

Just Food: Episode 1

You're listening to Just Food, a podcast about the complex web of people and places behind what we eat. This is the first in a series brought to you by the Berkeley Food Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. In each episode, we'll bring you stories from people vital to our food supply.

I'm your host, Laura Clivens, and I'm here with reporter Alissa Escarce.

Alissa: Hey there.

Laura: Hi! For this inaugural episode, we're talking about farmworker conditions and a certification program that's trying to improve them.

Alissa: Right. So, Laura, when you go shopping for produce, do you look for stuff that's organic or fair trade?

Laura: Yeah, I do. I also like to go to farmers' markets and a lot of the stuff there is organic.

Alissa: Yeah, so you know organic food is popular and some people also look for stuff that's GMO-free or that's free range. So today we're going to talk about another kind of food label, and it's about how farmworkers who grow and pick our food are treated.

Laura: Right. And to see if this is something people are interested in, I asked folks at the farmers' markets that I go to.

Person 1 at market: Those workers, they do work really hard actually though, so um, to have that kind of protection for them, that would be great actually.

Person 2 at market: I purchase that and promote it and support it.

Person 3 at market: I think we need to find a way to make it sustainable for people that are working on the farms.

Alissa: Okay, so it sounds like people might be into this.

Laura: Yeah, it does. So, what is this new food label?

Alissa: It's from an organization called the Equitable Food Initiative, or EFI, and it started just a couple years ago, but it's growing pretty fast. Over 20 major farms in North America are part of it.

Laura: And you spent the last several weeks talking to farmworkers who are involved in the program, right?

Alissa: Yeah, that's right. So I spent some time with them at work and also at home.

Laura: Nice. So where are you going to start us off today?

Alissa: We're starting in Moss Landing, which is a tiny landing just south of Santa Cruz, on California's central coast. This area's the strawberry growing capitol of the world, and strawberry fields sprawl out everywhere you look. We're here to talk to Barbara Decindes. She's one of the people who picks these strawberries. Barbara lives in a small blue house with three bedrooms and it's the afternoon so her son is home from school.

Dillon (Barbara's son): My name is Dillon and I am 10 years old.

Alissa: He's in fourth grade, and he shows me around the backyard.

Dillon: Over here we're standing, um like almost on the farm, um, of chickens. One is Tiny. The other is Georgina. Over here, we have some plants. Lemons, figs, a pear tree.

Alissa: Barbara is originally from Mexico, but she's lived in this house since before Dillon was born, along with her brother and his family. Barbara is a single mom, and that's a big part of why she decided to work harvesting strawberries.

Barbara (translated from Spanish): I really like strawberries because they're seasonal and I have more time with my son. Everything else is secondary. He is the main thing, and I want him to see that he can count on me.

Alissa: Barbara is devoted to Dillon. She taught him to read when he was just a toddler. Now that he's older, she still helps him with his homework. She's even taking English classes so she can keep up when his assignments get harder. Sometimes they do their homework together, and Dillon helps his mom pronounce new words.

Barbara: Good.

Dillon: Good.

Barbara: (laughs) New.

Dillon: New.

Alissa: Barbara spends a lot of time with Dillon, but soon, that's going to change. After about 5 months off, strawberry picking season is almost here. And when Barbara is working, she is in the field working really hard. She picks roughly 500 containers of strawberries every day, for a take-home of about \$0.35 per container.

Laura: Wow, that doesn't seem like much.

Alissa: It doesn't, but Barbara is actually making more than the average farmworkers. She says she's taking home about \$20,000 a year, and her working conditions, they're better than average too. Barbara even has a leadership position at Sierra Farms, where she works. That's no so common for harvesters.

Laura: That position is because of EFI?

Alissa: Yes. The farm where Barbara works was one of the first to join EFI, and actually, this leadership aspect is the core of the certification program.

Laura: Leadership is? I would expect the program to be about fair wages or minimizing pesticide exposure, things like that.

Alissa: Yeah, it is. EFI covers that stuff too, but they really emphasize leadership for farmworkers.

Laura: So, for Barbara, how has that made her life better?

Alissa: Here's an example: A few years ago, she was talking to her crew leader. That's her direct supervisor.

Barbara (translated from Spanish): I asked for permission to go to my son's school because he was student of the month so I wanted to be with my son, and my crew leader said, "No ma'am. You're not going anywhere until we finish."

Alissa: But through EFI, Barbara had learned to speak up for herself. It's part of this leadership thing I'm talking about. So, she went to talk to a different supervisor, and he told her to go ahead and take the time off, and she went to go see Dillon be student of the month.

Alissa (talking to Dillon): What did it feel like to have your mom be there?

Dillon: Pretty happy, and also because she was going to take me home and I was not going to ride the bus, haha.

