

**NEWS****Pick this fight****BY SIGNE LANGFORD**

Local and sustainable! It's the battle cry of the eco-foodie.

But, we locavores can be a smug bunch. We Pin and tweet pictures of our righteously delicious meals – Lake Ontario perch on local sunchoke purée – and call ourselves urban farmers when we grow a tomato or two in the backyard.

And I fear we are so entertained by the sounds of our own pontificating about heirloom carrots from Holland Marsh, heritage pork from Perth County or a lovely Pinot Noir from Niagara that we've all but forgotten about the not-so-local folks who plant, harvest and process Ontario's bounty: Jamaican, Peruvian, Ecuadorian, Mexican and Filipino workers, about 15,000 of them in Ontario every year.

Some of the local and sustainable movement's staunchest advocates, lay folks and food industry pros alike, eschew citrus, avocados and strawberries from California – but how sustainable is a foreign, and often vulnerable, agricultural workforce?

Two weeks ago, the provincial coroner's office ruled that there would be no inquest into the collision that killed 10 Peruvian poultry farm workers and the driver of the other vehicle near Stratford one year ago – a decision migrant workers' advocates say completely ignores the risks farm labourers routinely face.

Stan Raper, national coordinator for the Agriculture Workers Alliance, had hoped an inquest would shed light on what was

behind the “driver error.”

According to Raper, agricultural work is as dangerous as mining and construction, causing approximately 20 deaths per year in Ontario, the highest rate of on-the-job mortality and injury. Yet it’s the only industry, he says, without guidelines defining dangerous jobs, making it next to impossible for workers to refuse dangerous work.

Whenever there is a death in the mining industry, Raper says, a coroner’s inquest must be conducted. But when 10 agricultural workers die on an Ontario road – nothing.

Why are average consumers just now starting to hear about what goes on in our province’s fields and barns? Why are chefs more willing to talk about their sustainable seafood menus than about the workforce harvesting their local peaches?

It’s a question that generates dozens of other questions about the current global food distribution system and the often untenable market pressures put on producers and farmers.

Ken Townsend, a migrant worker outreach activist, can rattle off a list of horrible accidents that killed or maimed agricultural workers producing the local foods we enjoy. Most were caused by poor or non-existent training or safety equipment. Unlike construction accidents at downtown building sites, they rarely make the front page.

Farm workers are also missing some of the employment rights most of us take for granted. In 2011, the Supreme Court upheld the Agricultural Employees Protection Act, legislation from the Harris Tory era that denies Ontario’s 80,000 Canadian and foreign agricultural workers the right to bargain collectively.

So why are there no loud calls for reform from Toronto’s locavore community? I asked chef Brad Long, owner of Café Belong at the Evergreen Brick Works, an Ocean Wise-, LEAF- and LocalFoodPlus.ca-endorsed restaurant, for his thoughts. His answer was immediate and unguarded.

“Apart from noticing the Jamaicans who used to prime tobacco and harvest pretty much everything back when I was a kid in Norfolk County, I don’t have any experience with the migrant workforce. In fact, I’m so out of this topic, I believe that officially makes me oblivious.”

Another Toronto locavore chef, Nathan Isberg, owner of Atlantic on Dundas, says he’s very aware of the situation and buys produce for his restaurant accordingly. “I dumped any suppliers who didn’t grow the food themselves. I only work with really small farms.”

Most food producers obey the laws and work within closely monitored government programs like the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, which recruits Mexican and Caribbean workers, and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, whose employees can be from any country. Minimum wage rates apply for both, OHIP is available, and employers must provide workplace safety insurance.

But other employers take advantage and cut corners. Says Toronto lawyer Carly Dunster, who specializes in food law, “A key gap in protection is the fact that for most migrant workers their contract [and admittance to Canada] is specifically tied to one employer. If something goes wrong they’re screwed, not to mention the fact that this muffles any kind of whistle-blower activity or complaints about conditions of work.”

If workers are laid off, by that employer, they can only continue working under the table, and, as Dunster explains, “When they take on that kind of work, they have no occupational health and safety protections. If they get hurt on the job, they have no recourse.”

And then there are the more subtle realities. “Under the right circumstances, temporary workers are entitled to collect EI and CPP, but the fact of the matter is, most don’t know that or may be given misinformation by the employer.

“For many,” says Dunster, “there are social and cultural barriers: English may not be their first language, or they may come from a culture where drawing attention to yourself is just not done. So it’s not necessarily that the structure or protections are non-existent; it’s a problem of enforcement, access and awareness.”

So why haven’t foodies made agricultural workers’ issues a cause célèbre? While people care about where their food comes from, the question of who is actually working the fields is, let’s just say, not yet on the menu.

## Down on the farm

**15,080** Number of workers admitted to Ontario under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAW) in 2012

**The breakdown** 8,580 Mexicans, 6,500 Caribbeans

**8** Number of months a migrant worker can legally stay in Canada under SAW

**35,000** Number of requests for aid due to injury received by the Agricultural Workers Alliance from across Canada over a six-month period in 2010

*Sources: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Agricultural Workers Alliance*

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