

JUST FOOD EPISODE 1

Pilot: Harvesting Equitable Food

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 Klivans and I'm here with reporter Alissa Escarce.

Alissa: Hey there.

LK: 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 stuff that says "fair trade"?

LK: Yeah, I do. Kind of. I like to go to the farmers' market, and a lot of the stuff there is organic.

Alissa: Yeah. Organic food's popular. People also look for stuff that's GMO-free, or where the animals are free-range.

LK: Mhm.

Alissa: So today we're going to talk about another kind of food label -- it's about how farmworkers who grow and pick our food are treated.

LK: Right. To see if this is something people are interested in, I asked folks at the farmer's market near me.

VOX: Those workers they work really hard actually, so to have that type of protection for them would be great actually.

VOX: I'd purchase that and support it and promote it.

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

Alissa: 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 E-F-I. It started just a couple years ago, but it's growing pretty fast. There are over twenty major farms in North America that are part of it.

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

Alissa: That's right. I've spent time with them at work, and also at home.

LK: Nice. So where are you gonna start us off today?

AE: We're starting in Moss Landing, which is a tiny town south of Santa Cruz, on California's Central Coast. This area is the strawberry growing capital of the world - and fields of strawberries sprawl out everywhere you look. We're here to talk to Barbara Resendiz. She's one of the people who picks these strawberries.

[Ambi: birds chirping]

Barbara lives in a small blue house with three bedrooms... and it's the afternoon, so her son's home from school.

Dylan: My name is Dylan, and I'm 10 years old.

He's in fourth grade. He shows me around the back yard.

Dylan: Over here we're standing, almost have a farm of chickens... One is Tiny, the other one is Georgina ... Over here we have some plants. A lemon, fig, a pear tree.

[Chicken ambi!]

Barbara's originally from Mexico, but she's lived in this house since before Dylan was born, along with her brother and his family.

[Ambi of walking inside the house, baby & sister-in-law in background]

She's a single mom, which is a big part of why she decided to work harvesting strawberries.

Barbara: Me gusta mucho la fresa, porque es temporal, y pues sí, le digo, estoy más tiempo con mi hijo... Todo lo demás es secundario. Él es lo principal. Y yo quiero que él vea de esa manera que él cuenta conmigo.

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

Barbara's devoted to Dylan. 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 that she can keep up when his assignments get harder.

Sometimes they do their homework together- and Dylan helps his mom pronounce new words.

[ambi - Barbara and Dylan going through vocab]

Barbara spends a lot of time with Dylan, but soon that will change. After about five months off, strawberry picking season is almost here. And when Barbara's working, she's in the field working really hard. She picks roughly five hundred containers of strawberries every day... for a take-home of about 35 cents per container.

LK: Wow. That doesn't seem like much.

AE: It doesn't. But Barbara's actually making more than the average farmworker -- she says she's taking home about twenty thousand dollars 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 not so common for harvesters.

LK: That position is because of EFI?

AE: 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.

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

LK: So for Barbara, how's that made her life better?

AE: Here's an example. A few years ago she was talking to her crew leader -- that's her direct supervisor.

Barbara: Yo le pedí permiso para ir a la escuela de mi hijo... porque tenía, era estudiante del mes. Entonces yo quería estar con mi hijo. Y me dijo, "no, señora, no va a ir a ningún lado hasta que salgamos."

VO: 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."

But through EFI, Barbara'd learned to speak up for herself -- that's part of this leadership thing I'm talking about. So she talked to a different supervisor... and he told her to go ahead and take the time off. And she went to see Dylan be Student of the Month.

Alissa: And what did it feel like to have your mom there?

Dylan: I was pretty happy. And also because she was going to take me home, and I wasn't going to ride the bus.

Laura: Wow.

AE: yeah. That's one way EFI helps farmworkers. But there's a lot more to it than that. To get the bigger picture I meet up with a pair of researchers:

Ron Stochlic: Ron Stochlic

... and...

Christy Getz: Christy Getz

... they work at the University of California... and they've been studying EFI for the last year. They start off by saying that generally... farms are just not great places to work.

Ron Stochlic: Farmworkers probably have some of the worst working conditions of any sector in the United States.

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

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

Christy Getz: 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.

AE: And Ron and Christy say these problems are hard to fix because a lot of farm workers are scared to talk about them. That's mostly because of their immigration status.

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

Or, just from the way farms work, internally -

Christy Getz: 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.

LK: Cool.

Alissa: But what I really notice when reading through the standards is that they're trying to make it easier for farm workers 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 it calls leadership teams. Barbara represents her crew of harvesters on the leadership team at Sierra Farms.

LK: So how do leadership teams work?

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

LK: And what about the rest of the workers -- do they go to these meetings too?

AE: They have other trainings. But they get the information from the leadership team members.

Laura: This sounds great, but it makes 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 an organic label.

