

Ethical Dining and Restaurant Workers Rights

“People eat with blinders. We just want to eat our nice dinner without thinking about whether the person who made it is ok.” This statement, made by Barbara Sibley at last week’s^[1] roundtable discussion on Food, Justice, and Restaurants at the New School for Public Engagement, undoubtedly struck a nerve or two.

It took the question that had thus far been tacitly woven into each speaker’s stated experiences and thrust it onto the table like an unsavory hors-d’oeuvre: Why don’t we care about people as much as we care about our food?

Why is it that even now, when so many diners have recently become so deeply invested in the provenance of their vegetables, the health of their meat, and whether or not the chocolate in their pot de crème is fair trade or conventional, it seldom occurs to us to wonder whether our the hands who made those dishes—and washed those dishes and put those dishes on our table—are being paid well enough, or rested often enough, or treated with at least as much dignity as we now expect for the heritage pork chop that they put on our plate?



[2]

In a restaurant’s kitchen
(Flickr)

These questions were the cardinal takeaway of the event, organized in collaboration with the Restaurant Opportunities Center – New York^[3], (a chapter of Saru Jayaraman’s nationwide restaurant workers advocacy nonprofit, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC)^[4]) and which sought to explore possible answers through a range of voices from divergent sectors of New

York City's restaurant industry.

For most of the evening these speakers, whose titles ranged from restaurant owner to busboy, focused on precisely the issues delineated by a recent *Food Politic* article^[5] on Jayaraman's new book, *Behind the Kitchen Door*—namely, fair wages and benefits (and the shocking lack thereof) for restaurant workers and the general dearth of labor regulation and worker's rights in restaurant kitchens.

Essentially, restaurant workers across our nation are vastly overworked and underpaid. The federal minimum wage for tipped workers is a paltry \$2.13, though in New York City it reaches \$5. Over one-third of restaurant workers have worked off-the-clock or overtime without compensation, and the majority of restaurant workers—88% of them—are not entitled to paid sick days, paid vacation, or health care, and nearly two-thirds of workers have reported working while sick^[6] as a result. The realities of the injustices suffered by restaurant workers are especially visible in cities like New York, where sixty percent of restaurant workers^[7] earn poverty wages.

ROC tries to address such injustices by organizing restaurant workers like through campaigns, including the current ones to introduce mandatory earned paid sick days to local and state legislation and to raise the federal tipped minimum wage. While the organization is seeing some success in the first goal, including victories in Philadelphia^[8] and San Francisco^[9], raising the federal tipped minimum wage hasn't been done in over twenty years and is proving more difficult to achieve.

ROC also believes in the importance of employer engagement. Indeed, convincing restaurateurs that raising their labor standards makes good business sense is perhaps the most expedient way by those in the restaurant world can elevate restaurant workers' quality of life.

According to ROC-NY's Tatiana Bejar, with proper education, restaurateurs are more quickly and easily convinced to raise their own internal "minimum wage" than are, say, politicians at City Hall.

Sibley, owner of La Palapa Cocina Mexicana, concurs and goes one step further, arguing that *not* raising kitchen labor standards is detrimental to a restaurant's economic sustainability. In her view, restaurateurs who resist raising the minimum wage are "making a poor business decision... in not allowing their workers to earn a living wage. I mean, if you have a worker who has three jobs, they're not going to be a good worker. Are they [the restaurant] really saving money? ...It's so important to just have it in our psyche that you have to take care of people. These things are good for business and they're good for the workers."

Rosanne Martino, a restaurant manager, attributes resistance to progressive labor policies to a lack of consumer awareness. "I still don't think the general public is aware of the abuses that go

on in the average kitchen,” she said, encouraging the eaters in the room to “turn their eyes on” when they enter a restaurant. ROC’s recently published Diner’s Guide to Ethical Eating^[10], which ranks restaurants nationwide on the equity of their labor practices, can help consumers do just that.

With ROC’s help, perhaps diners will some day think as much about who is serving them at their table or preparing their meal as they do about the daily specials.

-Chelsea Newson

Links

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iuc3l4d77z8>
2. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/phanatic/700572132/>
3. <http://www.rocny.org/>
4. <http://rocunited.org/>
5. <http://www.foodpolitic.com/we-serve-you-we-arent-servants-behind-the-kitchen-door-and-restaurant-workers-rights/>
6. http://www.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/W_F_Taking_Care_of_Business_March_Update.pdf?docID=8721
7. <http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Organizing-Bargaining/New-York-City-Restaurant-Workers-Sing-and-Dance-to-Raise-Awareness-About-Raising-Minimum-Wage>
8. <http://rocunited.org/philly/>
9. <http://sfgsa.org/index.aspx?page=419>
10. <http://rocunited.org/dinersguide/>

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