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GROWING PAINS

by *s.e. smith* · illustrations by *Gigi Rose Gray*

WHY LABOR IS THE REAL FOOD MOVEMENT WE SHOULD BE PAYING ATTENTION TO

From the elaborate dinners of the Romans to the ornate and detailed dishes of ancient China, food has always been a performance of power. Fine dining has always been esteemed, and those able to access it considered sophisticated palates.

Today, battles over Michelin stars have celebrity chefs like Bobby Flay and Gordon Ramsay sparring in the media, while audiences flock to scores of food-related reality television shows. Food hotspots have expanded beyond Paris and Rome and into Mexico City, Hanoi, Vancouver, Austin, and other corners of the world. Gourmet dining is more accessible than ever before, and so are conversations about the best that the culinary world has to offer.

In response to the mainstreaming of “fine” food, the rise of convenience foods, and the revelation that people are spending less and less time in their own kitchens, multiple movements have arisen to resist and reclaim food for the people. Which “people” becomes apparent on closer examination: those with time and energy to spend in spacious kitchens or sourcing ingredients, the funds to stock a pantry, and the skills to execute often elaborate dishes. In their desire to connect more deeply with their food and its source, locavores and slow-food advocates have simultaneously extracted food from its past and erased some of the most important elements of its present.

Despite the shifting food conversation in the United States—formerly fringe discussions like “food miles” are now mainstream topics covered in *Time*, TED Talks has a dedicated playlist to rethinking what we eat—and the reevaluation of our personal relationships with food and how we consume it, there’s a problem. A lot of that conversation has centered on what animals are fed, whether chemicals

are used on fields, how far food travels to get to the plate, and what kind of conditions it's grown or raised in, without any mention of the workers involved in food production. After all, without someone to grow your organic carrots, you have no organic carrots to be smug about. This elision of human beings from the conversation is a curious parallel to the erasure of people from an industrial agriculture narrative, a polite fiction that no actual people are involved is maintained to avoid uncomfortable conversations about worker exploitation.

Agricultural labor is consistently ranked among the top-10 most dangerous jobs in the United States. The meat industry is particularly hazardous—in 2005, almost 23 in 100 workers died or incurred serious injuries in meat-packing plants. (Some labor activists believe this statistic is low, as changes to classifications for workplace injuries allow employers to keep their injury numbers low by keeping workers on the job.) Notably, the agricultural sector overall earns the dubious distinction of most fatal injuries, with almost 25 per 100,000 agricultural workers dying on the job annually.



Field labor, which includes growing, picking, and packing the produce we consume ourselves or feed to animals, also entails harsh and gruesome conditions. Laborers—often migrant laborers—work long hours without access to basic employment protections like overtime, minimum wage, shelter from poor weather, and sometimes necessities like water and shade. California's legislature ordered farmers to provide access to water and shade for their employees in 2012, only to have Governor Jerry Brown kill the bill.

Female farmworkers face particularly horrific conditions. Strawberry fields in Salinas, California, are known as the “fields of the panties” for the sexual assault that occurs between the rows, according to research conducted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Many women work knowing that sexual assault from overseers effectively comes with the job, and that resisting sexual assault from a supervisor could mean being fired and replaced with another who needs the work.

“Women often felt there wasn't any recourse,” says former farmworker Guadalupe Gonzalo of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) of the sexual assault rampant on U.S. farms. “They felt there weren't any protections from that kind of abuse. Scared. Scared to say anything—had they spoken up, they would have lost their jobs for bringing up such a complaint.” In a nation with labor laws supposedly designed to prevent this very thing, its prevalence is a testimony to the lower social status of farmworkers.

The CIW is just one organization leading farmworkers to protest labor abuse in the food system. They've been fighting alongside groups like Just Harvest USA not only to protect farmworkers, but also to direct the larger food movement's attention to agricultural workers and labor-rights abuses.

Under the CIW's Fair Food Program (FFP), farms must agree to a code-of-conduct policy that includes zero tolerance for sexual abuse, the use of time clocks to prevent wage theft, and oversight by an independent agency. Workers also receive a direct bonus of a penny per pound of produce picked, paid by the buyers who work with FFP suppliers. Ninety percent of Florida's tomato industry and 11 major companies, including McDonald's and Taco Bell, were participating as of October 2013, with the CIW mounting a campaign targeting Wendy's for its refusal to join.



Participating restaurants agree to purchase only from participating farms, creating a clear chain of accountability from field to plate to ensure farmworker justice, with a third party certifying farms to confirm their compliance. For farmers, there's a clear incentive for program participation, because they get access to lucrative fast-food contracts. The CIW has primarily targeted chains and large corporations for the FFP, as this does the most social good and sends a powerful message to the rest of the country: Not only is worker justice possible, it's economically sustainable.

Gonzalo says the FFP is "definitely something I see as being able to be expanded or replicated in other industries," illustrating that in fighting for worker rights, the CIW has developed a model with the potential to spread nationally. She noted that the group's program has been praised by both the Obama administration and anti-trafficking groups for its work on slavery and human trafficking in the United States.

