

The Politics of Food: A Look at How Government Policies Affect the Restaurant Industry

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When my great-great-grandfather immigrated to New York City from Russia, he ironed clothes in the garment district. So did many Eastern European Jews on the Lower East Side. When Chinese men immigrated to New York in the late 19th century, they opened restaurants in what we now know as Chinatown, recreating Chinese dishes with the ingredients they could obtain in American grocery stores. In the 20th century, immigrants in New York dug the first interborough subway line, worked in construction, built sewers and roads, and started businesses, among many other jobs.

Since the late 19th century, New York City has served as an entry point into America for immigrants. From 1892 to 1954, more than 11.2 million immigrants came through Ellis Island. Immigrants have always been, and continue to be, the unseen backbone of many New York City industries. More specifically, immigrants have played a critical role in the food and restaurant industry. From owning delis and working as line cooks in Michelin-star kitchens, to being farmers or fishmongers, the work of immigrants sustains the city's voracious appetite. The

second Trump administration has terrorized the food industry and its contributors, specifically because of his mass deportation effort. One of the hallmarks of Mayor Zohran Mamdani's affordability policy is centered on food and local street food. Through the case study of immigrant workers, one can understand the tremendous influence government policy has on the food industry, and our daily lives.

The food industry in New York City is an intricate web of food vendors, wholesale suppliers, restaurants, grocery stores, farmers, food carts, and food producers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, New Yorkers began to recognize how fragile this system truly is. Countless restaurants shut down, food prices skyrocketed, and food delivery services like Instacart and Grubhub became ubiquitous.

"Food's too cheap, tipping makes no sense, cooks are broke, and it's damn near impossible to earn a living in this effed-up business," said David Chang, a prominent chef and restaurateur, describing the restaurant industry in a recent opinion article in GQ (Chang 2016). In New York City specifically, rising rent and food prices make running and working in a restaurant especially challenging.

The sparse presence of unions in the restaurant industry makes it harder to advocate for better working conditions, even while workers earn less than minimum wage, experience common overtime violations, disregard of health and safety laws by employers, and discrimination. In addition, many restaurants have "hierarchies" in jobs workers can attain, sometimes based on race or ethnicity. "Back of the house" jobs, such as food preparation, are occupied mainly by immigrants, and many of those immigrants are undocumented (Brennan Center for Justice 2007). As many as twenty percent of all cooks are undocumented immigrants, meaning tens

of thousands of undocumented cooks work in New York City. These cooks are so integral to the industry that an entire underground economy exists, where people create fake IDs, Social Security numbers, and other documents for them.

Restaurants will still hire undocumented workers, so long as they have plausible deniability in front of Immigrants and Customs Enforcement, ICE (He 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic brought the neglect undocumented cooks face to the surface. At the height of the pandemic, when restaurants and other businesses were closing, undocumented workers did not receive unemployment checks from the government despite paying taxes under fake IDs. More broadly, under the first Trump administration, it became harder for all immigrants to attain various government services, including those with status. Although it is apparent that undocumented workers are both integral to the industry and simultaneously spurned from it, there are not many organizations working to protect their rights. Even groups that lobby for improved working conditions for restaurant workers, such as the Independent Restaurant Coalition, neglect to include undocumented workers in their advocacy. Nate Adler, owner of Gertie, a restaurant in Brooklyn, described their critical role, stating, "I don't think that restaurants could exist without undocumented workers" (He 2020).

Not only do undocumented immigrants experience horrible working conditions in their jobs, and are unable to advocate for better ones, they are vulnerable to human trafficking. In 2021, a case charged 24 people with human trafficking of Mexican and Central American workers on a farm in Georgia. The employers used threats to silence the workers' assertions of their labor rights while forcing them to "perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing

them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and by threatening them with deportation and violence” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2021). Human trafficking of undocumented workers is not limited to the food production industry. In the same year, two Niagara County men were sentenced for forcing undocumented workers to work in their restaurant for their own financial gain and physically harming the victims. The owners of the restaurant promised the workers better pay yet ended up paying far under minimum wage. (United States Attorney’s Office Western District of New York 2021).

