

Counter Culture

Food can be an agent of change, but first the industry's foot soldiers have to believe in it.

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It doesn't take long for Emma Field to move to grand statements when she talks about the mission behind [Silo](#), the Brighton, U.K. restaurant where she works as a waitress. "Nature is a closed-loop system," Field, 39, wrote in an email. "It's a beautifully efficient synergy of chaos

and evolution where all waste and excess is repurposed. [The food service industry] needs to emulate the way that nature operates and utilizes its energies. That's what we're aiming for."

Silo is a zero-waste restaurant, the first of its kind in the U.K. when it opened in 2014. Their whole operation is eco-conscious: they eliminate kitchen and service waste by trading directly with farmers, exclusively use products delivered in reusable containers, and route food scraps through an onsite compost bin. Their menu relies on locally sourced ingredients to create dishes that are deceptively simple, like a brunch of eggs and beans with mushrooms grown from coffee grounds, and sourdough toast made with flour from their own mill.

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In its small but growing movement, Silo isn't alone. In London, there's [Tiny Leaf](#), which launched as a short-lived brick-and-mortar restaurant in early 2016 and recently re-opened as a pop-up in a food market, and staves off waste by recovering unsellable produce from local retailers. They take produce that is misshapen, discolored, or past its sell-by date but still good to eat and transform it into organic, vegetarian dishes. Last year in New York, chef Dan Barber turned his high-end Manhattan restaurant [Blue Hill](#) into a two-week zero-waste experiment, serving food made entirely of what other vendors might consider garbage: rice remainders from sake fermentation, unattractive fillets of fish, veggies left over from plant-breeding research.

And in the grand scheme of food culture, zero-waste isn't alone either. Food trends drive commerce, whether restaurants are preaching a no-waste, or a meatless, or a farm-to-table future. For business owners, it doesn't necessarily matter whether you buy into that vision so long as it brings in customers. It doesn't hurt if the vision

attracts good employees, too. But for those employees, those who do buy in, the work can become like a humble act of faith — not specific to the foodservice industry, but especially striking there, where work is notoriously underpaid, disrespected, and unglamorous.

Many of the employees I spoke to — from restaurants, urban farms, and catering companies in London, New York, and San Francisco — are excited about being agents of a change. The themes brought up were consistent regardless of age, location, or role: the unique power of food, a universal necessity, to be a tool of social change; the importance of demonstrating a new food practice's viability by using it to create products consumers will be excited to buy. Unlike evangelists for other causes, they don't need to knock on doors to spread the good word. Whether it's a cocktail so delicious you wouldn't believe it was made from last night's leftover champagne, a veggie burger that doesn't taste like cardboard, or a juicy tomato picked and served fresh, they just have to make the proof available to those who are ready to receive it.

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For Field, who was previously employed at a restaurant in Tasmania focused on local foraging and sustainability, the decision to get on board with Silo was a no-brainer. “I started composting and growing vegetables as soon as I moved out of home at 18,” she said. “I’ve always been looking for ways to make my life more sustainable — repurposing things, making eco-cleaners, using charity shops. [Silo] was an obvious choice.”

And though the side work at Silo might be more labor-intensive than at another restaurant — a typical shift might include emptying the compost machine (lovingly referred to as “Bertha”), making nut milks, or storing used and excess products for reuse — Emma doesn't mind. “To me it feels necessary,” she writes. “These small tasks have

more dignity because they have bigger projects and ideas attached to them.”

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Even there, she’s not alone in her alignment of a personal philosophy with her job. Waiter Barry Griffiths, 35, said Silo’s zero-waste philosophy was “the reason” he wanted to work there; marketing manager Kim Hardingham, 21, identified it as the “whole reason” she applied for the job. Sous-chef Halfdan Kluftun, 25, who’s been cooking at Silo for three months, told me he knew first and foremost he wanted to work in a zero-waste kitchen. “It’s different from any other restaurant,” he said over email. “Silo is going to make a difference in the world.”

On a more molecular level, another dining proposition designed with the environment in mind is the Impossible Burger, a vegan burger that “bleeds” and whose introduction upended the world of meatless food. Its patty, an exquisite mid-rare pink, is served in select restaurants in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The secret to the burgers, which are created in the **Impossible Foods** lab in Silicon Valley, is heme, a molecule found in meat that’s largely responsible for beef’s taste, smell, and color — but also happens to exist in plants. Principal scientist Smita Shankar’s job involves expressing heme from the plants using yeast, isolating it, and putting it in the patties.

To hear Shankar talk about it, Impossible Foods isn't revolutionizing the meatless industry by making really delicious veggie burgers. Rather, they're "making meat" that just so happens to come from sustainable plant sources. It's an exciting prospect not only for vegetarians but for anyone who fears the toll the meat industry is taking on the planet, where animal agriculture is responsible for 51 percent or more of global greenhouse-gas emissions, according to research from the Worldwatch Institute.

Shankar, a lifelong vegetarian, hadn't really seen food as a tool for environmentalism — until she came across Impossible Foods. "I knew more about fuels, carbon emissions, and global warming," she told me over the phone. "But I had not thought about food as a sustainability thing at all until I came here and spoke to Pat [Brown, Impossible Foods's CEO and founder]." From there, it was an immediate emotional connection. "It was a small group of people at the time, everyone driven by the common goal, and it's one I think is truly important," she said.

With a background in molecular biology, she's now in charge of genetically engineering yeast so that it can make heme, then growing the yeast in such large quantities that her team can create tens of thousands of liters of heme. The daily work isn't all that different from what she'd done at her old job at the biotech firm [Codexis](#), where she helped with a project developing sustainable cleaning detergents: designing experiments toward solutions to complex problems, analyzing the results, and applying what's been learned. The novelty comes in her proximity to a new industry — it's a lab kitchen, not just a lab, complete with pots and pans — and in being able to taste the results. Plus, there's the satisfaction of seeing others enjoy it, too.

“Knowing that an end result of your creative work ends up in a delicious product — that experience is unique to working in a food company,” Shankar said. That the product might benefit the environment is, to Shankar, a crucial detail. “We as humans have already impacted the planet. There’s no going back, but at least, moving forward, it’s important for me to know that we are actively working on problems which will improve the planet so our future generations have something good.”

Of course, not everyone who works at a trendy restaurant or startup is doing so to sate a burning desire for change. At a recent visit to a bright and playful vegan spot called **by CHLOE**, in the West Village neighborhood of Manhattan, only one of the six employees behind the counter said the restaurant’s strictly vegan fare was part of the reason she applied; others were mostly ambivalent. Folks at **Superiority Burger**, home of what is possibly New York’s most celebrated veggie burger, had similarly mixed reactions. For them, these are jobs like any other — good jobs, but not necessarily taken with changing the world in mind.

Perhaps better food (or meatless food, or zero-waste food) is the key to a better future; certainly that belief is a driving force behind some of the labor that goes into it. Not everyone buys into it, but for those who do, the belief is a genuine, earnest, and often happy one. If the food is good, and the feeling of making it is good, too, being a foot soldier for a food movement can provide a sense of satisfaction — or even just a reason to power through another shift.

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