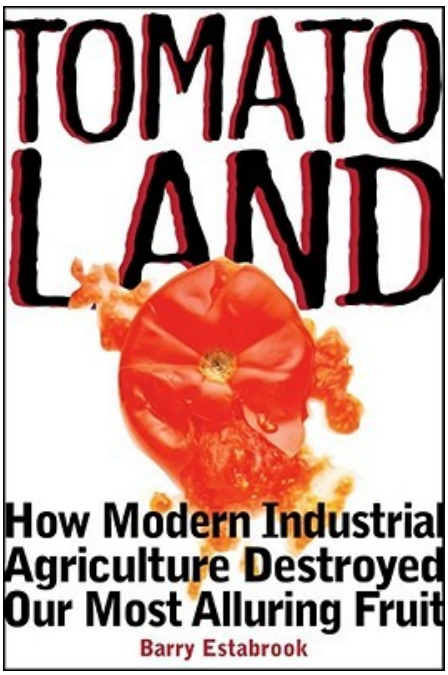

Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit

Barry Estabrook

Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit

Barry Estabrook

Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit Barry Estabrook Investigative food journalist Barry Estabrook reveals the huge human and environmental cost of the $5 billion fresh tomato industry and the price we pay as a society when we take taste and thought out of our food purchases.

Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit Details

Date	:	Published June 7th 2011 by Andrews McMeel Publishing
ISBN	:	9781449401092
Author	:	Barry Estabrook
Format	:	Hardcover 240 pages
Genre	:	Food and Drink, Food, Nonfiction, Science, Environment, Agriculture, History, Politics

From Reader Review Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit for online ebook

Lynn Anne says

Tomatoland is an expansion of a James Beard Award-winning article Barry Estabrook originally wrote for Gourmet Magazine, for which he was a contributing editor before the magazine folded. The book is at once a meandering survey of tomato history, and a detailed expose' of the modern Florida tomato industry.

Early on, Estabrook takes readers through rural Peru on a hunt for the modern tomato's tenacious forebears, then follows the tomato through to its place on the modern American plate. But much of the book is a harsh indictment of the Florida tomato industry, led by the Florida Tomato Council. Readers learn that the indestructible 'off season' Florida tomatoes we find in our supermarkets from October through June are unripe by design – harvested 'mature green' and then gassed for a couple of days to turn them colors mimicking those of ripe tomatoes. Estabrook presents statistics showing how much richer in nutrient (and lower in sodium) our grandparents' tomatoes were. We are shocked (I hope) to learn that Florida tomatoes are doused with insecticides so toxic that their use has been forbidden for all but four US crops, necessitating a chlorine bath (also appetizing!) for every tomato as it comes away from the field. And the darkest parts of the book, dealing with worker abuse involving both the lethal pesticides and the culture of modern day slavery in Florida (so commonplace that we meet in the book a US District Attorney in Florida who specializes in prosecuting slavery cases) provide a discomfiting amount of detail.

Estabrook provides more villains than heroes in Tomatoland, but one can walk away with a glimmer of hope that maybe it's not too late to make changes that will begin to reverse the damage that's been done. Maybe. Will reading this book turn you into a local tomato advocate, eschewing forever supermarket and fast-food tomatoes? Maybe. Will it have you thinking, as you take a bite out of your next tomato, about its origins, and the good or bad that went into its production? Ohhh, yeah. Tomatoland is a thoughtful, engaging read, well worth including on your summer reading list.
The takeaway: Pick up Esterbrook's informative eye-opener, Tomatoland, for a stark look at the ills of today's Florida tomato production practices, and learn to enjoy (even more than you already do) the sustainable, humanely grown seasonal harvest of your more local tomato farmers. Reading this book will, in the end, give you a greater appreciation for this fruit in its all its beauty and variety.

