

Book Review: California Cuisine and Just Food

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California Cuisine and Just Food shows that the progress toward food democracy in the San Francisco Bay area has been significant: innovators have built on familiar yet quite radical understandings of regional cuisine to generate new, broadly shared expectations about food quality, and activists have targeted the problems that the conventional food system creates. **Joel Krupa** is impressed by the undeniable synergies between social justice and food on display in this book.



California Cuisine and Just Food. Fairfax, Dyble, Tor Guthey, Gwin, Moore and Sokolove. MIT Press. October 2012.

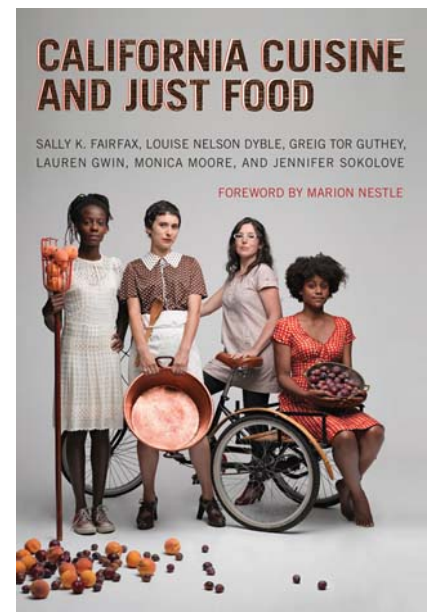
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In his gripping (and breath-takingly graphic) early twentieth-century novel *The Jungle*, socialist Upton Sinclair chronicled the injustices of capitalistic meat packing practices in excruciating detail. The results of his Chicago-based, fictionalized portrayal of immigrants working in livestock factories speak for themselves, as Sinclair's best-selling book made him perhaps the most famous activist in history to explicitly link food production with social justice (e.g. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*).

Although *The Jungle* inadvertently focussed the bulk of public attention on the importance of reforming food quality (rather than [Sinclair's desired emphasis on worker welfare standards](#)), a movement was afoot and, to this day, the issue of holistically 'socially just food' (i.e., food that cares for people, the environment, and animals) continues to occupy the time of a wide arrange of academics and practitioners.

In *California Cuisine and Just Food*, the undeniable synergies between social justice and food are on full display as researchers Sally Fairfax, Louise Dyble, Greig Tor Guthey, and Lauren Gwin join forces with activists Monica Moore and Jennifer Sokolove to tackle the dirty worlds of industrial agriculture, confined animal raising, and poorly treated field workers. Collectively, they show that the unethical status quo is mutable by utilising a San Francisco Bay Area case study that draws out the complementarities between interconnected issues like food democracy, public health, agricultural sustainability, healthy food access, and workplace fairness. Any academic looking at food systems, sustainability, or natural resources would benefit from reading this book.

[Professor Marion Nestle](#) opens the tome with an important bit of sobering context – food production and food services in the United States alone are worth over a trillion dollars (with the total global value being several times this amount). It would be an understatement, therefore, to note that the entrenched barriers to more sustainable food systems will be difficult to push aside. The authors are certainly aware of the still-omnipresent, seemingly immovable hurdles and do not shy away from cataloguing them in-depth as they outline an exquisitely insightful historical overview of food organisations in California. Even though they emphasize some of the positive elements of food systems history, the entire first section of their work is mostly devoted to diligently chronicling the sordid racialisation, inegalitarianism, and government-industry collusion practices that define California-based food procurement. At times, the narrative even verges into the unbelievable – one section recounts that even ostensibly sacrosanct laws were not immune from revision, while other chapters highlight the stunning tactics used by big business to divide and marginalise any prospective farm worker unionisers that might unsettle enormous agribusiness profits.



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The book's most original contribution, however, comes in the analysis of food distribution patterns and food culture near San Francisco. This analysis is contained in latter sections, and stem from the authors' extensive hands-on and academic knowledge of the region. The Bay Area has long been a veritable hub of food innovation, [particularly in the organics domain](#) and Fairfax et al. do an excellent job of drawing out the various components that comprise it. As these authors explain, the famous restaurant [Chez Panisse](#) is only the tip of the Bay Area's more socially just food culture. From Oakland-based organic bakeries to ethical goat cheese farms, vegetable collectives to family milk operations, and community-conscious hospital institutions to organic free lunch programs engineered by enlightened school district meal planners, the book presents a vast array of opportunities that have been harnessed by actors, big and small, in highly creative ways.

What broader take-away messages can be gleaned from this volume? Two come instantly to mind. First, we need to revamp conventional food structures, scaling up elements of 'privileged food' (inter alia, living wages for workers, pesticide-free environments, and humane animal treatment) to make them the norm. It is unconscionable that the status quo – especially in the meat and dairy industries – revolves around the abuse and mistreatment of some of the most vulnerable and defenseless creatures among us. Growing global adoption of these regressive methods is undeniably worrisome, and efforts should be undertaken to reverse these trends by adopting many of the ideas contained in this text.

Second, the authors argue that we must search for solutions that accomplish multiple goals simultaneously. This very well could (and should) be the rallying cry of all future environmental activist efforts, as all transactions lead to distributive effects which dictate that certain actors will inevitably bear costs whenever an existing state of affairs is altered significantly. Accordingly, we need to present a viable alternative to conventional food production that placates as many of the potentially affected parties as much as possible while still remaining true to reasonable principles of progressivism, justice and fairness.

The authors of this book recount several valuable (but potentially unpalatable, at least in some circles) examples, ranging from for-profit urban agriculture to quasi-ethical beef to partial unionisation for farmworkers in select areas to finding clever ways to re-divert waste streams. All these examples beg a question; namely, how far do you go for the sake of compromise? You must start somewhere, argue these pundits. This reviewer, for one, agrees whole-heartedly.

Joel Krupa is an energy and environment researcher at the University of Toronto, studying under Dr. Danny Harvey. He was educated at Oxford. [Read more reviews by Joel.](#)