[Behind the Kitchen Door]

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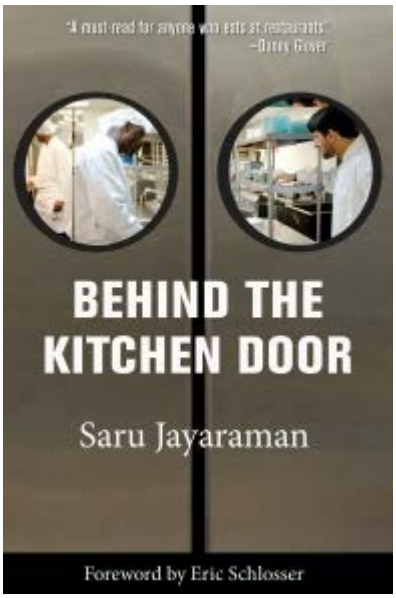

Abstract

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? Food Labor Research Center director Saru Jayaraman sets out to answer these questions by following the lives of restaurant workers in eight American cities. Blending personal narrative and investigative journalism, her book is an exploration of the political, economic, and moral implications of dining out.

To learn more or to purchase the book, visit: http://thewelcometable.net/behind-the-kitchen-door/

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Opinion

Viewpoints: Waiting tables, serving diners and receiving rock-bottom wages

By Saru Jayaraman

Special to The Bee

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With summer vacation season upon us, people on the road – or in places where it gets too hot to turn on the stove – are turning to America's restaurants to stay fed. And with the restaurant industry already reporting record profits, it's bound to be a big summer.

Unless you're one of the 10 million restaurant workers who work for tips, that is.

The restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the U.S. economy and, at the same time, the nation's lowest-paying employer. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, seven of the 11 lowest-paying jobs in America – including the two absolute lowest-paying – are restaurant jobs.

While celebrating record-high sales and profits, the National Restaurant Association continues to lobby Congress to keep the federal minimum wage at $7.25 an hour – and has played a major part in keeping the tipped minimum wage frozen at $2.13 an hour for the last 22 years. As a result, restaurant servers suffer from three times the poverty rate of the rest of the U.S. workforce and must use food stamps at double the rate of the rest of the U.S. workforce.

In a terrible irony, restaurant workers – the people who put food on our tables – cannot afford to feed themselves, let alone go on vacations of their own.

The National Restaurant Association argues that no one actually earns less than $3 an hour, since these workers make plenty of money in tips. Unfortunately, there are plenty of workers in America who can tell us otherwise.

Mike Morgan is a server in Detroit, where the minimum wage for tipped workers is $2.67 an hour. Morgan worked at a fine dining restaurant, hoping to earn good money in tips. In reality, he was lucky to bring home $200 a week. Most weeks, he didn't even have enough to put gas in his car to get to work. Unable to pay his rent, he moved in with his mother and started selling off his belongings to cover his bills.

Because the restaurant did not offer paid sick days, he frequently worked while sick so he wouldn't lose his job. Tips were never enough to bring Morgan up to the regular minimum wage of $7.25, but when he realized that the company must legally make up the difference, he complained and was fired.

Fortunately, restaurant workers may soon have something to celebrate. This March, Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, introduced the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2013, which would raise the regular minimum wage to $10.10 an hour and the tipped minimum wage to more than $7. Although the National Restaurant Association and many other business leaders complain that increasing the minimum wage will hurt profits and eliminate jobs, considerable research shows that an increased minimum wage not only does not cost jobs but boosts the economy by enabling more workers to have money to spend.

In fact, a recent University of California study shows that raising the minimum wage as proposed would not increase the total cost of food bought outside the home by more than a dime a day in an average U.S. household.

So as we look forward to taking it easy and eating in America's restaurants over our summer vacations, we can take action as consumers to help the workers who will be cooking, preparing and serving our meals. We can let Congress know that we support these workers getting a raise, and we can let restaurant management know the same, each time we eat out. As the industry celebrates and enjoys their record-high profits, they should hear that their customers would like them to share the joy with their workers.

Saru Jayaraman is the co-founder and co-director of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and director of the Food Labor Research Center at University of California, Berkeley. This article is part of an Oxfam America initiative to focus attention on poverty and low-wage work in America. Join the discussion at www.oxfamamerica.org/voices.

Saru Jayaraman, author of "Behind the Kitchen Door," has been at the vanguard of restaurant workers' rights for years. Photo: Lea Suzuki, ***The Chronicle***

Profile San Francisco Chronicle

Activist at vanguard of restaurant workers' rights

Joe Garofoli

Updated 10:25 pm, Saturday, January 11, 2014

Just once, Zachary Norris would like to eat a peaceful restaurant meal with his wife.