David says

This book is sort of a cross between The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals and The Grapes of Wrath. It is both a description of the tomato and how agri-business has transformed the tomato into a tasteless commodity, and a sociological muckraking of the obscene conditions suffered by migrant workers in Florida. The middle portion of the book is *extremely* depressing. Decades ago, I remember watching the documentary, "The Harvest of Shame" about migrant workers. For so many migrant workers, conditions have hardly improved, if at all. Poisonous pesticides are sprayed on them directly, without any protections. But the most affecting sections of the book describe modern slavery in Florida. If you eat tomatoes in the winter, then without a doubt, you've eaten produce that was harvested by a slave. There are workers who are not just "treated like slaves"--they *are* slaves; they are bought and sold, they are guarded at gunpoint night and day, and beaten when they don't work or try to run away.

It is not until the later portions of the book, when some more upbeat stories about enlightened farmers are described, that I began to gain some hope about the future of farming and the workers who pick the harvests.

Simone says

Everyone. Go. Read. This. Book. Now, before you eat another bad tomato.

"Any American who has eaten a winter tomato, either purchased at a supermarket or on top of a fast food salad, has eaten a fruit picked by the hand of a slave. That's not an assumption', said Douglas Molloy, a U.S. attorney in Florida, 'that is a fact."

And he's not talking, slave like, or something resembling slavery. He's talking legit whipped, kept in chains, badly fed, whipped for trying to escape slavery. If the conditions of labor aren't enough to make you swear off winter tomatoes, the description of the pesticides used should.

I hadn't really thought much about winter tomatoes. I'm used to seeing them when I walk into the store, but I don't buy them during the winter. Because, they taste like nothing. A bit of a water flavor, not much else. If I need tomatoes for something in the winter, like a soup or a chili, I either used home canned tomatoes (whole canning tomatoes is incredibly straight forward and much more satisfying) or canned tomatoes - which don't come from Florida and therefore have flavor.

As Estabrook details, the tomatoes grown in Florida are grown almost out of habit. They don't grow them for taste, as one farmer says, he doesn't make any money based on what a tomato tastes like when it's sold in a store. "They just want something red to put in their salads." That we are blind to the ramifications of that child like desire is insane if you stop and think about it. Literal slavery and environmental degradation so that people can walk into a grocery store in the dead of winter and buy tomatoes and that taste like nothing.

If someone can explain the logic of this system continuing that doesn't have to do with naked capitalism, please let me know. I can't think of one good reason it should continue. Read this book, and stop eating winter tomatoes.

Gail says

I already know that after reading this book or before i even finish i will plant tomatoes in my yard and boycot supermarket tomatoes.
(later)
This was an eye-opening book and what the prediction I made above came true. The last couple chapters were slower going that the beginning ones, but overall this is definitely worth a read.

Dana says

Rarely, if ever, has a book made me this angry. I had no idea that today, here in the USA, in Florida, people are being held against their wills' as slaves, beaten, subjected to cancer causing and birth defect causing caustic chemicals, living in horribly disgusting substandard conditions, sometimes locked up and killed, and

we have all eaten tomatos that they picked. Our country, the land of the free, is not adequately protecting migrant farm workers from horrific abuse and working conditions and substandard pay.

This book brings these issues to light and they are issues that we all need to be aware of. Migrant farm workers who come to this country illegally are not trying to steal jobs from Americans. They are just trying to earn a living and are willing to work hard in conditions that legal Americans would not put up with and that we should not allow to exist in our country. Even though it is legally not supposed to happen, tomato pickers are routinely forced to work in fields where pesticide is being sprayed causing them to have respiritory problems and skin rashes and to have babies born with no arms and legs and other, often life-threatening and deadly birth defects. One man walked through what he thought was water as he worked and when he went home and showered, all of his toenails fell off.

Not only are we eating tomatoes that have been grown in and routinely sprayed with these poisons that we may be ingesting, but the workers who plant and pick those tomatos are getting all kinds of horrible illnesses from the pesticides that our country allows to be sprayed on our food. Is it worth that cost to eat tasteless tomatoes?

