

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Whose Food Revolution? Perspectives from a Food Service Training Academy

By Doris Friedensohn



FINGERS OF BUDDHA PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND

**T**he poorest among us, those who might benefit most from the Food Revolution - - in relation to their health and well being - - are the furthest removed from its reach. Ironically or not so ironically, this includes food service workers who labor each day, often in the shadow of the Revolution, feeling "the sting" of exclusion.

I know some of these food service workers. For almost a decade now, I've been writing and telling their stories. I've met my subjects not quite on their own ground - - at home or at work - - but on common ground, so to speak, at the Community FoodBank of New Jersey in Hillside, on the edge of Newark. The protagonists of my stories have all been students at the FoodBank's free 14-week Food Service Training Academy (FSTA). The majority of them now work or are looking for work "in the industry."

How did I get to the FoodBank -- and why -- you may be wondering? In 2003, I was deep into a memoir about my life as an eater -- about the dizzying choices available to a culinary-conscious, health-aware, and globe-trotting American. Couscous or curry, sushi or souvlaki, paella or pozole? Lettuce grown where? Hogs slaughtered how? Who sells "the best cheese in the world"? Even as I extolled my options, I knew about neighborhoods in Harlem and Newark without supermarkets, where vegetables at the local bodega were anything but fresh, and where "choice" was between McDonald's, Burger King, and Taco Bell. Shouldn't this "other world" cast a shadow (at the very least) over my wry celebration of adventurous eating and America's culinary diversity?

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A friend suggested that I visit the FoodBank, where I was introduced to the Executive Chef of the Training Academy. His description of his program as "an intervention in the desperate lives of some very poor people" caught my attention. I wanted to watch the training process and get to know the trainees. Before I knew it, I was hooked. After my memoir was published in 2006, with a chapter on the FSTA, I became a regular visitor. Two to four days a week for the next five years, I hung out in the kitchen, the classroom, and the FoodBank's cafeteria - - observing cooks-in-training and asking many questions. But mostly I listened. In 2010 I invited photographer Steve Riskind to join me. The results of our collaboration are the book, *Cooking for Change: Tales from a Food Service Training Academy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Full Court Press, 2011) and a traveling exhibit, "Cooking for Change; Job Training at an Urban FoodBank."

The people we came to know, men and women, ages 20 to 70, are predominantly African American and mostly from the greater Newark area. They are, most of them, glad to have witnesses to their struggles with poverty, life in the streets, and time in prison and rehab. Often, they weep when acknowledging self-doubts; they drop their heads and sometimes their voices when describing efforts to stay clean. But almost always there's the hope, asserted

defiantly or dreamily, for the proverbial second (or third) chance at employment in the mainstream economy.

Many food service workers earn what's called a livelihood by helping others eat better. The "others" are usually richer, more knowledgeable about diet, more intimate with their physicians, and healthier, too. YES, food service workers employed in upscale restaurants, retirement communities, corporate dining facilities, country clubs, elite universities, and fancy private schools have a special experience. Often enough, they prepare organic Tuscan Kale salads with lovingly raised, small breasted chickens, fair trade quinoa, and freshly made mango salsa. They might even eat these same choice items a couple of hours earlier or later at a staff table (if there is such a thing). But their children won't be so lucky, and their partners won't be either. In fact, no one in their neighborhood will be so lucky - - unless they happen to have a similar, low-paying service job.

In short, there are select battalions of underpaid cooks who are out there - - on the front lines of an Apartheid-style revolution: a Revolution which caters to those in the dining room while cordoning off those in the kitchen. To put the case somewhat differently: when it comes to the Food Revolution, we're not seeing much trickle down. This is a sad state of affairs. Tragic, a word which shouldn't be overused, is the adjective I prefer. Those on the fringe of all the high-minded talk about eating better - - just eat less, eat more vegetables, and cook them yourself - - are eating bitterness. Much as they'd like to be inspired by Frances Moore Lappé, Michael Pollan, Alice Waters, Eric Schlosser, Mark Bittman, and Carlo Petrini, they don't quite see the pay-off in their own lives.

They've got a point. How do we speak honestly to people about a Revolution-in-the-Making without lying too much about their chances of enjoying its benefits? I've tried, without great success. After much talk with the chefs about the role of Big Questions in the training of students, I've put my skills on the line: giving short talks to groups of 30-45 students (followed by steamy, silly, or lackluster discussions) on culture and culinary habits, ethnic eating in New Jersey, Industrial Agriculture, and, yes, the Food Revolution.

