Women and Youth Supporting Each Other, a national organization serving young women of color. But I had never actually worked in a restaurant.

I was also young. I'd always loved eating out, but I had no idea that, in accepting the union leader's offer and becoming at 27 the leader of a new restaurant workers' organization, I'd spend the next 11 years of my life meeting low-wage restaurant workers—servers, bussers, runners, dishwashers, cooks, and others—who are struggling to support themselves and their families under the shockingly exploitative conditions that exist behind most restaurant kitchen doors.

It took me a while to understand what I was getting into—helping to improve the lives of men and women who belong to one of the largest private-sector workforces in the United States. And these workers perform important jobs—it's the people behind the kitchen door who make a restaurant. We interact with them daily, but few Americans know that the majority of these workers suffer under discriminatory labor practices and earn poverty-level wages. In fact, although the restaurant industry employs more than 10 million people and continues to grow, even during recent economic crises, it includes 7 of the 11 lowest-paying occupations in America—an unenviable distinction.[1] Plus, most employers in the industry refuse to offer paid sick days or health benefits.

So how do restaurant workers live on some of the lowest wages in America? And how do they feel about their work? What are their future prospects? And what impact does their mistreatment and poor compensation have on our experience as diners? These are questions I asked myself in the months after 9/11 as I met some 250 displaced workers from Windows on the World. They described to me in heartbreaking detail how 73 of their coworkers, mostly immigrants, had lost their lives on 9/11. Since the tragedy occurred early in the morning, the majority who died were low-wage kitchen workers who were preparing meals and setting tables for a large breakfast party that was scheduled for that morning. Many of them were incinerated. Several jumped to their death from the 106th and 107th floors of the building. Not a single one survived.

The owner of Windows attended a memorial service for the fallen workers and promised all of his former employees that he would hire them when he opened a new restaurant. However, when he opened a new restaurant in Times Square just a few months later, he refused to hire most

of his former workers. He told the press that they were "not experienced enough" to work in his new restaurant.

The Windows workers were outraged. It would be almost impossible for them to find jobs comparable to what they had at Windows—with a union in that restaurant, they had higher wages than similar workers elsewhere, and benefits. Only 20 percent of restaurant jobs pay a livable wage, and women, people of color, and immigrants face significant barriers in obtaining those livable-wage jobs.[2] As I listened to the workers' stories, I felt their frustration and outrage—first, as men and women who wanted to be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace, and then as people of color who'd discovered that race affected their ability to hold a job and move up the ladder. I met a woman chef from Thailand who'd moved from restaurant to restaurant in the weeks after the tragedy; she couldn't find a new position that would pay a living wage. I met an African American man who had been bartending for two decades; he couldn't find a position that offered wages and benefits comparable to those he'd received at the Windows bar, "The Greatest Bar on Earth." I also met several undocumented immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and eastern Europe, all of whom had found themselves at the mercy of unscrupulous employers who relied almost entirely on immigrant workers (approximately 40 percent of New York City restaurant workers are undocumented immigrants); these employers threatened to contact immigration authorities when their workers complained about exploitation and abuse on the job.

The union hired Fekkak Mamdouh, one of the headwaiters from Windows on the World, to work with me. Mamdouh, a Moroccan immigrant, had been a leader among his coworkers when the restaurant was still open. Medium-built, with cocoa skin, dark brown eyes, and black curly hair, he has a strong Moroccan accent and a mischievous sense of humor. He walks and moves fast and talks and laughs loudly. He's the quintessential Gemini—the happiest guy to be around or, when his temper blows, the foulest in the world.

When I met Mamdouh, he had more than 17 years of experience working in restaurants. He'd started as a delivery person, worked his way up to server, and recently served as an elected union leader fighting on behalf of his fellow workers on a range of issues. Still, I was predisposed not to like him—people had told me he had an aggressive personality—but he completely disarmed me at our first meeting. He cracked jokes and made fun of my seriousness while also listening to me and respecting what I had

to say. I found him sensitive, despite his bravado, always trying to make people feel welcome and comfortable. I also admired how he cared for his large extended family in the United States and Morocco—his wife and three children, his mother, and his eight brothers and sisters and their children.

Mamdouh and I cofounded the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) in April 2002. We agreed that our mission would be to organize workers to improve wages and working conditions throughout the restaurant industry. Our first priority, however, was to advocate for the displaced workers from Windows on the World.

