Vicki Robin
I'm here with Saru Jayaraman for another conversation about “What could possibly go right?” Saru is the President of One Fair Wage, Co-Founder of the Restaurant Opportunities Centres United and Director of the Food Labor Research Centre at the University of California, Berkeley. She's a graduate of Yale Law School and Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the author of 'Behind the Kitchen Door' and 'Forked: A New Standard for American Dining' to say just a few things about Saru.

Vicki Robin
In thinking about this conversation and listening to you, I was reminded of this quote from Shakespeare which is: “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.” I felt like you've been articulating some of this in your interviews that I've heard and your speaking; and it fits right in with our quest to ask this, to inquire about this of cultural scouts, about this question of "What could possibly go right?". So in this potent moment, I'm pitching you the question. There you go.

Saru Jayaraman
Yeah, there's an extraordinary moment of opportunity for change in the nation's largest and fastest growing industry, which is the restaurant industry and the broader service sector. The moment of opportunity has come because the pandemic really laid bare things that we've been saying for decades that the wage structure in the service sector, which is based in large part on the notion of tips as wage replacement, which is a direct legacy of slavery, that forcing millions of workers, mostly women across the country, mostly single mothers, to live off of a sub minimum wage of 2 or 3 dollars in 43 states in the United States, and have to live mostly on tips, have to feed their families and pay their bills mostly on the largess of customers that that was never tenable. And the pandemic just ripped bare the fact that it was never tenable because these millions and millions of mostly women have now been largely denied unemployment insurance benefits because the states that they live in are telling them that their sub minimum wage of 2 or 3 dollars plus tips is too low to meet the minimum state threshold to qualify for benefits. So the moment of opportunity is that on the one hand, you've got workers, millions and millions of them, who have kind of a light bulb has gone off, when a state tells you you earn too little to get benefits that you paid taxes to get; your light bulb is, I was paid too little and I should need to fight to never be paid that again. On top of which, tipping is way down. Tipping is down by, like, 75%. And so workers are asking themselves: "How are you going to make me go back to work? Not only is it not safe, do I not feel safe to go back to work, but how are you going to make me go back to work for 2 or 3 dollars when tipping is down 75%. I can no longer rely on tips to survive. I'm not saying to live and thrive, I'm saying to survive.”

Saru Jayaraman
So with workers, there's an opportunity to organize the likes of which we haven't seen. But the other kind of counterintuitive, surprising opening is that there's a new amazing opportunity with restaurant owners, employers, many of whom fought us on this issue in the past who disagreed with us, who are now more willing than ever, to move to a full livable minimum wage for all workers in their restaurants. And part of it is because they've seen the devastation and have also come to agree that this was an untenable, unsustainable system, industry, structure prior to the pandemic, 1). 2) They're having to reinvent themselves anyway because they're starting from scratch now in terms of thinking about: How would I even make money if I can't fill my dining floor so might as well think about an entirely new compensation structure? And 3) in moving to take out and delivery many of these restaurants are finding it actually works to pay
people a full minimum wage and care tips among non management employees. There's new systems, they're trying out with takeout and delivery that they didn't do previously within but with the old model. So I think it took the industry shutting down for several months, and having to reconfigure itself for things to be shaken up. And for people to say, well, maybe we can in this moment of both pandemic, and national unrest over structural racism, maybe we can actually correct a legacy of slavery, maybe we can actually correct a system that perpetrates sexual harassment and racial discrimination and horribly high rates of economic instability. So there's a moment of opportunity for workers and employers to come together now and say: "We don't want to go back to work for a sub minimum wage" and for employers to say, "You're right, let's change it." And then go to legislators together to say: Far from this not being the right moment, this is exactly the right moment for change, because the forces that be, the 1%, those that benefit the most from the status quo, are always going to say this is not the right moment. Frankly, they said, this is not the right moment prior to the pandemic. They said, it was never the right moment to raise wages. Now, they're still saying that, "Oh, how could you possibly talk about raising wages? Restaurants are struggling." And these incredible independent restaurant owners and workers are saying, "This has to be the moment. If there was ever a moment, it is now to change everything about the way we do business, and the way we eat out, and the way we value and treat the people who serve us in America."

