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Behind The Kitchen Door



Synopsis

"Sustainability is about contributing to a society that everybody benefits from, not just going organic because you don't want to die from cancer or have a difficult pregnancy. What is a sustainable restaurant? It's one in which as the restaurant grows, the people grow with it." —from *Behind the Kitchen Door*

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, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Miami, Detroit, and New Orleans. Blending personal narrative and investigative journalism, Jayaraman shows us that the quality of the food that arrives at our restaurant tables depends not only on the sourcing of the ingredients. Our meals benefit from the attention and skill of the people who chop, grill, sauté, and serve. *Behind the Kitchen Door* is a groundbreaking exploration of the political, economic, and moral implications of dining out. Jayaraman focuses on the stories of individuals, like Daniel, who grew up on a farm in Ecuador and sought to improve the conditions for employees at Del Posto; the treatment of workers behind the scenes belied the high-toned Slow Food ethic on display in the front of the house. Increasingly, Americans are choosing to dine at restaurants that offer organic, fair-trade, and free-range ingredients for reasons of both health and ethics. Yet few of these diners are aware of the working conditions at the restaurants themselves. But whether you eat haute cuisine or fast food, the well-being of restaurant workers is a pressing concern, affecting our health and safety, local economies, and the life of our communities. Highlighting the roles of the 10 million people, many immigrants, many people of color, who bring their passion, tenacity, and vision to the American dining experience, Jayaraman sets out a bold agenda to raise the living standards of the nation's second-largest private sector workforce — and ensure that dining out is a positive experience on both sides of the kitchen door.

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Customer Reviews

Increasingly the consumer is concerned about the sustainability of the food they eat, how it has been produced and other ethical concerns. Yet often the treatment their fellow man has received whilst tending to the ingredients, particularly in so-called developed countries, is often forgotten. The same "lack of concern" can also exist in the hospitality industry up to when it is placed on your table. But do we care? This book lifts the lid on something many people tend not to think about, whether by accident or on purpose. Written from a U.S.-perspective, an objective, thoughtful look is given to an interesting topic - many people will enthuse or even obsess about the provenance of their diet and ingredients, some might even consider the plight of foreign workers who might tend the crops, but not so many will think about what happens to those in their own country who handle or prepare the food as it completes its journey. The author founded a national restaurant workers organisation to help campaign for a fairer deal for the industry and within this book the lives of typical restaurant workers in New York City, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Miami, Detroit, and New Orleans are placed under the research microscope. The reading is far from comfortable. It is a lot more than just the (abhorrent to European standards) practice that wait staff must effectively live on tips. Poor wages, discriminatory labour practices, often unsafe and unsanitary working conditions and general exploitation are all brought up. Of course one cannot label an entire industry as bad, but equally the examples cited are apparently far from being unique, rare and unheard of.

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