But that may never happen because his wife, Saru Jayaraman, sits down to dinner out and sees all around her evidence of the wealth disparity that is drawing attention from the Vatican to the White House to Google bus stops in San Francisco.

Jayaraman, a 38-year-old Oakland resident, is emerging as one of the nation's top activists for restaurant workers. She's trying to forge a link between two groups that are dear to many Bay Area residents but don't have a history of working together - organized labor and foodies.

Her goal is to improve the working conditions for the nation's 10 million restaurant workers, people who are twice as likely to be on public assistance as other Americans.

One in 5 private sector workers is involved with producing or delivering food, making it the nation's fastest-growing industry. Yet 7 of the 10 lowest-paying jobs in America fall somewhere along the food industry chain. In San Francisco, The Chronicle reported last month, the situation is so bad that line cooks are leaving the city in droves because they can't afford the rents.

"The food system now isn't a bad employer - it is the worst employer. The absolutely worst employer in the United States," Jayaraman said. "The food we eat creates the worst jobs in America."

Dining and activism

Her intense focus rarely wavers - ask her husband.

Norris is an activist himself - he and Jayaraman first locked eyes at a Rebellious Lawyering Conference, and now he's executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in San Francisco. But he rarely gets a reprieve from activism during a night out to dinner with his wife.

Typical was a meal they shared in Santa Cruz a while back. Jayaraman studied the better-paid wait staff - all white - then noticed that all the busers and back-of-the-house workers were Latino or other people of color.

She buttonholed the restaurant manager, explained her observations, "and started asking him about the promotional plan for the workers there," Norris said. "She does it in a respectful way.

"Yeah, about that time, I exited stage left," Norris said and laughed. "I thought it would be a good time to take our daughter outside for a walk."

National attention

Jayaraman has been at the vanguard of restaurant worker rights for a dozen years, long before the issue went mainstream in recent months with a series of walkouts by fast-food workers. Her 2013 book on racism, sexism and worker abuse in the restaurant world, "Behind the Kitchen Door," snagged her spots talking to PBS' Bill Moyers and HBO's Bill Maher, and a stream of national speaking gigs.

Americans appear to be receptive to raising low-wage workers' pay - a Quinnipiac University poll released last week found 71 percent support boosting the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour.

Jayaraman, however, has different targets, ones that are receiving less publicity: raising the minimum wage from $2.13 an hour for workers who receive tips, such as wait staffs, and combatting racial segregation in restaurants - something she says is just as big a problem in San Francisco as elsewhere.

"Look at the fine-dining restaurants," Jayaraman said. "Who is working in the kitchen? Who are the busboys and runners? Who is at the front of the house?"

'I was really angry'

Jayaraman has never worked in a restaurant, but she's been crusading for underserved communities since she was a 16-year-old student - at UCLA, having already graduated from high school.

"I was really angry," she said. Angry at how people treated her parents, immigrants from India who had moved to Southern California. Angry at how the culture treated her Latino classmates in high school and their families, many of whom worked in restaurants and other low-wage jobs.

"I think I channeled my anger and passion into wanting to do something to change what I saw happening to my high school classmates and what I saw happening to my family," Jayaraman said.

At 19, she headed east, to earn a law degree from Yale and a master's in public policy from Harvard. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks focused her energies on helping restaurant workers who had lost their livelihoods, which led to a broader campaign to improve working conditions in the industry and lower-paid employees' prospects for advancement.

She, Norris and their daughters, now ages 3 and 1, moved to the Bay Area a little over a year ago to rally for those working in the back of the restaurant, as well as to be closer to the family of her husband, who grew up in East Oakland.

Changing industry

She started an Oakland branch of the Restaurant Opportunities Center that she co-founded in New York. Last year, she was one of the first hires at the Berkeley Food Institute, affiliated with UC Berkeley, which works with faculty members and outside experts to transform the food industry, stitching together the interests of farm workers, environmentalists, nutrition experts, and law and policy experts.

Jayaraman is also among those working on the ground with what labor activists say is the largest-ever study of California restaurant employees in the hope of learning more about their working conditions.

"She's incredibly smart and dynamic, and she's filling in the gaps between labor and food," said Michael Pollan, a best-selling author about the food industry, who is also a journalism professor at UC Berkeley and member of the institute's executive board.

"So much in the food movement is about connecting dots, that the industry has disconnected and not allowed us to see - like the connection between what's going in the fields in Florida and the meal on your plate," Pollan said. "This is a politics of connections and showing people connections, and Saru is very effective in that kind of politics."