This book also chronicles the different types of tomatoes that are grown and shows that it is possible to grow tasty tomatoes organically and in safer conditions for the workers. The author tells about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which is assisting the migrant farm workers to earn at least minimum wage and to prosecute those tomato farmers and field bosses who are engaged in human trafficking.
Here is their website: http://ciw-online.org/slavery.html

I personally won't buy tomatoes from Florida any more. I realize, however, that the Florida tomato fields are not the only part of our agricultural industry that incorporates slave labor. We all need to become aware of the injustices and horrible abuses of human rights that are going on in our country and we need to do something about it. This book was a real eye-opener for me and I hope that others read it and are touched by it and moved to action against these abuses as well.

David Harris says

Read the chapter called Re-Building the Tomato. Great info about how people are working hard to rehabilitate the tomato after decades of abuse by large agri-businesses. If you don't have time to read the book, at least read this chapter.

Heather says

This is potentially the library book I've had checked out the longest (approximately three and a half months now) that I still *actually managed to finish*. (Although Wildwood was probably pretty close.) This book didn't really grab my interest in the first 40 pages, and it languished in my bag, next to my bed, on my desk at home, on my desk at work, for many weeks before I was able to really pick it up again. Good thing I had some time to give it another chance!

I came to this book with a desire to answer the following questions: why do supermarket tomatoes, even the greenhouse-grown "on the vine" varieties, taste like such utter crap? Why did our homegrown tomatoes taste

like such utter crap this year? How can I be assured a tomato so acidic it'll burn my mouth? A recent article in the *New York Times* provided some clues, but I spied this book in a bookstore and with its subtitle ("How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit") I thought I might reveal the answers.

There was some generally interesting information up front, about the history of the tomato and how all plants we currently think of as tomatoes are almost identical genetically, except for a very few genes that dictate size, shape, color, and so on. An interviewee described a long journey to the Chilean mountainside in search of a tomato version of the missing link. This is good. This helps me understand whence my cherished Willamette tomatoes were developed. Sprinkled throughout this 250 page book, I found many answers to the question I was really interested in reading more in-depth about. I was fascinated to learn some interesting details about New Deal legislation that makes farm laborers disadvantaged to this day.

But this book, in my opinion, got hijacked by the state of Florida.

There is a huge market these days for books about food politics—so there are as many of them as there are knockoffs of Twilight. My very unscientific estimate is that 50% of this book was a variation on a theme that's very popular these days, and covered extensively by every other book of the genre: industrialized farming (in this case, of tomatoes). More specifically, issues tied to the immigrant labor force. This section of the book seemed to be aiming to be a modern-day version of The Jungle, and the stories were extreme enough that some of the details actually pulled me out of the narrative. (That's a bad sign.) I took an iPhone photo of one passage and texted it to someone else: a paragraph described how a worker's toenails fell off after he had stood in a deep puddle of what he assumed was water. Tetra-amelia babies. Workers sold into slave labor.

Now, I don't usually read murder mysteries, or westerns, or romance novels, but this section of the book to me seemed like the liberal/enviro version of reading a pulp novel. It seems like this book wanted me to vow that I'll never eat store-bought tomatoes again. The horror story tactic worked when I read The Jungle as a 16 year old in 1994, but not so fast this time! My dear book, do you think that these incidents are limited to tomatoes? That future books about industrial production of strawberries, grapes, and other fruits and vegetables would not reveal similar stories? Get a load of 1960's "Harvest of Shame" if you think the problem is so specific. Everyone knows that "reclaimed" water used to water California crops is "reclaimed" from sewage, right? And we wonder why we have e. coli problems with spinach? If I stopped eating all the "dirty ag," it seems like in winter months I would be left with the slug-munched romaine in my garden, and the bird-munched groundfruit underneath my apple tree. Yum yum.

Secondarily: Florida? *What an easy target.* You could probably write a scathing indictment of ANYTHING as long as you're studying it within the state of Florida. This is the state that brought us *Cool Hand Luke*, the 2000 election, and some of the nation's most notorious serial killers.

In order to focus on the horror aspect, the book fails to explore any industrialized farming in the Canadian greenhouses—in fact they are only mentioned a few times. Estabrook has chosen to focus his book on Florida, as he claims that a large portion of the nation's tomatoes are grown there. I think he may be speaking as a New York-centric east coaster, because in the Pacific Northwest I have only noticed Canadian and Mexican tomatoes in recent years. So I still feel like Estabrook's subject matter isn't tied to my region.