Ron Stochlic: The idea is for people like you and me to go to the store and see if EFI certified product, and buy that over something that's not certified.

LK: Yeah, 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 talk to the director of operations at Sierra Farms, she tells me something a little different and surprising about why EFI is good for farms.

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

Jackie: Buenas tardes!

That's Jacqueline Vasquez. She's the director of operations at Sierra Farms. She's showing me around as workers prep the fields for this year's harvest.

The workers go up and down the rows, sticking their hands through holes in the plastic and ripping out weeds that are growing inside.

[Sound of hand pulling out of plastic wrapping on soil.]

Alissa: These berries will be ready to pick in a couple weeks... and then they'll be on the shelves at grocery stores all around the country.

[walking ambi]

Jacqueline: My responsibility is to make sure 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.

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 it means she puts into her job to make sure workers have what they need.

She goes to all the leadership team meetings.

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

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

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

Making sure her workers are happy will help Jacqueline a ton in a couple of 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. These days there's a big labor shortage in agriculture all across the U.S.

Jacqueline: Where, you need 30 people and, maybe 5 show up. And so you actively have to go and go to laundromats, go to grocery stores, put signs up... So EFI is certainly a tool for us to be able to get people to come here and really want to stay with us.

Before Sierra Farms joined EFI, Jacqueline says 40% of their workers came back from one year to the next. Now, that number is sixty percent. So the farm has to spend less money on going out to find new workers... and to train them.

[driving ambi]

As we drive along, Jacqueline points to a strawberry field on the other side of the street

Jacqueline: So right now the fields look really good here, but... across the street, they hear that some field is having like a boom in numbers. So they're gonna jump ship and go to the other field. Which happens in agriculture all the time.

So to get her crops picked, things need to be pretty good for the workers here. Or at least, better than they are across the road.

LK: That's so 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 on EFI-certified farms.

LK: But can Jacqueline really get hundreds of workers to keep coming back just by letting them... speak up more? Is there some money involved here?

Alissa: Yeah, a little. EFI requires farms to pay a little more than the minimum wage - and Costco, one of the stores that buys a lot of the fruit, pays extra for it so that the workers get a bonus. Barbara makes an extra seventy dollars or so from that every month.

LK: That's something.

AE: Yeah.

LK: Does that mean EFI produce is more expensive?

AE: Not at Costco, at least. A buyer there says the store's hoping to make money by selling large quantities of EFI berries. In the long term, they hope people will start looking for the EFI label, the way people look for organics now.

LK: Ok. 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.

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

Laura: Oh 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 it 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 -- that makes unions happy.

Laura: Still, though, you said Barbara's making about \$20,000 a year - that's still not a ton.

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

Christy Getz: I think it's doing a lot in terms of bringing bad conditions up to, you know, relatively tolerable and sometimes really good conditions. But it's not necessarily bringing workers out of poverty.

AE: 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.

[ambi: walking]

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: Ese es el con que esprayamos, esprayamos las plagas.

VO: We use this one to spray pesticides.

The farm has lots of tractor-like machines. One is big and orange with a label that says: BUG VAC.

[Bug Vac turning on.]

The Bug Vac is a truck-sized vacuum that sucks the pests off crops... so that 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 keeps things like the bug vac in shape.

Juan's thirty, and he's been working on strawberry farms since he was thirteen, and he started out as a harvester, like Barbara. He's worked on several farms, but he's stayed at Sierra Farms the longest... nine years.

Juan: Me gusta el trato que te dan en la compañía. Las oportunidades que se han dado.

VO: I like how the company treats me -- and the opportunities I've had.

The thing Juan likes most about EFI is what he's learned about communication.

He says 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 other employees where they wrote their feelings out on a big piece of paper.

Juan: Te explican todo, cómo hablarle a una gente con respeto, todo eso... Tienes que saber cómo llegar a pedirle algo, saber escuchar a las personas, son muchas cosas. En mi vida personal me ayudó también.

VO: 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.

Juan's 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'd often say no. He was stressed and tired from work -- he just wanted to go to bed. But now, that's changed.

Juan: Ahora llego, y pues, son niñas, todas llegan, estoy sentada en el sofá y me brincan todas! (laughs) Ah, quieren ir al parque, salir a jugar, ok, vamos. Osea, para todo hay tiempo.

VO: Now, when I get home, I'll be sitting on the sofa, and my daughters all run over to me. They want to go to the park, they want to go play. And I say, 'Ok, 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 behind his house, playing with his kids.

[bring in biking, "whee!" ambi]

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

AE: Thank you, Laura.

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This is a production of the Berkeley Food Institute. For more information about the institute, or more background on the Equitable Food Initiative, visit food dot berkeley dot E-D-U.

This episode of Just Food is produced by Laura Klivans and Alissa Escarce.

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Thanks for listening!