After one month on the job at ROC, Mamdouh and I called a meeting of all the surviving Windows workers, many of whom had applied to work at their former boss's new restaurant. Since we didn't have an office yet, we borrowed meeting space from the union. The workers packed the room. All of them wanted to do something. They felt desperate and humiliated, especially since their former boss had told the media that his former employees—many of whom had lost family and friends in the restaurant—were not qualified to work in his new place. After hours of heated discussion, the workers decided to hold a protest.

We protested loudly in front of the Windows owner's new restaurant on its opening night. The workers showed up with their families in tow and picketed as celebrities entered the restaurant on a red carpet. A headline in the *New York Times* declared the next day, "Windows on the World Workers Say Their Boss Didn't Do Enough."

The coverage prompted the owner to ask Mamdouh and me to meet with him. A few days later we met the owner on the cold, dimly lit ground floor of his multistory restaurant. It was still early in the day, the restaurant not yet open. Before we could say much, the owner told us he was setting up a new banquet department for which he would agree to hire almost all of the workers who'd wanted to work in the restaurant. I couldn't believe it. I thought it was a trick, or that perhaps it would be less than what the workers wanted, but Mamdouh assured me it was truly a victory. When we conferred in an empty banquet room of the restaurant, Mamdouh gave me a hug. "We did it!" he said.

The victory was covered in the *New York Times.* Best of all, the workers seemed happy. The next day I was interviewed on New York's Channel 1. I explained that ROC was a new organization established to serve restaurant workers, and then the floodgates really opened: workers started calling

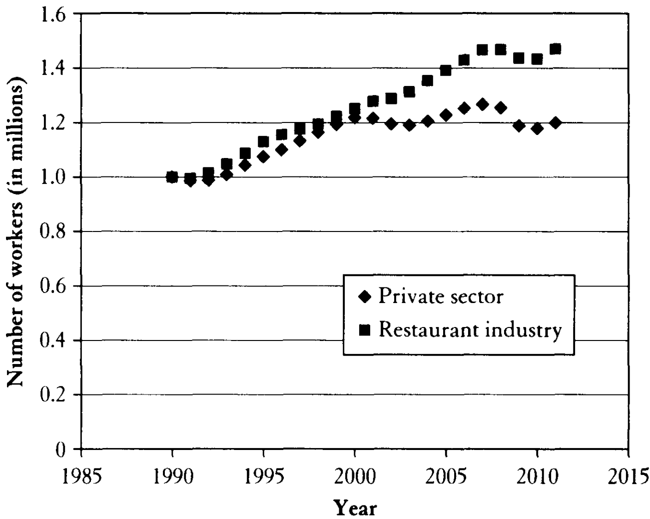

Figure 1. Job growth in the private sector and the restaurant industry, 1990–2011. Adapted from Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, *Behind the Kitchen Door: A Multisite Study of the Restaurant Industry*, technical report (New York: Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2011), fig. 1; http://rocunited.org/blog/2011-behind-the-kitchen-door-multi-site-study/.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics.

us from all over the city, seeking our help. I realized that problems in the restaurant industry were pervasive, often insidious, affecting workers from every background.

I didn't know it then, but the restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the U.S. economy (see fig. 1). Restaurant workers are not just young people saving money for college or earning a few extra dollars while attending high school (a common misconception among American diners). They are workers of all ages and include many parents and single mothers. Many stay in the industry for 20, 30, or 40 years and take great pride in hospitality.

Unfortunately, although the industry continues to grow, restaurant workers' wages have been stagnant over the last 20 years, in part because for the last two decades the federal minimum wage for tipped workers has been frozen at $2.13 an hour.[3] Millions of workers regularly experience wage theft (not being paid the wages and tips they are owed) as well as discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and other factors, such as socioeconomic background, accent, and educational attainment.

Thus, as soon as the existence of ROC became news, Mamdouh and I were flooded with calls for help from restaurant workers all over New York City—and eventually all over the United States.

Our victory with the owner of Windows on the World made anything seem possible. If we could push him to do the right thing and hire his former employees, then we could get any restaurant to pay higher wages and treat its workers with dignity and respect. As more and more workers called us, I began to feel in my heart that we could radically change the restaurant industry for the better.