Eventually the book dedicated a shorter chapter to exploring other parts of this flawed system, such as the struggles of the Joe Farmers. Estabrook did have a nice section about a farmer in Pennsylvania who seems to be the hope for the future—he produces quality tomatoes, manages to treat his workers right, he is immensely popular in New York City, and he has managed to keep his business running for many years. He

doesn't hit the reader over the head with the "hope for the future" business that closes the book, and after the heavy-handed middle section about labor, I feel that the book was sorely in need of a Michael Pollan-like "here's what you should do about it" conclusion.

In fact, the book angered me enough with its misleading subtitle and my unfulfilled expectations that I'm going to write my own "here's what you should do about it" conclusion. Go read a Michael Pollan book instead if you're wanting to explore food politics. If you're looking for tomato information like I was...just grow a plant, and call your local extension office. There's almost nothing Master Gardeners like to talk about more than tomatoes.

Louise says

This was an illuminating look into the modern day tomato business. I am going to be more careful about where and when I buy tomatoes from now on.

Linda Harkins says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this. Following in the footsteps of Frances Moore Lappe and Michael Pollan, this James Beard award-winning journalist provides insight into American tomato growing practices. Not only do we learn that supposedly mature green tomatoes are actually "gassed" to make them appear ripe in the produce section of the supermarket, but also how Florida manages to use loopholes to continue to spray vines with poisonous pesticides. These chemicals are linked to birth defects as well as depletion of the ozone layer. After what I've learned from Estabrook, I'll buy my tomatoes in season at the local farmers' market or Whole Foods.

Adwoa says

Estabrook's Tomatoland offers an incredibly lucid and even-handed look at what is frequently a horrific industry in an unfair state - and for that, I commend him.

As a writer and garden grower of tomatoes who cares about both good food and human rights, Immokalee presents a complex problem. On one hand, you believe firmly that workers should receive fair pay, equitable rights, and a chance to band together: but it's hard to approach that while ignoring the fundamental truth that on a larger level, tomatoes should probably not be grown in Florida at all. Estabrook does a really wonderful job of humanizing the people behind every level of the many conflicting viewpoints on the industry, where admissible.

He has no pity whatsoever for those bosses who run their crews as slave gangs, which is as it should be. The thoroughness of the reporting fosters both deep satisfaction in his careful exposure of both the practices of modern-day slavery and indignation at the corruption that allows the owners of the companies who use the slavers' service to walk away with clean hands. Upliftingly, the book goes one step beyond many Problem Food tomes and documentaries, which frequently condemn big farming operations in broad strokes, champion organic food, and then end without ever addressing the gap in thinking between the two.

In Tomatoland, there are several sections at the end devoted to organizations and individuals who are doing the right thing AND making a profitable living, from attorneys prosecuting for back taxes to architects building habitable structures for migrant workers. A few organic or near-organic farmers even make the cut.

There is frequently little room in literature for conscientious Floridians. To see our state in print is usually to see it skewered as a depressing, corrupt wasteland: more backwards than the deep South and even less able to nourish its residents without extreme measures (intellectually or agriculturally). But what our topsoil lacks in nutrients, it makes up in narrative. Bravo to Barry Estabrook, for taking the time to tell one of our most insidious - and vital - stories.

Sherri says

There are certain books that have changed my viewpoint and shopping habits; this is one of those books. At some point in my consciousness, I knew that tomato workers were treated poorly. I vaguely recalled the time when Chipotle became the first restaurant to insist that its tomatos were purchased from sources that agreed to pay workers more. I knew that pesticides and other chemicals were used to grow tomatoes.

In Tomatoland, the author painstakingly details the multiple horrors of the tomato industry in Florida where nearly all tomatoes that are sold to grocery stores and restaurants are purchased. Chemicals lingering on tomatoes are the least of the issues with the commodity tomato farmers - workers are routinely sprayed with chemicals in the field and when they complain about the effects, such as burning eyes, they are told to get back to work. Too many complaints can lead to, at best, firing, and at worst, a beating. As horrific as the disregard of the health of the workers was the stories about the migrant workers who literally were slaves of the crew bosses.

