

Inside the house, an older woman enters the kitchen and picks up a tupperware dish from the pile stacked near the table. She asks Rosario where the "*chicharrón*" is. Chicharrón loosely translates to crackling or pork rind and usually includes layers of meat, fat, and skin. Rosario points with her finger to a cooler near the door. The woman fills the tupperware with chicharrón pieces. All of the food is well-received, but the chicharrón is especially popular; several people take some for later or leave chewing on pieces, wiping their greasy hands on napkins.

It's 8:15 in the evening, and another wave of guests is pulling in. Overwhelmed, Rosario wipes her brow, watching as someone attempts to park a car close to one of the tables at the edge of the lawn. Samuel approaches to discuss the situation. If more people keep pouring in, they may need to move some of the tables to make room for the cars. Despite worrying about the parking situation, Rosario and Samuel are happy with the turnout. The guests seem to be enjoying themselves, and everyone is eating plenty.

These events are special, giving Rosario an opportunity to showcase her cooking and remember Mexico. It has taken a lot of time, work, and money, but it feels worth it. As guests wave goodbye, plastic containers of chicharrón in hand, new ones arrive. They are greeted by a remake of a classic Mexican song. The adults prefer the old version, but the kids, shaking their hips to the beat, love the remake.

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## CONCLUSIONS

## THINKING OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

The stories of the nine families featured in this book are a testament to the complex, messy, joyful, creative, fraught process of putting food on the table. And these families are not alone. Americans are increasingly strapped for money and time, contending with rising costs of education, healthcare, and housing; longer commutes to work; and growing uncertainty about the safety of our food system. In this context, sustaining the determination to put a decent meal on the table can feel like a meaningful act, undertaken by those who want to demonstrate care for their families and the environment.

In fact, many see family meals as a way parents can combat our fast-paced, technologically saturated, consumer-driven world. The dinner table is positioned by everyone from social workers to nutritionists as a modern-day refuge, a place where families come together, with the hope of staying together.

Increasingly, foodies also see cooking as a political act. Spending the time and energy to make a home-cooked meal, some argue, constitutes a vote against mass-produced, processed food. It's a way to resist the standardization and industrialization of our food and keep our children safe. Home cooking is a way to demonstrate our commitment to being good parents and our nostalgia for another time, a time that we imagine as simpler.

Family meals have long been symbolically laden with lofty aspirations. The valorization of family meals sprang up during the industrial era, coinciding with the new idea, and ideal, of the nuclear family as a retreat from the public realm. With more men (and many women) leaving the home each day to go to work in factories and businesses, the home and motherhood became sentimentalized, as something pure and untouched by the barbarism of commerce, a place where family members could seek

respite. But of course, this public-private divide was one that only the most affluent households could ever hope to achieve, usually by employing poor women to do the bulk of the housework and childcare.<sup>1</sup> The family has never been a private, inner sanctum, separate from the external world. Whether it is by shopping for food, looking after children or doing other work at home for pay, or negotiating the complex rules and requirements of public assistance, women and families are entrenched in and tied to the world outside the home.

Moreover, family dinners are often left to women to figure out. Some women find it deeply satisfying to make food and feed others. And their efforts are important, forming webs of care and commitment that sustain us all. But those webs are profoundly gendered; for the most part, it is women who are expected to take on the work of feeding families.<sup>2</sup>

Leanne Armstrong describes feeding her family as tremendously rewarding. It is one of the few areas where she and her husband, Latrell, find unconditional common ground. Leanne's cooking is a point of pride for Latrell, who praises her efforts in the kitchen. This puts Leanne at the center of her family; she is key to their care and well-being. This role, in turn, is a profoundly important component of Leanne's identity as a good mom.<sup>3</sup> Yet even as cooking provides a creative outlet and serves as a source of pride, there is a downside. Latrell is proud of Leanne's cooking, but he offers no help in procuring or preparing food. She has to do all of the work of feeding their family herself.

Leanne's arrangement is not uncommon. According to national surveys that track how Americans spend their time, women spend more than twice as much time as men do preparing food and drinks, cleaning, and doing laundry.<sup>4</sup>

Typical of Leanne, she makes the best of it. And certainly, the joy she finds in cooking and her can-do spirit are commendable. But her striving and sacrifices also wear her down. Like Patricia Washington, she goes without food when there's not enough to go around. And there are times when she can't get out of bed because she's exhausted, stressed, and overwhelmed by the unrelenting demands of her life.

