



## Book Review

**Take back the tray: Revolutionizing food in hospitals, schools, and other institutions**

Joshna Maharaj

ECW Press, 2020: 250 pages

Review by Jennifer Sumner\*

This book fills a gap that is decades old—the problem with institutional food. Long the butt of jokes, complaints, and recriminations, institutional food has often represented the epitome of the worst that food can be: unhealthy, bland, colourless, placeless, and joyless—an afterthought that is underfunded and overcooked.

Enter Joshna Maharaj, a chef who is also a TEDx speaker and food activist. Her bona fides are impeccable—she has worked in institutional food settings in Toronto for over 10 years and has revolutionized the way food is served in those settings. From The Stop Community Food Centre to The Scarborough Hospital to Ryerson University, she has implemented her belief “in the power of chefs and social gastronomy to bring hospitality, sustainability and social justice to the table” (251). Her stories from the frontlines of these institutions are fascinating in themselves, starting with her experience as a post-surgery hospital patient facing an egg-salad sandwich mixed with low-calorie whipped salad dressing on white industrial sandwich bread that stuck to the roof of her mouth. Add to this her drive to change institutional food systems to be more hospitable, sustainable, and just, and the book crackles with ideas, inspiration, and creativity.

In this highly readable volume, she espouses what those of us in Food Studies know well: “Food is never just food” (58). For Maharaj, it was important that the organizational values also be present on every plate, even though it was often difficult to articulate those values. She worked with dietitians, chefs, serving staff, and administration to clarify their institutional values and manifest them in the food that was served. For example, at Ryerson, she emphasized that

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food was one of the ways the university could assure anxious parents of first-year students that it cared for their children, not only intellectually, but also physically and emotionally.

As much as Maharaj personally pushed for change in the institutions where she worked, she argues that “much of the responsibility for any change to institutional food services lies directly at the feet of government. In this province (Ontario), and many others, government budget cuts are largely responsible for the rapid deterioration of institutional meals” (225). She points out that institutional food can have enormous impact. Instead of buying prepared and packaged meals from giant food-service corporations that get reheated on site, she advocates earmarking funds to improve and sustain food services in Canadian institutions and developing public policy that connects these institutions to local agriculture, small business, and the local economy. This vision of “joined-up food policy” (MacRae 2011) uses food as a catalyst for local development, while opening the door to hospitality, sustainability, and social justice.

Maharaj also promotes investment to help institutions transition back to cooking from scratch. This move will require a government granting stream without which, she worries, change will not occur. While cooking from scratch at an institutional scale may seem a daunting process, she was able to accomplish it within her budget, please eaters, and end up with far less waste than the standard “industrial diet” produced.

Maharaj firmly believes that cooks can have an exponential impact on people through food. This is where the idea of social gastronomy enters the picture. For Maharaj, social gastronomy entails chefs using food to create social change by becoming activists and advocates for food and communities, such as happened at Foodstock in 2011, when the Canadian Chefs Congress spearheaded a fundraiser to protest the conversion of prime Ontario farmland into a mega-quarry.

Social gastronomy is about using the values of the kitchen and dining room to animate other food spaces in a way that promotes justice, ecological stewardship of the land, and thriving communities. If sustainability and hospitality are not present, it's not social gastronomy (209).

Maharaj moves seamlessly from concepts such as social gastronomy, to practical problems on the ground, to policy advice for government and institutions. I could find nothing to fault in her approach to, and treatment of, institutional food. She is one of those public intellectuals who knows her field inside out and communicates her knowledge with flair, ease, and confidence.

In the end, Maharaj reminds us that, as human beings, food is our common denominator. In taking back the tray, we take back dignity, hospitality, sustainability, and equality, we reinvest in the land and those who work the land, and we nourish people we love and people we have never met. Her final contribution to our understanding of institutional food is a set of tasty

recipes she has used in her work that includes an egg-salad sandwich filling that is original, bright, and nourishing—just like her book.

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## References

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