Vicki Robin

So are you seeing this as the prime driver, as a partnership between business owners and workers? So you're saying that they're gonna come up with the innovations. And then they're going to go to government to tell them what they need from government in order to, you know... It's like, what industry was it who said, "You've got to make us do the right thing?" Was it the oil companies? Yeah, you've got to make us do the right thing. We want to do the right thing, but we will not do it if you don't make us. So do you think this is the innovation, that there's agreements that are coming into being between restaurant owners and workers that could be industry wide?

Saru Jayaraman

Yeah, it's not quite as clean as that. It's that you've got large numbers of workers demanding change and leading industry, you know, industry leaders saying, "We will change our own restaurants but we think the best solution is actually that everybody does it, that it's a level playing field." So we as organizers are bringing both the workers who are demanding change and the employers who are saying, "Let's all do it at the same time", to the legislators who, you're right, the legislators are behind. They're not the ones leading, they're following. And many of them are saying, "Oh, we can't talk about this. It's not the right time to be talking about this." And yet the workers and employers are saying, "No, this is precisely the right time to be talking about this." So it is frustrating because you have Democrats in state legislatures that are supposed to be thinking about workers’ rights, and thinking about small business, that are the ones saying, "No, we can't talk about wages. We can't talk about workers’ protections." at the time when even consumers are saying, "Oh my God, we need worker protections, more than ever. We've come to realize how essential these workers are." And so it's not quite the industry saying make us do this. It's more that we're bringing the various forces for change and there are more of them than there were before; to the legislators that are slow to react, and say, "Look, everybody wants this." Not everybody! Don't get me wrong. I'm sorry, I misspoke. Not the chains, not the 1%, not the corporations. Independent restaurants who have a lot of influence in this industry, and the workers are saying, "We need this now."

Vicki Robin
Right. And so, I'm driving a little bit deeper into this because I'm interested and because we have a few extra minutes. Is there like a middle ground on this that actually has some power of worker ownership? Where the workers and the owners, you know, basically go into a partnership?

Saru Jayaraman
Yeah, I wouldn't call that a middle ground. I would call that another pathway, aligned pathway. I mean, I think there's a broader industry that we need to regulate and create change around because most restaurants are not moving to worker ownership. But while we are... like we need both; we need law that would require whether you're a co-op or just a regular restaurant, everybody's paid a full livable minimum wage regardless. So I don't think moving to worker owned industry negates needing livable wages; they both are necessary. I do think worker ownership is increasingly of interest for a number of reasons. 30 to 40% of restaurants may never come back. We want to talk to a lot of those small businesses to say, "Why don't you just sell your business to your workers?" You know, and we’re providing grants to restaurants that commit to going to livable wages, even if their state doesn't require it. You could use that grant to potentially sell your business to your workers. So that's one reason why cooperatives are of interest. Another reason why we're thinking a lot about worker ownership these days is if 30 to 40% of restaurants don't come back, that's 3 to 4 million workers who are long term unemployed; not six months, not a year, not a year and a half, not two years. We're talking about five or more years of long term unemployment for millions of people, because this industry is not going to switch back, flip of a switch and it all comes back the way other industries might,. You're going to see a significant number of restaurants go under. And so for long term unemployed, we're looking at large service worker cooperatives that could do catering, food delivery. I mean, the opportunities are really endless. The possibilities are endless, like that Shakespeare quote, and it's imperative on all of us to help the industry reinvent itself to push for reinvention; rather than going back to the way things were. We've created a coalition of groups around this notion of, "There is no going back." We can only go forward together if the pandemic taught us nothing, it's our interdependence, global interdependence. We can only go forward together, we must reimagine the restaurant industry and every aspect of our lives. So consumers can play a role in encouraging restaurants not to go back to the way they were, but rather to really push to reimagine themselves.