Most mothers today work outside the home.<sup>5</sup> They have less leisure time than they did in previous generations.<sup>6</sup> We can't keep asking women to juggle more. A long-term solution is to shift household dynamics, with both parents doing their fair share in the home. Women are fatigued from trying to balance being good mothers with being successful in their jobs, notes Anne-Marie Slaughter in her widely read *Atlantic* article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." Something's got to give.

Men have stepped up, to some extent. American men cook much more than they used to, and they spend more time doing housework and taking care of children than they did in the 1960s. Many men say that parenting is a positive and important part of their identity. Yet, tellingly, men are also increasingly experiencing a problem women have been reporting for decades—they're having a hard time balancing the demands of work and family.<sup>7</sup>

Working toward greater household equality is important, and we are moving in that direction.<sup>8</sup> But there are limits to how far this solution will go toward solving the challenges of feeding families. For one, many children are being raised by single parents.<sup>9</sup> Single mothers like Tara Foley may not have the option of recruiting another adult to help with the work of feeding the family. Even families with two adults present to help care for children often struggle to meet the unending demands of modern life.<sup>10</sup> The central problem is that families are being asked to do more, with less. Since the 1970s, there has been a steady erosion of the social safety net and regulatory protections in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Real wages have stagnated.<sup>12</sup> And unlike other wealthy nations, the United States lacks policies to help offset the cost of raising children (for example, by offering paid leave to care for children and other family members, childcare subsidies, or universal child or family allowances).<sup>13</sup> If feeding children is more vital than ever before, then families should not have the sole responsibility thrust on them.

## A Growing Divide

Food matters. It's a central part of our daily lives. It's vital to our health and our social lives. It's deeply ingrained in our memories.

Food, and our bodies, are also bellwethers of inequality. There is growing evidence of a widening gap in how rich and poor Americans eat. We see this in national dietary surveys,<sup>14</sup> and we see it in our own communities, where foodie restaurants bloom alongside food pantries that don't have enough food to feed the people they serve. Gaps in what we eat are tied to economic inequality, which has increased in the United States over the past several decades. Although money doesn't determine what we eat, it has a lot to do with it. In general, the more money a person spends on food, the healthier their diet is.<sup>15</sup>

And many people in the United States simply do not have more money to spend on food (not to mention on housing or healthcare). Poor families in the United States spend a lot less money on food than rich households: \$3,767 a year, compared to \$12,340 for the wealthiest households. Poor families also

spend less money at restaurants,<sup>16</sup> and they devote more time to cooking at home.<sup>17</sup> But when you calculate how much poor households spend on food as a proportion of their income, they are spending much more than the rich—33 percent of poor households' incomes goes to food, compared to just 9 percent for wealthy households.<sup>18</sup>

There is less and less common ground, so it seems, between families like Greely Janson's, who can afford fresh, seasonal, nutritious fare, and families like Ashley Taylor's, who search for the cheapest deals—ten for \$10—to keep everyone fed on the smallest possible budget; between families like Marta Hernández-Boynton's, who have ample resources to safeguard and cultivate their children's tastes, and families like Melanie Richards', who make do with few resources and rely on stigmatizing forms of public assistance that put them at the mercy of bureaucratic glitches and procedures that are often humiliating.

At the same time, these families have much in common. All of the mothers in our study want their children to thrive, to be as healthy and happy as possible. They share similar ideas about what this would require. All of them are taking on the lion's share of shopping, cooking, and meal planning for their families. They all like at least some aspects of cooking, yet all regularly experience some degree of ambivalence, frustration, exhaustion, or failure about the food they are able to put on the table.

## Moving Beyond the Kitchen

Most people would agree: it's nice to slow down, eat healthfully, and enjoy a home-cooked meal. But should the kitchen be the front line in reforming the food system?

Food reformers' advice is inviting. It draws on popular notions about individual responsibility and hard work that resonate with the belief that the United States is a meritocracy, a place where individuals can get ahead if they prioritize education and make the right choices. The idea that people have a responsibility to buy sustainably produced food, cook from scratch, and sit down for dinner makes sense. It is something we can do, today.

All of the women in this book, and many families in the United States, do some of those things. Most people would enjoy the chance to sit down and enjoy a meal at the end of the day, and many manage to pull it off. Lots of people are doing their best, every day, to get meals on the table that their kids will eat and that will nourish them and help them grow. Lots of people

are "voting with their forks" to support the small farmers in their areas, many of whom struggle to get by themselves.