And while not all farms have such accountability, farmers, too, have joined the calls for reform and the quest for food justice. The farming industry in the United States has become ensnared by a cycle that propels farmers to abuse workers, strip the soil, and abandon all hope at ethical and environmentally friendly farming practices if they want to stay ahead. Today, small farmers are rising up against big agriculture, and they're finding unexpected allies. For example, farmers Kevin Fulton and Carole Morison both made an active choice to turn away from inhumane farming methods for cattle and chickens, respectively, working with animal-welfare advocates to establish humane and healthy conditions for their animals and themselves. They're using their experience and status as trusted members of the farming community to encourage colleagues to do the same, changing the face of what farming looks like in the United States. Meanwhile, the growing revolt against ag giant Monsanto, triggered in part by the company's aggressive patent-related lawsuits, is drawing farmers together with environmentalists and various food movements, creating a force to be reckoned with.

But while some corners of the greater food movement seem fascinated by small farms and their "beyond organic" farming practices, it's often from a privileged and limited perspective focused on supporting individual farmers. The growing farmer rebellion pushing a shift from exploitative methods to more humane ones moves the conversation to an institutional level rather than limiting it to individual participants in the farming system.

Meanwhile, other farmers and farmworkers understand that reforms to the food system require more than simply buying organic at the grocery store and going to the farmers' market. In a May 2013 *Grist* article ("Strengthening the Food Chain: Farmers and Workers Unite, Find Power in Numbers"), Siena Chrisman wrote about the quiet revolution happening:

Farmers coming together with farmworkers, sharing lessons learned about how to transform their industry and hold major corporations accountable. Farmers and food-industry workers talking to consumers about the economic and policy issues shaping the system—and encouraging them to vote with their political power as well as with their fork.

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Despite these developments in food labor, “foodies” and “locavores” tend to dominate mainstream discussions of what food means and which kinds of foods are accessible to the public. The *New York Times*, for example, often covers food challenges (where participants agree to attempt to survive on funds equivalent to food stamp allowances) and food deserts, but it approaches the problem from a fundamentally privileged position that seems to conclude that low-income people should “just try harder” to eat healthy, sustainable food. Workers are predominantly left out of the discussion, not only as laborers, but also as consumers. When the zeitgeist leaves out the work behind the creation, it suppresses a critical piece of the picture. Without an open discussion of labor, no radical changes to the larger food system in the United States—the one thing everyone in various food movements seems to agree is necessary—are possible.

Some of this is a function of privilege, with food-movement activists approaching their work from a position of social and political power. For them, the movement for “real” and “fair” food is not about workers because they don’t see the workers, or live in their reality. As Real Food Challenge activist David Schwartz noted in a 2010 essay, “Choosing Reverence and Resistance: Reflections on the Farmworker Freedom March”:

The divide between those who seek to promote the good and those who are compelled by their life circumstances to stop the bad is one that has persisted in social movements for generations. On one side are those whose life circumstances and identity compels them to confront the structures that hold them in a degraded state—the resistance movement. On the other side, those of us who hold the unearned privileges that allow us to build alternatives while skirting around the current order when we like.

In a movement that is supposedly reframing the way we look at and talk about food, it’s the people who produce and serve that food that are struggling with lack of access. Fast-food workers who march in demand of a living wage can barely afford to eat the food their own restaurants sell, let alone shop at farmers’ markets for all-local ingredients. Those berries in the grocery store, organic or

not, come with a taint of rape and worker exploitation. It's possible for the tab on one dinner out to amount to more than the server's monthly paycheck.

These are the people on the front lines, and they are every bit as invested in changes to the food system as those who are primarily consumers, rather than producers, of food. The fundamental disconnect between the larger food movement and the people who are intimately involved in the production of food is troubling evidence of what happens when a social narrative focuses on end products and performance, rather than whole systems.



This expansion of the movement encompasses not just field laborers, farmers, and those working to grow and raise the food we eat. It also includes workers in the service industry who create the interface between consumers and food: undocumented immigrants laboring as dishwashers, line cooks, and, of course, servers and waitstaff working directly with customers. Throughout 2012 and 2013, fast-food workers walked off the job in massive rolling strikes as part of an organized movement to raise awareness about their situation—one of long hours, wage theft, and struggles to eke out a living on minimum wage. Fast Food Forward's "We Can't Survive on \$7.25" protests swept across several major cities in the United States, with retail and other service workers joining the cause.

By July 2013, the protest was making national headlines in both mainstream and liberal press, in no small part thanks to the exposure of a McDonald's financial planning budget that effectively suggested fast-food workers should maintain two jobs to support themselves. Given the constraints built into the budget itself, there was no way workers could actually meet the budget on the wages offered by the fast-food giant—and the company's understanding of living expenses differed quite radically from reality. For example, the budget posited that it was possible to access health insurance for under \$20 a month. As the budget made headlines, workers in major U.S. cities were walking off the job to highlight their unfair conditions, taking advantage of the media attention to further their cause.

Many exploited workers are rising to say "*basta*," and foodies who hadn't formerly thought about labor conditions when considering whether food was sustainable or ethical may have to change their tunes. Just as the Fair Trade certification program has changed conditions for farmers and producers in the Global South, could we someday see a national Fair Food certification indicating that food was produced without exploitation and abuse of workers?

By stepping out from behind the fryer, fast-food workers are the latest to confront the public with the reality of the broken and exploitative nature of the food system. By taking the conversation to the street, workers from the tomato pickers of the CIW to the McDonald's counter staff of Chicago are engaging directly with the public, refusing to be silenced, and forcing a larger, and for many very uncomfortable, conversation about labor, class, and abuse in the United States.