Eric Schlosser, author of the groundbreaking expose "Fast Food Nation," said Jayaraman is "incredibly disciplined, and she cares about these issues on a visceral level."

"Ultimately, I think she will be successful," Schlosser said. "We will be able to eat hamburgers and french fries without depending on the misery of the people cooking them for us."

Family's troubles

Jayaraman smiles easily and peppers her conversations with a loud, throaty laugh. But her intensity is obvious, whether she's talking to restaurant managers in Santa Cruz or big-city politicians.

That intensity was born in Jayaraman's upbringing in the Los Angeles County town of Whittier. Her father emigrated from India to find work as a software engineer, but he lost his job when Jayaraman was a teenager and had trouble breaking back into the field.

"Her family was doing well - and then they weren't," said Norris, her husband. "That plays a part in her understanding of these issues and how important it is to provide a base salary to live on."

She became conscious of her race. As a child, she recalled the family experiencing car trouble as they traveled across Utah. Seven different mechanics declined to service the car. During the 1991 Gulf War, she said, there were several times when people on the street screamed at them to "go back to Iraq."

"Most of my family would just say, 'Oh, whatever.' But I would be seething," Jayaraman said.

Soon after she arrived at UCLA, she heard about a public school in the San Fernando Valley where many of the girls were already mothers. After working with the students there, she formed a nonprofit - Women and Youth Supporting Each Other, known as WYSE - to mentor young women and offer them guidance on relationships and sexual health. It is still active, although Jayaraman is no longer involved in its daily activities.

Culture shock

She attended Yale Law School sight unseen - advisers told her that if she was accepted, she should go. She was in for a shock.

"Just the privilege that my classmates had ... was depressing," Jayaraman said. "I had classmates whose families owned islands or were senators or whose parents wrote the textbooks.

"It was so dramatically different from UCLA," she said. "I felt so isolated."

She found her calling - and her people - after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when she was living in New York as a labor organizer. She connected with servers who had worked at Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the destroyed World Trade Center. Among them was Fekkak Mamdouh, a Moroccan immigrant with degrees in physics and chemistry.

Mamdouh wanted to get financial benefits for the workers, who were now unemployed, and the families of those who died in the attacks.

"But Saru said, 'The hell with just doing that. We're going to organize everybody,' " Mamdouh said. They co-founded the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York.

"She is always thinking big," Mamdouh said. "Far down the road."

Helping N.Y. workers

Their first target was the former Windows owner. He had promised that he would do everything he could to hire the displaced workers for his next venture. But when he opened a new restaurant on Times Square a few months later, he hired only the managers from the destroyed restaurant.

Mamdouh and Jayaraman set up pickets outside, and the story exploded. Soon, the owner capitulated and hired all 33 members of the former Windows wait staff who wanted a job in the new restaurant.

A dozen years later, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United has roughly 13,000 restaurant workers, 100 employers and 2,000 consumer members in 32 cities. Over the past few years, the organization has opened its own restaurants called Colors in New York and Detroit, as employee-owned cooperatives that pay wages above the local standard.

Now, Jayaraman is facing a different challenge - one of merging the fast-growing army of foodies with the power of shrinking labor unions. She sees promise in the short-term walkouts of nonunionized workers at fast-food restaurants to call attention to the campaign for a minimum wage that people can live on.

"You're seeing more low-wage people out on the street now than we have seen in decades," Jayaraman said. "There's something happening right now. You can feel it. It's palpable."

'Diffuse' groups

Lots of people who "are not political at all have become excited (in general) because of food," she said. "But the challenge is that it is so diffuse that there isn't one institution or seven institutions that you could say lead the food movement. There's 50 or 60 - and lots of institution-less people involved."

But, "Wow, what a potential opportunity for the two of them to come together," Jayaraman said. "And what a danger if they don't. Because what people don't realize is that we have the exact same enemies."

The top mutual enemy, she says: a corporate-run food industry that doesn't want a unionized workforce or anybody telling it to limit the amount of sugary drinks it can sell or how it should raise chickens or what pesticides it can spray on crops.

Jayaraman wants labor activists and food fans to listen to each other. Labor needs to talk more about not just better pay, but also better access to healthy food for lower-income people, she said.

And foodies, Jayaraman said, must better connect their passion to political solutions.

"Every book you read by a food luminary - every one - talks about how the problem is corporate control over the food system," Jayaraman said. "But the solutions are always, 'Go to the farmers' market.' 'Buy an heirloom tomato.' 'Buy organic.' It's always very individual and consumptive. It's not about targeting these corporations and loosening their control over our democracy, which is at the root of everything."

Joe Garofoli is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: jgarofoli@sfchronicle.com. Twitter: @joegarofoli