The author highlights organizations that are fighting for these workers with no voices - and with some success, but there is a long way to go to change the standards in the industry. The author also highlights some of the successes in the industry, such as organic farms and farms that pay minimum wages to the workers. And the emerging hydroponic greenhouse tomatoes, cutting into the demand for the Florida tomatoes.

And, to think that all these people are treated so horribly to bring to consumers tomatoes that have no flavor. Interwoven with the story of the tomato workers, the author also discusses the course of the tomato to being the bland deceptive looking object today and the success of other varieties that can be commercially grown and taste like a tomato. Alas, those tomatoes are not readily available in all grocery stores.

Readers of Omnivore's Dilemma or Fast Food Nation will likely appreciate this book and the spotlight on the deplorable tomato industry.

Marvin says

If you only read one book about tomatoes in your lifetime make it this one.

Thanks to investigative books and films like *Fast Food Nation* and *Food, Inc.*, we have been exposed to the

shady going-ons in the food industry that gives us unhealthy sub-standard food products and inhumane treatment of animals. After reading *Tomatoland*, I'm almost persuaded to start an humane society for the tomato. Anyone who buys a commercial tomato know that this once noble fruit has been reduced to a pretty but tasteless atrocity.

Barry Estabrook investigates the Florida tomato business from where we get a third of our tomatoes and most of the winter supply to find out that the tasteless tomato is a well planned conspiracy. From toxic pesticides to slave labor conditions, this is a book that echoes back to Sinclair's *The Jungle* for pure disgust. Yet the Florida tomato industry is so strong that they can dictate how the tomato is developed and persecute any independent grower that deviates.

Books like this may be disturbing but they are essential. The author does an excellent job in his investigation but he also covers those persons who are fighting the establishment. I would have liked a little more about what the consumer can do to help but it is really very obvious. Boycott commercial Florida tomatoes and buy heirloom and organic products from independent growers. Or grow it own. It's worth it if only for taste.

David says

Like other reviewers, I note that the book concentrates almost exclusively on Florida tomato growing. I urge the author to consider *Tomatoland 2.0* as a future project, expanding his view. Are Florida conditions unique to Florida? Why or why not? I'd like to know about conditions not only outside Florida, but outside the US.

I've lived in the US, southeast Asia, and Europe, and found tasteless tomatoes in each. Here in the Balkans, yummy local tomatoes are available in abundance for six weeks a year, after which the pale, dry, tasteless variety return to the supermarkets for a long and sad 10+ months. (Consistent with local culture, the evil machinations of neighboring nationalities are blamed.) I'd love to know: how is the situation here the same as the US, and how is it different? What, if any, conclusions can be teased out of the similarities and differences? Have Floridian commercial agriculture practices and results been deliberately exported around the world, or did the unhappy model which created the Cardboard Tomato appear spontaneously in several different places?

In addition to the (probably correct) assumption that Americans will only read about the US, it's a sad commentary on the US that this book had to be misleading marketed as primarily concerned with the question “Why do supermarket tomatoes taste so bad?”, but you do what you have do to get published and get publicity. If it had shown its true colors as an exposè of the exploitation of Florida agricultural workers, most potential readers people would have said “Yeah, whatever, Cesar Chavez, that's so 1970's.” The author certainly wouldn't have been able to get the attention he has, and maybe might never have found a publisher.

That said, the book answers the bad-tasting tomato question, using about 30% of the space of the book to do so. The rest is an appalling catalog of ill-treatment of illegal immigrant labor, which is the price of cheap food in our supermarkets.

Finally, a tip of the electronic hat to whomever formatted this book for Kindle. When necessary, the main text is clearly and accurately hot-linked to the book's end notes, making navigation back and forth easy. Other recent non-fiction works I've read apparently felt that the effort necessary to do this was too great.

Andrea says

This book reminds me of a lyric by one of my favorite bands, The White Stripes:

"White Americans, what, nothin' better to do?
Why don't you kick yourself out, you're an immigrant too
Who's usin' who? What should we do?
Well you can't be a pimp and a prostitute too."

