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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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"For all its talk of organic foods and sustainability, the restaurant industry pays little mind to the health and welfare of its own low-wage employees. In this persuasive volume, Jayaraman draws attention to servers, bussers, runners, cooks, and dishwashers across the country 'struggling to support themselves and their families under the shockingly exploitative conditions that exist behind most restaurant kitchen doors.' . . . Jayaraman champions employee causes and argues fervently against discrimination, giving restaurant owners, diners, and readers considerable food for thought." [Publishers Weekly](#) (11 February 2013) "The author reveals . . . [how] many restaurants steal workers' wages and tips, and put white workers in the best jobs out front while assigning those of color to the worst kitchen work. Women are harassed and not promoted. Few food workers have insurance or even sick leave, which is a problem not just for the workers; patrons also suffer when ill workers prepare and serve meals. . . . This book will leave readers angry at the injustices detailed within, queasy about eating out, and much better tippers." [Library Journal](#) (15 February 2013) "Behind the Kitchen Door is a powerful expose of the labor practices of the contemporary restaurant industry. . . . Throughout the book, the author brings her points alive by providing profiles and stories from individual restaurant workers." [Janice Fine, ILRReview](#) (October 2014) "With Behind the Kitchen Door, Saru Jayaraman has introduced a fresh and essential perspective on our culture's food obsessions and dining habits. By highlighting the lives and circumstances of workers who are often unseen and unheard, she has helped us see that labor is a key ingredient of authentic sustainability, and greatly enriched our understanding of those people who have [whether we have recognized it or not](#) [been part of some of the most important celebrations of our lives.](#)" [Danny Glover, actor, producer, and cofounder of Louverture Films](#) "Half of all Americans eat out at least once a week. The restaurant has become our second kitchen. In her groundbreaking new book, Saru Jayaraman exposes a missing plotline in the story of our food: the story of who's behind the kitchen door, how they're treated, and

why it matters. Hers is a captivating, rousing story. If you care about where your food comes from, this book is for you. Read this book, get inspired, and join the fight for fair food behind the kitchen door." —Anna Lappé, founder of the Real Food Media Project and bestselling author of *Diet for a Hot Planet* "The poorest paid workers in America are the ones most likely to be cooking your food and washing your dishes. Saru Jayaraman tells their stories with searing analysis and vital compassion in this landmark book. She shows how the most exploited aren't just victims, but survivors organizing for dignity and safety in the food system. And in so doing, she helps us understand that sustainable food isn't just about how organic or local the food is, but how high workers can hold their heads." —Raj Patel, bestselling author of *The Value of Nothing* and *Stuffed and Starved*

Saru Jayaraman is cofounder and codirector of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and director of the Food Labor Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Eric Schlosser is the author of *Fast Food Nation*, *Reefer Madness*, and *Chew On This*, and he has been a contributor to *The Atlantic* since 1994.

I worked as a server in a resort hotel when I was in college, and again in food prep in a college cafeteria as a retiree. It has gotten worse, not better, for these workers. We do take too much for granted when we "eat out." This book holds those doors open and introduces the reader to the life of the servers and kitchen staff. The first issue is of course the ridiculously low pay, but the second is the lack of paid sick time, so workers come to work because they cannot afford not to, and everyone else pays the price. I gave this book four stars only because I thought it needed a stronger editor.

This is a really important book to read if you've never given any thought to how the workers who prep your food and bring it to you in restaurants are treated. For example, it's astounding that restaurant workers don't receive any options for sick time - so think about it, their choice is either to miss work and lose an important part of their paycheck or show up and work sick. That means the person who preps your food, cooks it or brings it the table could be sick and make you sick. The research in this book finds that it would only cost the customer 1% or 2% more for restaurants to provide workers with paid sick days - I was surprised at how little paid sick days would cost and it made me wonder why restaurants don't just offer them. The book focuses primarily on people who used to work in the restaurant in the World Trade Center towers in NY and what happened to them

after September 11 and their experiences in the restaurant industry. I was hoping for something that was more ethnographic and offered a more detailed view into the daily experiences of a few restaurant workers in different places, along with the data about working conditions, so I was disappointed at the narrow focus on NY/World Trade Center workers. It's also not especially well written - the writing is not very engaging and often a little awkward; not what I would have expected from a university press. Overall, though, this is a book worth reading to get people thinking about the human costs of eating out.

This is a very thought provoking book dealing with the restaurant industry. The wages, the health care lack for most workers, looks and language matter - and often ethnicity make getting "out of the kitchen" almost impossible. The low minimum wage (\$2.13 at the time this book was written) and the tips do not add up to a LIVING WAGE. All of us are urged to be vigilant when we dine out. Take note of the way the employees are treated talk to the staff and interact with them as well as the BOSS.

Intelligent and informative, a combination of statistics and some life stories, this book reveals the plight of those who work in restaurants--or at least most of them. Except for the celebrity chefs, most workers in the food service industry are poorly paid, work long hours and often when sick, and for the most part are exploited. Because many of them are illegal immigrants or people who do not speak English, they are unable to advocate for themselves, and this book seeks both to display their working conditions and advocate for their improvement. It is in turn didactic and full of specific recommendations for what restaurant users can do to improve the situation.

This is really shocking expose for someone who lives in California. the browner you are or the further back in the kitchen the exploitation can be extreme. A minority of states require restaurant workers receive minimum wage (California, Oregon, Nevada are some of the few) workers can earn as little at \$2.13 an hour plus tips. My only negative comment is the restaurant business is very competitive and the author fails to point out that owners and managers can be the position to really need cheap labor to survive, always the gorilla in the room.

In recent years we have focused on the living conditions of the animals raised for our food. Finally, we are examining the living conditions of the people who serve us that food. This book does an excellent job of integrating large scale research results with personal vignettes. The author presents

stories of restaurant workers who are terribly exploited and abused, juxtaposed with stories of those whose spirit and determination lead them to fight against this oppression. As a result the book raises consciousness , inspires hope, and provides practical suggestions on how consumers can work for a more just and spiritually wholesome restaurant industry. For those of us who wish to choose compassionate consumption, the book is a beacon.

It's a great read. Now I ask almost all the service help who wait on me what is the starting hourly wage for a person in this establishment. Most service help are really happy that someone cares about their situation.

I actually just had my first conversation at a restaurant about pay and working conditions for the workers. It was at Freddie's a hamburger chain (a damn good one too). They pay minimum wage. No benefits. But I could tell the owner was defensive and had been asked this question before. The premise of this book is a good one. Politely let the owners of places you eat know that you care about working conditions and pay. Now that I have done it once I can do it again.

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