



[Tracie McMillan](#)

The undercover journalist

By [Amy Halloran](#)
May 10, 2012

In an effort to illustrate the American food system from the inside out, and learn more about the people who work and eat within that system, journalist [Tracie McMillan](#) worked undercover in Walmart's produce section, in California produce fields, and at an Applebee's kitchen. McMillan's new book, [The American Way of Eating](#), frames her experience with facts and figures to deliver a well-rounded portrait of the working — and eating — conditions at the lowest rungs of our food system.

[Tracie McMillan this weekend](#)

This Saturday, May 12, McMillan will be speaking at the [Brooklyn Food Coalition Conference](#), a huge free event with a book-sized program of workshops and discussions on changing the Brooklyn food system.

McMillan's work is generating a lot of discussion. The radio talk-show host [Rush Limbaugh](#) [spent 45 minutes on air lambasting it](#); he and other political conservatives see McMillan's book as an attack on free enterprise.

As McMillan tours, the book is fostering dialogues at events around the country, such as a talk about farm labor at [CUESA](#) (the Center for Urban Education and Sustainable Agriculture) in San Francisco. In Detroit, McMillan kicked off a dinner series at the restaurant [COLORS](#); the Talk Soup series pairs \$5 soup suppers with conversations about social justice.

Where did the book begin?

I was really frustrated with very well-intentioned affluent folks saying that the way we fix the food system is we have everyone pay more money for their food. For the families I reported on, that wasn't a realistic option. For the families I grew up with, that wasn't an option. The thing that was most frustrating of all is that these families cared about their health and cared about their food.



Tracie McMillan

I wanted to figure out how to have a conversation about food that really broadened it from talking about food as a luxury product to something that everybody understands and gets at a base level. What we really need to do is for everyone to get easy and affordable access to food. How do we do that?

Is your book helping to advance that conversation?

Only time will tell what part of the conversation moves. In terms of farm labor, that's just really, really hard stuff to move, because the growers are really well-organized and have a lot more resources than farm-labor advocates. It's also difficult because there's a strong narrative in American culture of the family farm. I've had growers with 25 ranches spread across California say their farm is a family farm.

Often people say if we increase wages for farmworkers, that means food wouldn't be affordable for everybody, so we couldn't possibly do that. But if you could figure out how to pass on that increase to consumers or retailers, if you could just make sure that any increase price, which would be really tiny, go to farmworkers, it wouldn't really change anything for growers. [At the CUESA event, it was noted that Philip Martin, a labor economist, has said that if you [increase farmworker wages by 40 percent](#), the average American family budget would increase by \$15 a year.]

In the course of researching your book, once you told some fellow farmworkers that you were a writer, they said that people would believe your story, and that that would change things.

That was really heartbreaking. A friend — I think I call him Diego in the book — was so confident that if you just told people that this was going on, they would care. Most of my professional instincts tell me that this is not true. Most of my experience says no, it's not enough to just say this is happening. Which is why we are doing some work trying to get this into the hands of legislators and policymakers in D.C. and California.

“We” meaning your publisher?

Yes, [Scribner](#), and through my fellowship at the [Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism](#) at Brandeis, which is a great institution. I'm blessed to be with them. It's an unpaid fellowship, but what they do is help build outreach and amplify the work they support.

Is this activist journalism, working toward social justice?

I take my label as a journalist really seriously. I don't feel like it's activist journalism, because I'm not advocating for anything too specific. For me, I would consider the book a success just if it shifted this discussion around our food to focus on working families in America, for whom cost is an issue.

One of the things that was shocking to me with Rush Limbaugh is he said, it's not enough for Walmart to go into low-income communities, it's got to have high-quality produce? He really thinks there shouldn't be high-quality produce. Most of our discussions around food access assume supermarkets have good-quality produce, and often they don't. If all the produce in your market tastes like cardboard, why would you keep eating it?



You mention doubling farmers-market coupons for food-stamp users as a possible solution.

People are actually using them when they're offered. If they really didn't like fruit and vegetables, they wouldn't buy them; they wouldn't go and do that.

We're talking about reforming agricultural subsidies. We subsidize all this production, end up with all this extra corn, what do we do with it? How do we make it into food everyone can eat? How do you create demand for fresh fruits and vegetables? Subsidizing demand is a great way to do that, because that creates a steady demand for farmers who want to do that kind of farming. But it doesn't create an incentive to go crazy and plant more tomatoes than anyone could use.

You see cooking as a skill that needs to be reinserted into our foodscape. Given what the food industry spends on advertising, how can we overcome the impression that cooking is a burden?

I struggle with that question a lot. I think there's something really empowering about being able to

cook for yourself. In cooking classes, I see that again and again with kids. [Primarily a poverty reporter, McMillan says her interest in food was sparked by working on a story about a sustainable-cooking class taught by [Bryant Terry](#).]

Cooking is not that much work if you know how to do it well, and that's a really big if. The level of cooking literacy you need to pull something out of the fridge and just make dinner without a plan — that's a fairly high level of kitchen comfort and literacy. But I do think that this is why you see such an interest in DIY stuff. Americans like being able to do things by themselves. I don't think Americans want to be babied by anybody, either the government or corporations like the food industry. So if you give people the tools to take care of themselves, I think they will do it.

I did this experiment in the book. I totally expected Hamburger Helper would be cheaper, but it was more expensive, and it was one minute difference in time. But you have to know how to make gravy.

[Amy Halloran](#) lives on half an urban acre in upstate New York, and writes about the changing foodscape. Her work is kept at [amyhalloran.net](#).