The restaurant industry is facing additional hurdles in the second Trump administration. President Donald Trump plans to deport millions of undocumented immigrants a year, detaining some in camps while they wait for deportation (ACLU 2025). ICE restaurant raids in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. instill fear in restaurant workers.

At the start of 2022, there were eleven million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., some with “temporary protections”, which allow people from certain countries to attain temporary immigrant status. In the farm industry, nearly half of the two million workers are undocumented. Many farm groups are urging Trump not to deport workers in the food sector because their deportation would strain the U.S. food chain. Currently, with the H-2A visa program, which allows farmers to hire seasonal workers if they show there are not enough American workers, farmers are able to hire workers legally. However, many farmers cannot afford the visa. In his first administration, Trump reassured the food industry that his deportations would not target their businesses yet raids of farms and poultry plants continued. Republican U.S. Representative John Duarte, a fourth-generation farmer in

California, believes that farms rely on undocumented workers and towns would not function without them (Douglas and Hesson 2024). Government representatives from all sides of the political spectrum agree that Trump's mass deportation plans will weaken and change the food industry. The price of food will likely go up because of mass deportations, and Trump's tariffs, adding a bigger strain on restaurants and people throughout the country.

In a 2019 NPR interview, a restaurant owner said that she would close her restaurant if the government were to deport all undocumented immigrants. "We'd close. I mean, I couldn't —I'd just sell everything for whatever amount of money we could get for it, and we would close because there's not enough talented people who really do know how to cook." This restaurant owner, who preferred not to give her name, explained that she considers the undocumented workers who work for her as dependable and hard-working. She fears that if undocumented immigrants get deported by ICE, she will not be able to find enough cooks to continue operations in her restaurant (Burnett 2019). It is evident that the government indirectly and directly controls the food and restaurant industry. Policy changes can harm or benefit workers and owners. Under the deportation threats of the Trump administration, many undocumented workers, some of whom have been in the U.S. for years, could be deported.

The effect of government policies on the food industry is apparent through the mobile food carts that line NYC streets. The Street Vendor Project of the Urban Justice Center of 2021 survey found that there are 23,000 street food vendors in New York City, 96% of which are owned by immigrants, 27% percent being undocumented immigrants. Almost half of the food cart workers speak very little

English, which would be an impediment for them in searching for a different job (Immigration Research Initiative 2024). Becoming a licensed and permitted vendor is incredibly difficult. Currently, there are only around 5,000 permits in use, with over 20,000 people on the waitlist. Because of the shortage of permits, 75% of mobile food vendors are unpermitted. City Hall has promised not to target food vendors who do not have licenses, yet the Sanitation Department continues to give out tickets and fines (Sundaram 2024). In December 2025, City Hall passed a bill that will raise the cap on permits, adding around 2,000 new licenses per year until 2031, as well as other regulations on food and general vendors (ABC7 New York 2024).

Despite local progress, the food industry as it stands today is not sustainable for the future: for workers, owners, and consumers alike. Although government policy has the capability to improve the situation, the only-increasing mass deportations of undocumented immigrants, some of whom have worked hard in the U.S. for years to sustain themselves and their families, will debilitate the restaurant and farming industries, consumers, as well as the lives of undocumented immigrants and their families. Whether currently visible, politics has the potential to change our lives dramatically. Government policies affect the food we eat, the products we buy, how much we get paid, and how much we pay. Immigrants, specifically undocumented immigrants, are the unsung heroes of our country. They face horrible working conditions, are unable to advocate for bettering those conditions, and often have little to no advocates supporting them. Hopefully, we will use the experience of Trump's administration as a catalyst to make the restaurant and food industries more sustainable and equitable—and so that America, and NYC,

can continue to serve as beacons of opportunity and security for people around the world.

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