These are all good things. But they all rely on individual people managing to work better, try harder, commit more. And when people can't—whether it's because they lack the money, the time, or just the space in their lives for it—they hear that they're failing. In 2014, after we wrote the article that led to this book, a mom wrote to thank us. Her husband had died a few years earlier, leaving her with two young children. Even at such a stressful point in her life, she felt she should be doing a better job of feeding her children. "I was mad at myself," she wrote, "for not providing the same standard of healthy eating as my friends. Literally, I would have nightmares about feeding my children chicken nuggets."

We can't keep asking people to do better. Doing so ignores the challenges facing families. Whether it's a family member's illness or death or the grinding demands of paying the bills, many parents are experiencing chronic stress. The way we eat is also inextricably linked to social inequality. Patricia Washington and her family eat sitting on beds in the hotel where they are temporarily living. They heat food in a microwave or on a hotplate.

Trying to solve the environmental and social ills of our food system by demanding that we return to our kitchens en masse is unrealistic. At best, it is a weight of responsibility that will most likely be felt by the women who tend to occupy this space already.

We need to change the way we think about food, family meals, and inequality. Fortunately, there are multiple levels at which we can enact change: in our homes, communities, and nation.

## Home

### *Keep Food in Perspective*

We need to uncouple the "package deal" that links good mothering with preparing wholesome family dinners from scratch.<sup>19</sup> This standard is difficult to achieve, especially when few families have ever resembled the iconic *Leave It to Beaver* family of the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Families in the United States still spend quite a bit of time cooking, with many cooking almost every day.<sup>21</sup> The most recent surveys suggest that Americans are actually cooking slightly more than they were a decade ago.<sup>22</sup> Yet women, in particular, often feel a sense of inadequacy and anxiety around cooking, a sense that there is never enough time in the day to do it "right."

Cooking matters, but we should avoid falling into the trap of believing that dinnertime alone can cause, or prevent, children from being healthy or happy. As sociologists Kelly Musick and Ann Meier find in their research on the impacts of family dinners, eating meals together offers natural opportunities for interacting. But these are not always positive experiences. What seems to matter most is that children get quality time to connect with their parents,<sup>23</sup> whether that happens while driving to soccer practice, taking a walk, or playing a pickup game of basketball. A large body of research shows that parents often feel especially anxious and worried about food. But families need to decide for themselves which tradeoffs they would like to make.<sup>24</sup>

### *Allow Food to Mean Different Things to Different People*

We can celebrate food's meaning in our families and our cultures while acknowledging that the process of getting dinner on the table is time-consuming and not always very rewarding. We can try to make sure our children eat their vegetables without demonizing certain foods. We can work hard to master our grandma's recipe for enchiladas or chicken pot pie and also appreciate the convenience of being able to put a frozen pizza in the oven and have it ready in fifteen minutes.

Food means different things to different people, and we should celebrate this. Even among nutrition scientists, there is little consensus around which foods are the healthiest or the degree to which our diets are linked to our weight or overall health.<sup>25</sup> Instead of insisting on a universal definition of what it means to eat healthy or eat well, we should recognize that our beliefs about food are rooted in our family histories and our particular social contexts and intertwined with inequalities linked to gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Food is incredibly complex for Rae Donahue, who is still figuring out what food means to her as a black middle-class woman raised in the South. For Rosario García, deciding what's for dinner involves constantly feeling pulled between the Mexican food traditions she wants to preserve and the American foods her children have embraced.

Recognizing the diversity of our food experiences also means listening to others and challenging dominant narratives about food. Our current food discourse is still dominated by white men. While white men can and should certainly be advocates for food reform, addressing long-standing food inequalities requires insights from people of diverse backgrounds and experiences, particularly immigrants, people of color, poor and working-class

people, and women—groups whose voices, preferences, and practices have long been excluded from public conversations about food.

### *Community Share the Work*

It takes a great deal of labor to get dinner on the table. People are already feeling the pressure, and asking them to somehow make it all happen seems like wishful thinking. It's time to consider other ways to make it possible for families to enjoy a meal at the end of the day without expecting the work of creating this meal to happen solely in the home.

For families that can afford it, the market has answers. Upscale supermarkets have expanded their lines of prepared foods, including weekday meal plans, with all foods made in-house. Companies like Blue Apron will send recipes and pre-portioned ingredients for complete meals every week. Grocery stores and AmazonFresh will even deliver food to your door, depending on where you live. But these options do little to address the inequalities in our food system.