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The individual students I've come to know are optimistic in spite of their experiences. They would be angry, many of them, to hear me suggest that they are eating bitterness. They would be angry because that reality (or possibility) threatens the narrative they are desperately attached to: a narrative of second chances and hope which it's also the business of job training programs to promote.

There's a second, self-defining narrative which figures, sometimes quite powerfully, in their thinking and feeling. It's about food as a realm of creativity, nurture, and community. In a field where the pay is poor and labor conditions range from adequate to terrible, most of these trainees have an emotional investment in cooking. Preparing good food is life-sustaining - - like sex, sunlight, and sports. People who cook, they like to imagine, are uniquely empowered, not just to fill bellies but also to give pleasure to others.

Pleasure is no small matter. For the FSTA students I know, there's pleasure attached to familiar foods; to foods that are chemically pleasing with their sweet, salt, and fat flavors; to foods that are good to look at, surprising to the taste buds, and energizing. There's pleasure attached to foods that are soothing - - like a lover's touch or a mother's breast. The Theater of Food is another source of pleasure. Many food service workers, mesmerized by Food Channel Competitions and tales of Celebrity Chefs, harbor their own dreams of Cooking-as-Glory. Related to these sensual and soul-satisfying pleasures is the notion of "plenty." Abundance is a beautiful thing. Restraint, by comparison, seems ungenerous, even small-minded.

In a world of increasing and increasingly visible inequality, it's easy to understand why, for many food service trainees, missing out on the Food Revolution may be a matter of indifference. They'll gladly take home those well-marbled steaks and imported triple crème cheeses that the country-club set is forgoing - - that is, unless their cholesterol levels are off the charts. Many food service trainees need to think twice about their health - - or the health issues of others in their households. In fact, these concerns make what little they know about the Food Revolution both too painful to acknowledge and infuriating.

Repression and rage are a bad combination in our political culture: they are paralyzing - - or numbing like booze or a drug. "Don't hit me with stuff I can't have!" That's what I see on the faces of students when Michael Pollan appears on screen in *Food, Inc.* talking glowingly about organic heirloom tomatoes and delicate baby lettuces, picked 24 hours earlier and available at farmers' markets. "Wait a minute! In Newark! We ain't got no decent supermarket - - and this guy wants us takin' two buses to buy stuff we can't afford." Then there's always a

student who is quick to announce, "After school, I'll grab me a bus to McDonald's and give these achin' feet a rest. Besides, my kids, they love Big Macs and feel good when we go out. And, yeh, I'll feel good, too, after chopping onions in the kitchen all morning and being on clean-up after lunch."

Students at the Food Service Training Academy know that good ingredients are out there, at Whole Foods and elsewhere - - and out of their reach. The same is true for clothes, jewelry, cars, kitchenware, you name it. They know - - even if they don't know exactly what all those good things might be; even if they don't care to know - - or don't dare to imagine them. Desire is normal. But too much desire is dangerous to their precarious balance.

In a related vein, FSTA students don't know they're in the trap of Industrial Agriculture. They don't know until

someone like me insists they look at the film "Food, Inc," and take in the dark side of its message. They need to see cows locked in feeding lots knee deep in shit; they need to see chickens so profitably fattened and big breasted that their legs can barely support them. They need to see underpaid immigrant workers butchering hogs during 12 hour shifts - - on machines that are known to slice off part of a finger or two. They need to hear farmers explain that they're terrified to use their own, chemical-free seeds because Monsanto, with its seed monopoly, will collude with the banks to squeeze them out of business.

Watching *Food, Inc.* makes food service trainees twitchy with anger. It leaves them feeling depressed. The System is too complex - - and mystifying - - for them to comprehend; it's too

dangerous to mess with. They don't mind if some idealists think they can change things - - and say they're willing to go to jail for their beliefs. But not them. They've been in jail - or their fathers, brothers and friends have, and jail ain't no fun. Besides, they're doing this training program to stay straight. So why am I fucking with them about things they can't change?

In fact, Change - - with a capital C - - and job training are often at loggerheads. Job training, at the FSTA and elsewhere, is geared to producing compliant workers: people who will show up every day on time; people who will say "yes, chef," who will work efficiently, with a smile, and with minimum waste. The boss doesn't want to hear smartass comments that he's cutting corners with the chili,



FROSTING PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND

putting smelly peppers in the sauce, or using ingredients way past their expiration date. Job training teaches people - - many who have never been in the mainstream workforce - - what the system requires of them and how to get along. In addition, a tight job market (how's that for a euphemism?) discourages risk-taking. Unemployment in their neighborhoods has taught food service trainees and workers just how expendable they are.