ROC grew quickly. We found our own office space and were able to get some funding to hire a small staff. We hired four new people—all former Windows on the World workers. Among our staff of six, I was the only one who had never worked in a restaurant, the only nonimmigrant, and the only person who was not a 9/11 survivor. I was also the only one who had professional organizing experience. I spent many long days training our new staff. I talked about the theory and history of organizing, sharing stories of successful movements from all over the world. I conducted political education sessions on the restaurant industry, labor history, and globalization. I also trained my new colleagues to conduct similar sessions for other restaurant workers so that they could inspire their peers to join us in changing the industry. I remember Mamdouh saying in one of our sessions that he had never thought about workplace discrimination before, but after discussing it with us he could see how all of the restaurants he had worked in maintained racial segregation, with lighter-skinned workers in the front, serving customers, and darker-skinned workers in the back, hidden in the kitchen. He also realized that in his 17 years in the industry he had never seen a white dishwasher in New York City. Dishwashers, who earn minimum wage or less, are almost always the darkest-skinned immigrants or people of color in a restaurant. In fact, of the 4,323 restaurant workers we surveyed around the country, we found that only 6.1 percent of all dishwashers were white.

I learned as much, if not more, from Mamdouh and his former coworkers about the issues workers confront daily in restaurants. During our long days of training we would eat lunch together in different local restaurants. Throughout our meal, Mamdouh would point out things I didn't know about the service, food, or ambience. He would say, "That's good service" or "That isn't." He would comment if the restaurant was understaffed or if the workers were carrying too much. He would talk about poor management and the problems that arise when workers are expected to live off

their tips. He would always say, "If you don't pay your bill at the end of a meal, the manager will come running after you. But if workers don't get their tips, they can't say anything, or they'll be fired." I began looking at restaurants differently every time I ate out.

Of course, we weren't training all the time. We were also busy meeting with the workers who showed up at our door seeking help on the job. Many of them came because they hadn't been paid. Others had been injured while working. We helped some of them recover their wages and address their problems, but we knew that in order to really begin changing the industry, we needed to engage in high-profile campaigns that would send a signal to other restaurants that poverty-level wages, wage theft, discrimination, and lack of benefits were not sustainable for anyone.

A watershed moment for ROC came about when one of our new staff members, Utjok, visited his brother at a fancy steakhouse in Midtown Manhattan. Utjok met a kitchen worker there who told him that the restaurant had been stealing wages from its employees. He immediately brought the cook to see me. His name was Floriberto Hernandez.

Floriberto was a rotund, jovial Mexican immigrant. He had light brown skin and a baby face that dimpled when he smiled. He always wore a baseball cap. His coworkers, who were also Mexican or Central American, thought he was quite naive, and later told me stories about how they would play mean practical jokes on him. One of the woman workers told me that some of the guys in the kitchen also made inappropriate sexist jokes. For example, they made fun of her for being a little overweight. One day they told Floriberto that she was pregnant. He believed them and congratulated her on the happy occasion. The woman told me that she felt personally humiliated. She was angry with Floriberto's coworkers and with management for not doing anything about it, but she knew that Floriberto himself was not trying to be mean; he had congratulated her because he was genuinely, though mistakenly, happy for her.

Floriberto wasn't dumb, just overly trusting perhaps, which is why it hurt him so much when he realized that the company would never pay him and his coworkers their overtime wages without a fight. In fact, Floriberto was probably the most intelligent and courageous of the bunch. When his coworkers shrugged off the wage theft, Floriberto insisted that they do something about it. After coming to ROC and meeting with Mamdouh and me, Floriberto almost immediately brought 17 of his coworkers to our office and started a campaign. He was a true leader.

Floriberto Hernandez with other ROC-NY members on Human Rights Day. Courtesy of Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York.

Over the next two years we launched a public campaign against the restaurant where Floriberto worked, demanding that it pay its workers properly and comply with the law. After all, we argued, a fine-dining steakhouse in Midtown Manhattan should be able to pay basic minimum

and overtime wages. After giving the company a chance to respond to our requests for a meeting (and being ignored for several weeks), we organized weekly protests in front of the restaurant. Floriberto and his coworkers joined us. We circled the restaurant, ringing cowbells, beating drums, and of course raising our voices to demand that the company stop the illegal practice of not paying its employees. We handed out leaflets describing the restaurant's health-code violations to potential customers, and we chanted, "It's illegal! It's a crime! Pay your workers overtime!" As the weeks passed, Floriberto convinced more of his coworkers to join the campaign, and a young Latino busser—the only nonwhite waiter in the restaurant—filed charges against the company for giving him the lowest-paying shifts and tables, and for hurling racial epithets at him, even in front of customers.