Alissa: Yeah, that's one way EFI helps farmworkers. But there's a lot more to it than that, and to get the bigger picture, I meet up with a pair of researchers: Ron Stochlic and Christy Getz. They work at the University of California, and they've been studying EFI for the last year. And they start of by saying that, generally, farms just aren't great places to work.

Ron: You know, farmworkers probably have some of the worst working conditions of any sector in the United States.

Christy: Wages are low. It's also seasonal so that's a number of weeks where there is often no farm work.

Alissa: There are also high rates of wage theft, sexual assault, and people even die from the heat.

Christy: Farmworkers also suffer from high rates of food insecurity so that's kind of the paradox, that the very people who pick and harvest our food often can't afford to eat that very food.

Alissa: And Ron and Christy say that these problems are hard to fix because a lot of farmworkers are scared to talk about them, and that's mostly because of their immigration status.

Ron: I think it's safe to say that at a minimum 70% of people are undocumented, probably much higher than that. There are a lot of threats of getting people deported if they, you know, make any waves.

Alissa: Or, just from the way farms work internally.

Christy: Often, labor management relations can be very punitive. If farmworkers speak up, they can be fired.

Alissa: This is where EFI comes in. It sets up standards for safer, healthier conditions in the field, and even addresses how farming impacts the environment. But what I really notice when reading through the standards is that they're trying to make it easier for farmworkers to do what Barbara did. Basically, to speak up about things that aren't working for them. The way EFI gets at this is through what they called Leadership Teams. Barbara represents her crew of harvesters on the Leadership Team at Sierra Farms.

Laura: So how do Leadership Teams work?

Alissa: Once a month, Barbara and other volunteer leaders go to meetings at 6am, before harvesting even starts. They meet with other strawberry pickers and crew leaders and managers, people who work on different parts of the farm. They all sit together, and they just talk about stuff they've noticed, and then they make plans for what they want to do better

Laura: And what about the rest of the workers? Do they go to these meetings too?

Alissa: They have other trainings, but they get the information from the Leadership Team members.

Laura: That sounds great. But it does make me wonder what's in it for the farms. I mean, we're talking about businesses that need to make a profit.

Alissa: So, the way Ron explains it, the EFI label would eventually have the benefit of organic label.

Ron: So the idea is for you and me to go to the store and see a certified product, and buy that over something that's not certified.

Laura: That makes sense. Like, if those people I talked to at the farmers' market go out and buy EFI stuff, that ends up making the EFI farms more money.

Alissa: That's the idea, yeah. But when I talked to the Director of Operations at Sierra Farms, she tells me something a little different and surprising about why EFI is good for farms.

Alissa: It's spring and strawberry plants at Sierra Farms are flowering. Rows of soil are wrapped in clear plastic, and strawberry plants poke out the top.

Jacqueline: Buenos tardes. ¿Como estamos?

Alissa: That's Jacqueline Vasquez. She's the Director of Operations at Sierra Farms. She's showing me around as workers prepare the fields for this year's harvest. The workers go up and down the rows, and they stick their hands in holes in the clear plastic and rip out weeds that are growing inside. These berries will be ready to pick in a couple weeks, and then they'll be on shelves in grocery stores all over the country.

Jacqueline: My responsibility is to ensure that we meet or exceed budget, that we are efficient in finding technical ways of doing things that are going to make things more efficient and save us money.

Alissa: Even with Jacqueline's focus on speed and finances, she says being a part of EFI means better berries and a better operation. For her, it's worth the fee the farm pays to participate in the program and worth the extra hours she puts into her job to make sure workers have what they need. She goes to all of the Leadership Team meetings.

Jacqueline: We're actually listening and we're actually giving you what you're telling us you need instead of just saying, "Hey, we decided that we think that you need this, so we're going to do it for you."

Alissa: So Jacqueline can respond faster when problems come up, like when harvesters need more water when it's hot out.

Jacqueline: Or hey, I'm in the row and I'm seeing that this person is being treated unfairly, stop. Let's talk about it.

Alissa: Making sure her workers are happy will help Jacqueline a ton in a couple weeks. That's when these plants will have ripe, red strawberries, and she'll need almost 500 workers to pick

them. Getting those workers is really hard. Immigration from Mexico slowed down a few years ago and since then there has been a big labor shortage in agriculture all over the US.

Jacqueline: Where you need 30 people and maybe 5 show up. You actually have to go, go to laundry mats, go to grocery stores, put signs up. So EFI is certainly a tool for people to want to come here and stay with us.

Alissa: Before Sierra Farms joined EFI, Jacqueline says 40% of their workers came back from one year to the next. Now that number is 60%, so the farms has to spend less money going out to find new workers and to train them. As we drive along, Jacqueline points to a strawberry field on the other side of the street.