We need collective solutions that will benefit people across the income spectrum. Some of these would need to come from the federal government. School lunch does not have to be a source of inequality and stress for parents. Universal school lunches, made with fresh foods and according to diverse recipes, would go a long way toward nourishing kids in the middle of the day. It would cost more to provide lunches for all students, but not necessarily a lot more, and better school lunches are an investment in our kids' health and in the environment.<sup>26</sup>

Local governments and businesses can also contribute to collective solutions. Schools, daycares, and churches could share their commercial kitchens to help fill the cooking gap. Institutions like these are capable of producing healthy, tasty food, especially when they link up with local farmers. Buying in bulk and having the space to store and prepare food on a large scale saves money and could provide families with hearty, affordable dinners, such as lasagna or soup, to reheat at the end of the day. Making these meals available on a sliding scale would also help share the expense of feeding families and equalize people's access to food.

Finally, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Collective solutions are already in motion, in small towns and big cities across the country. Community suppers—hosted in churches, community centers, and private houses—bring people together not just to share food but also to share

stories.<sup>27</sup> They're often funded by a system that allows wealthier people to pay a little extra so that others can eat for free. Participating in these dinners is about more than having an excuse not to have to cook, although that's a good reason to go in itself. It's also a chance to meet and interact with people from outside a person's usual circles, whether this means people from a different generation, people from another neighborhood, or people with different backgrounds.

With a little creative thinking and some economic support, communities can work together, investing in the health of all.

### *Listen*

We know that fundamental inequalities shape the food we put on our plate. These range from the types of stores in our neighborhoods to the tools in our kitchens. In recognition of these disparities, neighborhood groups and nonprofits are trying to ensure that everyone in their communities has access to good food to eat. Many of these organizations are doing exceptional work. But in a context where funding is tight and people want to see immediate results, food justice advocates often implement solutions without considering the needs and values of the people who they are trying to help. And as cities like Raleigh continue to grow, people end up evaluating food systems according to how many artisanal donut shops, craft breweries, or even farmers' markets there are, instead of asking who gets to define what good food looks like.

Working to bring about true food justice starts by trying to understand people and communities and building on their ideas.<sup>28</sup> What works for one neighborhood may not work for another. After the Kroger in southeast Raleigh closed, one man started a mobile market that brings fresh produce, dairy, and meats to food-insecure residents. In some ways, the mobile market is similar to other mobile vendors springing up all over the country. But it is different in key ways. It allows people to pay with food stamps, and it accepts credit, often on an informal basis. It offers the foods that many of Raleigh's older residents remember from growing up: mustard greens and turnip greens, for example. In the end, the mobile market looks quite different from AmazonFresh. It not only delivers food but also helps form a network of community ties, showing that someone cares. The key to the success of food justice efforts is close attention to the particular needs of a community.

## Nation

### *Make Food a Human Right*

One out of every eight Americans does not have enough food to eat,<sup>29</sup> and many more do not have enough money to regularly afford healthy foods. The gap in the quality of the food that rich and poor people in the United States eat is growing.<sup>30</sup>

Food pantries and other charities cannot keep up with the demand. Our federal food assistance programs—food stamps, WIC, and school breakfast and lunch—were founded in part on the belief that it is our duty as a nation to make sure that our citizens don't go hungry.<sup>31</sup> But these programs are increasingly subject to debates over whether the people who use them are deserving or dependent and morally suspect. When the government says that food stamps should be only available to working adults, as was proposed in the draft of the Farm Bill released just as we were finishing these conclusions, they are saying that not everyone—not even every child—in this country deserves to be free from hunger.<sup>32</sup>

We need to reframe the way we think of food: not as a privilege to be dispensed by charities to people who deserve it, but as a fundamental human right, for everyone.<sup>33</sup> The right to food is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The United States is one of the only industrialized countries in the world that has not endorsed a right to food.<sup>34</sup> Public health researchers Mariana Chilton and Don Rose argue that fulfilling the right to food must happen at two levels. First, we must fix structural inequalities in order to stem the tide of hunger at its source. At the same time, we must have a way of feeding people during times of crisis and emergencies.<sup>35</sup>

Recognizing food as a human right would mean evaluating policies based on the degree to which they successfully reduce food insecurity. The United States has measured the prevalence of food insecurity in the nation since 1995. In more than twenty years, there has been no measurable improvement.<sup>36</sup>

To reduce food insecurity, we must tackle the underlying conditions that cause poverty while also strengthening our existing food assistance programs, ensuring that they are available to everyone who needs them. This will require raising the minimum wage, so that working families are able to feed themselves,<sup>37</sup> and investing in affordable housing, given the strong links between housing insecurity and food insecurity. Instead of passing laws that

make food assistance programs more restrictive, we should bolster existing programs to make sure that everyone who needs help is eligible and can get it.