At one point, we decided to let the restaurant's customers know what was going on behind the kitchen door. We found out that the restaurant had numerous health-code violations, including insects in the kitchen, food kept out too long, and meat not stored at the right temperature. As the customers entered the restaurant, we passed out handbills that described the nasty things going on in the kitchen. Our latest research shows that in every city across the United States in which we conducted surveys with restaurant workers, the restaurants that mistreated their workers were more likely to engage in unsafe food-handling practices that sicken customers. It made sense—if a restaurant was not a responsible employer, how could we expect that restaurant to be responsible with our health and safety?

The restaurant initially counterattacked, telling the press that our protest was a "shake-down." I was personally vilified. One columnist wrote an editorial in the *Nation's Restaurant News* arguing that we were exploiting 9/11 to change the restaurant industry. In a way, we were. We were using the attention that the Windows workers got to highlight deep problems in the industry that had existed long before the towers fell. The Windows workers had banded together, determined to make the industry better, in the name of their fallen coworkers. The editorial in the *Nation's Restaurant News* only strengthened my resolve to stick with the Windows workers and change the industry with them.

Floriberto stood strong, encouraging his coworkers to stay united and not allow the company to intimidate them at work or threaten them with retaliation. His leadership led us to victory. Unfortunately, just as we heard

news that the restaurant was going to settle, tragedy struck. I had gone on vacation, accompanying Mamdouh and his family on their annual trip to Morocco. We were in Fez, an ancient city with narrow, winding alleys between old limestone buildings. Late one evening when Mamdouh's family had already fallen asleep I decided to check my e-mail. I asked a young boy to tell me where I could find an Internet café. He guided me through a dark maze of alleys to a brightly lit room full of computers. Almost the first e-mail I saw was news from home—Floriberto had passed away suddenly. Sobbing, I stumbled through the dark alleys back to the hotel where Mamdouh and his family were sleeping. Mamdouh and I had been fighting that day, but when I told him the sad news, all of our frustrations were washed away in the terrible pain of loss. We found our way to an international phone booth and called the ROC office. Our staff confirmed that we had suffered an incredible loss.

Just a week before, at a protest in front of his restaurant, Floriberto had complained that he was thirsty and tired. He'd brought a huge bottle of Coca-Cola with him to the protest; in fact, over a period of several days he had been buying 20-ounce bottles of Coca-Cola and downing a single bottle in less than a minute. Within a day or two his roommate, a single mother, had found him facedown on the floor of their tiny Bronx apartment. He was a large man, too large for her to move. She called 911. It took four paramedics to lift him onto the gurney and rush him to the hospital. He was in a diabetic coma, apparently having suffered from a sudden adult onset of diabetes. By the time he reached the hospital, it was too late. He had killed himself drinking Coca-Cola.

I immediately threw myself into crisis mode. Floriberto had no real family in the United States, and so I ended up dealing with the coroner, doctors, and his coworkers—who believed the restaurant had poisoned him—as well as with his family in Mexico. We discovered that Floriberto had lost touch with his family after crossing the border into the United States more than 10 years before, but we found his family in Mexico and sent them his body for burial, with $1,000 collected from ROC staff and members.

A few months after Floriberto's death we finally won the campaign against the restaurant company. We won not only $164,000 in unpaid wages but also real changes in the company, such as paid sick days and vacation days, a grievance procedure, and much more. The company's

lawyer later said that the campaign had really forced the company to create policies that it should have created a long time before.

Floriberto led his coworkers to this victory, but he never had the chance to enjoy the fruits of his labor. His portion of the damages—the amount of unpaid overtime wages he was owed—totaled close to $15,000. I thought it would be easy to send this money to Floriberto's family in Mexico, but it was ridiculously complicated. I had to become an administrator of Floriberto's estate through the Bronx County Surrogate's Court—a process that is still ongoing. I remember Floriberto's family calling me from Mexico to say that they did not have enough money for a funeral and that they could really use the money that Floriberto had won. I could do nothing. The money still sits in a legal escrow account in New York.