Jacqueline: Right now, the fields look really good here. But then in two weeks, across the street they hear that some fields are having like a boom in numbers, so they're going to jump ship and go to the other field, which happens in agriculture all the time.

Alissa: In order to get her crops picked, things need to be pretty good on the farm here, or at least better than they are across the road.

Laura: Wow, that's interesting. So, it sounds like it's not just customers voting with their dollars that makes EFI work, but also the choices the workers make to stay there.

Alissa: Yeah, the labor shortage gives farmworkers more leverage to decide where they'll work, and some are choosing to work of EFI-certified farms.

Laura: Can Jacqueline really get hundreds of workers to keep coming back, just by letting them speak up more? Is there any money involved here?

Alissa: Yeah, a little. EFI requires farms to pay a little more than minimum wage. And Costco, which is one of the stores that buys EFI fruit, pays extra so workers can get a bonus. Barbara makes about an extra \$70 or so from that every month.

Laura: Well that's something.

Alissa: Yeah.

Laura: Does that mean EFI produce is more expensive?

Alissa: Not at Costco at least. A buyer there is saying the store is hoping to make money by selling large quantities of EFI berries. So, in the long term, they hope people start looking for the label, the way they look for organics now.

Laura: I guess that makes sense, but it's still kind of surprising to me that a big store would just eat the cost of a bonus for farmworkers.

Alissa: So that's the other thing that's interesting about EFI. Grocery stores like Costco or Whole Foods are actually a part of it. EFI is made up of retailers, growers, and even farmworker unions.

Laura: Wow, that's such a weird combo. Big companies and unions? Haven't those been opposed to each other in the past?

Alissa: Totally, but seems like everyone gets something they need out of EFI. Jacqueline's farm gets more workers, Costco gets better fruit, and farmworkers make more money and are safer, so that makes unions happy.

Laura: Still, you said Barbara is making around \$20,000 a year, right? And that is not a lot of money.

Alissa: Right, the researchers I talked to about this said they think EFI is making things better for the 10,000 farmworkers on EFI farms. But the program isn't totally solving all the problems they listed at the beginning. Here's Christy Getz.

Christy: I think it's doing a lot in terms of bringing bad conditions back to, you know, relatively tolerable and sometimes relatively good conditions, but it's not necessarily bringing these workers out of poverty, if that makes sense.

Alissa: So, this may not drastically change how much money farmworkers make, but EFI farmworkers say there's been a big change in the culture on farms, because now the workers are treated with more respect. The person who really drives this home for me is Juan Cortez. He also works at Sierra Farms, and he's showing me machines the farm uses to control pests.

Juan (translated from Spanish): We use this one to spray pesticides.

Alissa: The farm has lots of tractor-like machines. One is really big and orange and has a label that says "Bug Vac." The Bug Vac is a truck-sized vacuum, and it sucks the pests off crops so you don't have to use as many chemicals to kill them. Juan represents the crew of drivers and maintenance workers on the farm's EFI Leadership Team. He makes sure the fields have enough toilets for workers and he keeps things like the Bug Vac in shape. Juan is 30 and he has been working on strawberry farms since he was 13, and he started out as a harvester, like Barbara. He's worked on several farms but he's stayed at Sierra Farms the longest, 9 years.

Juan (translated from Spanish): I like how the company treats me and the opportunities I've had.

Alissa: The thing Juan likes most about EFI is what he's learned about communication. He said he used to get mad all the time. Like if someone took a piece of equipment he needed to run the tractor, that would just set him off. But then, he started going to EFI trainings. He'd do exercises with the other employees where they'd write their feelings out on big pieces of paper.

Juan (translated from Spanish): They explain everything, how to speak to people with respect, all that. You learn how to ask for something, how to listen to people, lots of things. The training actually helped me in my personal life too.

Alissa: Juan is married with three little daughters and another on the way. He says his girls always want to play when he gets home from work. But before EFI trainings, he's often say no. He was stressed and tired from work, and he just wanted to go to bed. But now that's changed.

Juan (translated from Spanish): Now when I get home I'll be sitting on the sofa and my daughters will all run over to me and they'll want to go to the park, want to go play, and I'll say, "Okay, let's go!" I can make time for everything.

Alissa: I go by Juan's house after work one afternoon, and sure enough, he's out there behind his house, playing with his kids.

Laura: That's a sweet way to end this story. Thank you for all your reporting, Alissa.

Alissa: Thank you, Laura.

Laura: You're listening to Just Food, a podcast about the complex web of people and places behind what we eat. This is a production of the Berkeley Food Institute. For more information about the Institute or more background about the Equitable Food Initiative, please visit food.berkeley.edu. This episode of Just Food is produced by Laura Clivens and Alissa Escarce. Theme music is by Roy Barrill. Thanks for listening.