Saru Jayaraman
Based on this new opportunity, we worked with the Institute for the Future, which is kind of a future planning outfit, and the James Beard Foundation, which I call that Academy Awards of the restaurant industry. We worked with all of them to bring industry leaders together from around the country chefs and restaurant owners to create a roadmap to reimagine restaurants and that's up on our website now and it profiles different ideas people are coming up with to reinvent the way things work in the industry. So we have tools, we have examples, we just need consumers to push and say we want to see reinvention, including and especially about how workers are treated because we've come to realize how workers are treated impacts us as consumers.

Vicki Robin
Exactly. Yeah, you know, you're talking and I'm thinking about my community, which unfortunately, everybody has my colour hair, you know, and I just think what we really want is to eat really good food and not have to cook it or clean it up. And possibly, you know, somebody else set a nice table for us and have a friend come over. So there's there is that, you know, it's like if you disaggregate the service of something from the thing itself, you know, what we don't,
we don't want restaurants. We want that experience. Yes. And we want the conviviality and we want the good feeling. We even want the good feeling of tipping. Yeah, you know, we want all of those good feelings. It's like we don't want cars, we want mobility. So in that reimagining, there's so many possibilities for a more humane way of life for diners and owners and workers. Exactly.

Saru Jayaraman
I mean, I would push a little bit on the good feeling of tipping because I feel like I would love to...

Vicki Robin
Not to eliminate the fair wage. I'm not saying that.

Saru Jayaraman
No, I know. But even just to get at, what is the good feeling of tipping? It's for good people, it's being able to thank the person who serves you. And if you think of other service... obviously, there are lots of other people who serve us other than restaurant workers, and we don't tip them all. We have teachers and mentors and coaches. We have lawyers and doctors, people in retail who serve us and we don't tip them and we find ways to appreciate them without that exchange of money. And so I think what we are fighting for is a full livable wage with tips on top. But I do think all of us as consumers as we reimagine, really getting at exactly what you said: What is it about the experience that makes us feel good? And how could we promote that good feeling or have that good feeling increased by knowing that our server, the person who's serving us is treated like a professional, the skilled professional that they are, in the same way that we know that our doctor is a skilled professional, we would never tip our doctor. We know our doctor's a skilled professional. We so appreciate the service they provide, especially in this moment, doctors and nurses. Could we think about people who cook and serve our food in that same way, that they're professionals, and I feel so good about the service they provide. I can appreciate them in the way I appreciate my doctor or nurse. And I also appreciate knowing that they're treated and paid as a profession.

Vicki Robin
There's a quality of gratitude for one another, that maybe that can be a key part of what returns to our society, rather than treating people and food and everything, like things rather than relationships.

Saru Jayaraman
That's right. Exactly.

Vicki Robin
Exactly. Thank you, Saru. I could go on and on and on with you. Thanks for your insights. And just one thing. If you could insert a sentence or a thought into the heads of everybody who is listening to this, you know... Just give me the sort of tape recording, we're recording on their minds and the back of their minds. Let's do the recording.

Saru Jayaraman
I would love you all to think as you order food now and perhaps go back to eat out later about the possibility of speaking to the manager or the owner of the establishment that you've ordered from or that you're eating at, to say to them, "I love the food here, I love the service. I want to keep coming here or keep ordering from here. I want to know that you're paying everybody a full livable minimum wage. And that tips are on top of that; my tips that I give are not in place of that
wage, but instead on top of it.” You communicating that, you know, regardless of whether they actually do it, many people communicating that will have a tremendous impact.

Vicki Robin
I got it. Okay, my friend, thank you so, so much.

Saru Jayaraman
Thank you. Take care.