This experience shook me to my core. I had never experienced the death of someone so close to me and with whom I'd worked so intensively. It blew my eyes wide open to the people who work behind the kitchen door, their lives, and their struggles. I knew these workers were poor, many immigrants, many struggling to survive. But I had never known this—that as jovial and innocent as Floriberto was, he lived a hard life, separated from his family, alone. Although he had told me that he loved working in the restaurant and hoped to move up one day to a position as sous chef or even chef, he had been living paycheck to paycheck for over 10 years. Fighting for the $15,000 of his hard-earned wages that had been kept from him was not just about justice. It was also about survival. He had no insurance to cover his medical bills or help his family when he passed away. Worst of all, he had had no one to care for him when he was alive. He had had no one but me—a then 28-year-old who had gone to law school but never really practiced law, and who was totally ignorant about nutrition and medicine. I barely took the time to see a doctor myself. We organized a memorial event for Floriberto at ROC, the only one that he had.

After that, every time I ate out I would look in the kitchen. For the first time, I saw every kitchen worker, every restaurant worker, as a human being, with a unique story, family, dreams, and desires. I would see these workers every time I ate out, and then I would talk to them at ROC. Many would express their desire to move up the ladder, maybe even open their own restaurant one day, but so few had the opportunity.

That was my *Matrix* moment. Suddenly I could see a whole world I had never seen over a lifetime of eating in restaurants.

Millions of Dreams Deferred

I am a daughter of immigrants from India. When I was young, my mother and father didn't take me and my sisters out to eat very often, maybe because my parents grew up eating delicious, home-cooked meals in Tamilnadu. They never seemed especially excited about dining out, but even in my earliest memories I loved eating in restaurants. Those rare family outings—my parents and three little girls in braids—to Denny's or McDonald's or a local Mexican or Indian restaurant were extraordinarily exciting and made "eating out" sacred to me.

After I moved out of my parents' house, I ate out every time I had the opportunity. Eating out became part of my lifestyle. I grew so accustomed to eating in restaurants that when I went on a trip to Italy with my parents as a young adult I assumed we'd eat out in ristorantes or trattorias for every meal. But my parents had other plans. When we got to our hotel room, they started unpacking their unusually large suitcase, and out came the family rice cooker, followed by jars of curry and chutney. I was horrified.

That trip made me realize that Americans have a unique relationship to eating out, and that I am an American. It isn't just my parents who prefer not to eat out. I've noticed people's resistance to eating out in countries around the world, from Latin America to Africa to Europe. It isn't that there aren't restaurants in other parts of the world; there are world-famous chefs and restaurants, new and old, busy and slow, all kinds, all over the world. It's the frequency with which Americans eat out, and the way we choose to mark so many of our major life events—birthdays, anniversaries, marriage proposals—in restaurants. Restaurants are a space in which families gather, friends meet, and new connections are made. Restaurants are where American culture happens.

I can remember one very special meal in a Chinese restaurant, a lunch with a guy I had briefly dated in my early twenties. It had been eight years since we'd seen each other, and we hadn't stayed in touch. A month before our lunch he'd called to say that he thought we should get back together. I was very skeptical.

It was a beautiful spring day in New York City, but I don't think either of us noticed. We sat at the back table in a dark, narrow storefront restaurant, which was almost empty. We were nervous about seeing each other after so long, and so our date was awkward. I asked him a thousand questions about why he wanted to get back together. His gentle, sincere

responses to my questions reminded me why I had liked him so much when I was younger. Finally, the bill came, with the standard fortune cookies. He opened his, and I could see from his expression that it said something striking. I insisted that he show it to me. "Look no further," it said. "Happiness is right next to you." We got married a year later. We didn't get married because of the fortune cookie, but that moment certainly helped.

What I can't remember about that lunch is who served our food. I can't remember who brought our plates, or the fortune cookies, to the table. That, however, just makes me like most Americans. Every one of us can tell a story about a life-changing moment in a restaurant. We remember the way it looked, who was there, where we sat, what we ate, and how it smelled. However, we tend not to notice who is handling our food.

It's strange that most of us spend so much of our time and income in restaurants and yet think so little about restaurant workers. They perform the most intimate acts for us—cooking and serving our food, typically an act reserved for a parent or a partner.