More broadly, the most effective way we can reduce hunger in the United States is by reducing poverty. Poverty rates are higher here than in other industrialized countries, mostly because we lack policies to support the people who are most at risk of being poor (for example, single parents or people with low levels of formal education).<sup>38</sup> Other countries' approaches to reducing poverty vary, but research suggests that universal policies—those that are available to everyone—may be more effective than policies that are targeted to families under a certain income level.<sup>39</sup> Some countries and communities have considered trying to raise living standards by implementing Universal Basic Income, premised on the idea that everyone deserves a minimum level of resources, regardless of whether they are working.<sup>40</sup> To give an idea of another proposal, a recent article by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers suggests that by converting the Child Tax Credit and child tax exemption into a universal, monthly child allowance, we could reduce child poverty by 40 percent in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

In any case, it's clear our current system is not working. Compared to other wealthy countries, the United States invests very little in families. There is good evidence that not only does this negatively impact families' health and well-being, it also costs the government directly, generating costs that result from children growing up poor and disadvantaged.<sup>42</sup>

### *Support the Workers Who Feed Us*

The food on Americans' tables would not be there if not for the many workers who do the invisible work of planting and picking fruits and vegetables, bagging and ringing up groceries, and cooking and serving food at restaurants. Many of these workers are women of color. Ironically, working to get other people's food on the table often leaves them without enough money or time to feed their own families as they would like to.<sup>43</sup>

It is fundamentally unfair that the restaurants that serve the Instagram-worthy meals are staffed by people who could never afford to eat there, and that the fruits and vegetables that middle-class consumers buy to ensure the health of their children are picked by farmworkers who suffer from chronic health problems because of their jobs.<sup>44</sup>

So what do we do? Consumers and retailers have an important role to play. For example, the Campaign for Fair Food, an initiative of the Coalition for Immokalee Workers, has forged alliances between tomato farmworkers

in Florida and consumers around the country. They have succeeded in getting major food retailers, including Walmart, McDonald's, and Burger King, to commit to paying an extra penny per pound of tomatoes. Retailers also commit to ensuring that a human-rights-based Code of Conduct is implemented on the farms that grow their tomatoes. The Campaign for Fair Food has succeeded in confronting and addressing injustices in the food system by linking farmworkers with consumers. Farmworkers determine the priorities that matter most for them, while consumers carry out creative actions—marches, hunger strikes, and concerts—to raise awareness.<sup>45</sup>

The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) is another successful model. Founded in 2008, ROC has gone from “a small, determined group of low-wage [restaurant] workers” to a national organization of over 25,000 workers, 200 “high road” employers, and thousands of diners, all of them “united to raise restaurant wages, benefits, and industry standards.” ROC publishes an annual diners' guide that grades restaurants nationwide on how they treat workers, giving consumers the opportunity to choose to support restaurants that not only have good food but also treat their workers well.<sup>46</sup>

Consumer-based campaigns can produce important changes in a relatively short period of time. However, because they often target specific retailers or implicate particular groups of workers, they are somewhat limited in scope. To improve workers' labor and living conditions, we must simultaneously push to change ineffective and harmful laws and regulations. For example, in cities across the United States, workers and activists have begun to demand that all workers be paid a living wage.<sup>47</sup>

### *Support Families*

Caring for others is a vital part of what families do; it's also vital to society. Countries that recognize and value carework intentionally create public policies to support it. This looks different in different places, but countries with strong family policies generally offer paid family leave, paid sick and vacation leave, subsidized preschool, and universal healthcare coverage. A recent cross-national study found that in general, parents are less happy than non-parents, but the “happiness” gap between parents and non-parents is larger in the United States than in other wealthy countries. And this difference is largely explained by variations in social policies.<sup>48</sup> One of the study authors, sociologist Jennifer Glass, explained the findings as follows:

What we found was astonishing. The negative effects of parenthood on happiness were *entirely* explained by the presence or absence of social