FSTA chefs, who sympathize with the aspirations of their students - - and worry about their health - - have their own bottom-line concerns. Here's an illustration. Five mornings a week, beginning before 7 am (class starts at 8:30), crews of students make breakfast, to order, for themselves and the staff. The operative notion is "A Hearty Breakfast": eggs, bacon, pork or turkey sausages, fried potatoes and onions, muffins, bagels, croissants, and sticky buns plus juice and coffee. When I asked the Executive Chef why he wasn't promoting a Healthy Breakfast of yogurt, granola, and fruit, his immediate response was "yogurt's too expensive."

The Food Revolution, to be successful, requires that we rethink and renounce our bad food habits. As we all know, resisting great Belgian chocolates is hard. Saying "no" to seconds of perfectly grilled, lemon-drenched salmon with a touch of sautéed broccoli rabe may be harder. I'll confess that drinking no more than two glasses of wine before dinner is the hardest of these disciplines. For food service students, who count every dollar - - and sometimes every quarter - - the terms and stakes are often different. A heaping, "hearty" (but heart-unfriendly) American breakfast, maybe 1500 calories worth, which costs \$12 in the neighborhood diner, is a free perk of the training program. Who wants to say no to that?

"We like **our** food," food service trainees tell me all the time: deep fried chicken, well-cooked greens, well-done meat, well-buttered bread, gooey mac and cheese, and whipped cream on multi-layered cakes. Like most of us, they want what they know and have always enjoyed. It's personal. It's cultural. It's identity politics. What they **don't** want is what upper-middle-class white people, who go to the gym all the time, think is good for them.

When I started working on a book about the FSTA, back in 2006, I already had a title, "Cooking for Change." No, I wasn't thinking about the Food Revolution. I was focused, somewhat naively, on Opportunity. What I saw was a chance for people to be trained for jobs that were and still are plentiful - - jobs that are not likely to be outsourced or replaced by machines, at least not in the immediate future. These jobs, paying more than the minimum wage, sometimes even come with benefits.

In these last five years, since the banks, in collusion with the government, threw our world into disarray, I'm seeing the terrible vulnerability of the poor more clearly. The Fabled American Dream, which job training evokes, looks to me like a glass half empty. Or worse. However, most FSTA students and graduates are determined to see the glass as half full, and they act accordingly. They do what they must to get through the training program, to find work and hold on to a job. They do this even when they know that their wages probably won't cover their expenses.

Perhaps they're more optimistic about the democratic potential of the Food Revolution than I am. If they could afford to live in Brooklyn, with a friendly food co-op down the block, they surely would be. Still, as masters of the art of Making Do, these gritty individuals may surprise me and surprise themselves. They may actually start planting community gardens - - as some of their children and grandchildren are doing - - in downtown Newark and elsewhere around the area. If local churches agitate for more farmers' markets, they may sign petitions and ring their neighbors' doorbells to drum up support. When they learn that farmers' markets accept food stamps, they'll be even more likely to pay attention. In fact, some of them have kids in the Greater Newark Conservancy's summer program, "Farm to Table and Then Some," where they will learn about food justice, food cultures, and even food waste.

Recently, when I spoke to FSTA students about the City of Newark's "Rent a (Garden) Plot Program," for a dollar a year, three women took down the name and contact number of the program administrator. "We

should try that," one of them said. "It's not really so hard." Indeed, some routes to the Food Revolution are easier than others. For example, if their ministers organize Walks for Health or establish "No Fry Zones" in their church kitchens (as has happened in rural Mississippi), these students and their friends may spread the word.

Here's a footnote on "spreading the word." There are Food Revolution evangelists, with roots among the African American poor, who are doing a bang up job. Will Allen, the founder of Growing Power Inc., a farm and community food center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a MacArthur Award winner and a pioneer in urban agriculture. Allen's projects promote access to fresh, safe, affordable, and nutritious foods for the poor, including those in the inner city. If only he'd come to Newark; if only he'd run a few workshops at the FoodBank.

Food service students, I've been arguing, are torn between old habits of denial and a new uneasiness. Yes, they recognize the health costs of eating as they do, as poor people do, and they believe that their children



KNIFE SKILLS PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND

deserve better. That's why they've come through the FSTA. That's why, day after difficult day, they curse the system and tease one another while looking for hugs, exchanging

hi-fives, and trying desperately to stay hopeful. That's why there's still a chance that Michael Pollan's practices can become theirs.



MOPPING PHOTO BY STEVE RISKIND



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