When Mamdouh and I started ROC, I made the decision to dedicate my life to improving the wages and working conditions of the people who prepare, cook, and serve our food daily. Over the last 11 years ROC has led 11 campaigns against exploitation in high-profile restaurants like Floriberto's, winning more than $6 million in stolen tips and wages and helping to bring about policy changes to improve the lives of thousands of workers. We've educated and organized responsible employers to promote sustainable business practices. We've fought to change policies that have an impact on restaurant workers, such as increasing the federal tipped minimum wage from $2.13 an hour. We've also opened several COLORS restaurants, worker-owned restaurants in which we train workers to advance to living-wage jobs. We struggled for three years to open COLORS in New York, and we struggled another five years to make it successful, but now the restaurant has a sustainable business model in two cities. The programs we created at COLORS now train about 1,000 low-wage workers across the country every year.

In addition, ROC has conducted a massive amount of research, much of which confirms that Floriberto's experience was not unique. In surveys and interviews, restaurant workers continue to report that they simply can't survive on the industry's abysmal wages; their woes are compounded by lack of benefits, wage theft, and other challenges. Most restaurant workers

can't see a pathway to a better position or a better life. Many say they don't want to leave the industry because they take pride in their work. However, almost one-third report that they have been passed over for a promotion because of their race. Others report that they've never even tried to seek a promotion because they've never seen anyone in a higher position who "looked like them." These workers tend to move from restaurant to restaurant, constantly seeking better wages and opportunities to advance, but usually never making it to the best-paying jobs.[4]

In the words of Langston Hughes, that's millions of "dreams deferred."

Voting with Our Forks

I realized early on what I could do as an organizer to change the industry, but I didn't immediately recognize my power as a consumer—and the power of all consumers nationwide—to take action to change the industry.

It took another special moment in a restaurant for me to realize that power. Not long after my first daughter was born, my husband, Zach, and I decided to take a springtime trip to Santa Cruz, California. It was our first family vacation with the baby, and perhaps the first time we took her to a restaurant. We took a lot of pictures and laughed at the funny faces she made.

As I sat there, I couldn't help noticing that all of the people who greeted and served us were white and all of the bussers were Latina women. I watched these Latina women work their tails off throughout our meal. They moved chairs, collected an impossible number of dirty glasses in one hand and dirty plates in the other, ran about the restaurant putting bread on the tables and refilling water glasses, and generally engaged in the most physical labor of anyone in the front of the restaurant. I knew that they weren't paid much; our research shows that bussers across the country generally receive the minimum wage for tipped workers (again, in most states, that's $2.13 an hour!), and the vast majority of them don't receive paid sick days or health insurance.[5]

After we ate and paid our bill, I decided to say something to the manager and asked about the restaurant's training and promotion opportunities. I praised the hard work of the bussers and asked if they were ever given the opportunity to advance to a server position. The manager was caught off

guard, but he answered amicably. He said they didn't really have a program, but if an employee were interested, he'd be open to providing them with training. He said none of the bussers wanted to move up, or at least none of them had ever said so. I told him that as a customer it was important to me to eat in restaurants where I knew that there were genuine opportunities for everyone to advance, training programs that would encourage people to move up, and a transparent promotions policy. I told him that I wanted my daughter grow up in a world where everyone could have opportunities in the workplace and be able to eat in restaurants where the staff was diverse at every level. He said that he had never really thought about whether any of the bussers wanted to be waiters, but that he would ask them about it. He thanked me for my point of view and comments, and I left.

The experience really gave me hope. It wasn't that I imagined my comments had prompted the manager to implement a new training and promotions system. But I saw a very easy avenue for consumers to act and change the industry: if multiple diners told that manager that they appreciated seeing diversity and responsible labor practices in the restaurant—and if there were accessible resources to explain to owners and managers how other employers have successfully created these opportunities for their workers—it would certainly encourage him to consider training and promoting more of his bussers. Plus, I'd seen change happen this way in ROC campaigns. Just a handful of consumers could push a restaurant to comply with the law and improve how it treated and compensated its employees. In 2005, for example, ROC won a campaign against exploitation at a fine-dining restaurant company when consumers from all over the country wrote to say they wouldn't frequent the restaurant when they visited New York if the abuses continued. We've also seen that consumers can do more than speak up to individual restaurants. That same year, ROC was part of a campaign in which the people of New York told their legislators that tipped workers needed a raise. The people won. The tipped minimum wage was raised to $4.65 an hour.

I can imagine a day when millions of consumers across the United States advocate for restaurant workers in small ways every time they eat out. We may begin by speaking up to let managers know that we want our dining experience to reflect our values. We can also support the restaurants that are really trying hard to pay decent wages, provide benefits, and create pathways for advancement for all employees.

A bevy of books has been published about food, encouraging consumers to think about farmers, the land, animals, and our health. Americans are increasingly concerned about what they eat—where their food comes from, how it's grown and harvested, and how it's prepared. Still, despite the surge of interest in organic, locally sourced, sustainable, healthy food—and despite the TV shows and tell-all books by celebrity chefs, and the muckraking of Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan—most Americans are totally unaware of the horribly exploitative working conditions in restaurants, which affect the quality of our food and, ultimately, our health.

I want you, the consumer, to know that if you care about your health, thinking about whether your food is organic, sustainable, or locally sourced—or anything else related to how it's grown or raised—is simply not enough. Consumers also have to consider the health and well-being of the people who actually touch their food before they put it in their mouths.

The restaurant industry has grown meteorically over the last 40 years, and it continues to grow because Americans eat out more every year. Fifty percent of Americans eat out at least once a week.[6] The share of daily caloric intake from food Americans purchased or consumed away from home increased from 18 percent to 32 percent between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, and the away-from-home market now accounts for more than half of total U.S. food expenditures.[7] That means our health—along with our pocketbooks—is very regularly in the hands of the restaurant industry.

So, what if consumers demanded that restaurants provide sustainable wages (definitely more than $2.13 an hour) for employees as well as sustainable food for customers? What if we based our dining choices on which restaurants promote diversity and good working conditions along with grass-fed beef and organic strawberries? What if we insisted that a clean kitchen include workers who can afford to take a day off when sick?

The people I write about in this book demonstrate not only how we can significantly improve the lives of workers in the restaurant industry, but also how the quality of our food depends on the conditions behind the kitchen door. Their stories may seem dramatic or depressing, but they are true and, in my experience, representative. Over the last decade I've heard stories similar to those related in this book dozens of times. In chapter 2 ("*Real* Sustainability, Please!"), I show how employment practices of many establishments in the restaurant industry are completely out of sync with the core values of the Slow Food or sustainable food movement.

To most foodies, sustainable food means food grown locally without the use of harmful pesticides, livestock raised more humanely without hormones, and other farming practices that support the health and diversity of our food system. However, sustainable food has to mean more than that, because food isn't really healthy if it's served in restaurants where abuse, exploitation, and discriminatory labor practices are commonplace. The stories of Daniel, a former dishwasher at celebrity chef Mario Batali's restaurant Del Posto, and Diep, the owner of Good Girl Dinette in Highland Park, Los Angeles, expose how unsustainable labor practices seriously affect our so-called sustainable food. Diep, a remarkable leader in the restaurant industry, shows us how a truly sustainable restaurant can operate and make a profit.

In chapter 3 ("Serving While Sick"), I write about workers like Nikki, who was forced to continue serving food in a Washington, D.C., restaurant after coming down with conjunctivitis, and Woong, a Korean American who served food in an upscale French bistro even after contracting H1N1, better known as "swine flu." The experiences of both Nikki and Woong attest to how the quality of the food that arrives at your table is not just a product of raw ingredients: it's a product of the hands that chop, cook, and plate it, and of the people to whom those hands belong. Restaurants that force employees to work while sick are also usually careless when it comes to food safety and customers' health.

Chapter 4 ("$2.13—The Tipping Point") looks at how millions of workers are struggling to survive—and often ending up homeless—on the $2.13 minimum wage for tipped workers. Both Claudia, an immigrant worker from Mexico, and Mike, a white worker from Detroit, earned $2.13 an hour and were lucky if they made $200 a week. Their experiences in the restaurant industry are particularly shocking, but in fact millions of restaurant workers make only $2.13 an hour before tips and can't afford to pay their rent or feed their families. Progressive restaurant owners—like Jason and Ben of Russell Street Deli in Detroit—demonstrate how restaurants can pay workers a livable wage and still be profitable. Their food is better, too.

In chapter 5 ("Race in the Kitchen"), I introduce workers like Oscar, a charismatic busser who couldn't get a promotion in a fine-dining restaurant in Miami because he "didn't have the right look." He'd previously been called names like "niggeraguan" on the job. Maya, who was raised in a Trinidadian neighborhood in Washington, D.C., repeatedly trained