Certain segments of American society love to complain about how undocumented immigrants are taking "our" jobs, but I'll eat my hat if they can find one American willing to work sixteen hour days in the scorching sun, be sprayed with class one pesticides, give birth to children with horrible birth defects due to the aforementioned pesticides, live in squalor and have what little wages you earned garnished for the privilege of a filthy trailer, be forced to work while sick or injured, risk being chained and literally held as slaves, beaten if you attempt to escape, and have little to no legal recourse due to your illegal status and the threat of deportation. (I might also add that nobody can "take our jobs" without companies that are willing to give them away, but I digress.) I wonder how many of the same people who wouldn't dream of sinking to such lows would also throw a fit if they couldn't get a slice of tomato on their salad or burger in January. Make no mistake: that January tomato depends on the illegal status of many people, and many more who look the other way when faced with the abuses that go on in the fields of Florida's tomato growers. (It's telling that when asked about abuses of its workers, a representative of one of Florida's tomato giants replied "Put it this way: the tractor doesn't tell the farmer how to farm.")

All for the sake of a tomato that's not even good. There's a reason that your tomato from the grocery store tastes like nothing: It was bred for durability and uniform appearance, grown in soil so inhospitable that hundreds of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are necessary, picked while green and hauled to a large warehouse where it was gassed to artificially obtain that red color. Flavor does not even factor into the equation.

The good news is that there are signs of improvement. Workers' rights groups are gaining ground, as are smaller tomato growers who, though having to charge far more than the big growers, are finding footing among a public who wants organic, flavorful tomatoes harvested by workers treated and compensated fairly. Additionally, some success has been achieved with boycotts staged by large fast food chains who rely on the Florida tomato growers. (It hurts the bottom line, after all, when customers find out that the tomatoes in their chalupa were picked by slaves.) You can bet that the threat of losing one of its biggest customers got the growers' attention fast.

This is a well-written, well-researched book that, while at times very hard to read, is an important one. I recommend it for anybody interested in knowing more about where their food comes from, which should be everybody. Knowledge is power; vote with your dollar.

Jacquelyn says

After seeing Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit (by Barry Estabrook) on sale at Barnes and Noble this summer, I added it to my reading list. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get my hands on a copy until yesterday. I expected to be bored with a history of industrial tomato production

in Florida.I read the whole thing between last night and this afternoon. Bored would have been an improvement over how I am feeling right now.

As someone who lives not far from Immokalee, which is a major subject in the book, it backs up everything I have ever heard on the news, from my high school Spanish teachers, and my mother on the conditions of the tomato laborers. But the truth is so much more-conditions and prospects are much worse than anyone has ever let on. I feel ashamed to live so close to this poor, often enslaved, community and have not known more about it before now. Reading through the chapters on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) broke my heart over the situations these people have been put through.

Estabrook does a good job highlighting the complex interplay of economic and social aspects in the tomato business. At times, it seems as though he has failed to highlight environmental aspects. And then you read about the pesticide use and the health abuses against these workers from being sprayed with pesticides while working in the fields, in violation of laws set up to prevent this. He scares the reader with the sheer amount of chemicals spread on the fields, let alone the toxicity of these. He names each possible chemical that could be used and its harmful side effects. He writes about several cases of birth defects in the Immokalee area caused by improper exposure to pesticides. I cried through this part; I was heartbroken for these families. Yet they remain optimistic for their children and their prospects in the United States.

He presents the CIW and highlights their work to improve the lot of the migrant workers in Immokalee. National campaigns against large fast food companies have been successful, but the CIW still has its work cut out for them. They have taken part in several cases to expose modern-day slavery in the area when police didn’t have enough evidence, at the risk of their own personal safety. Estabrook has highlighted those that help these workers well, the lawyers that fight tirelessly to get minimum wage for the workers.

Not all of the book is spent on the issues of Immokalee. Estabrook also goes into the lack of taste in industrial tomatoes. He highlights current research being done at UF (Go Gators!) on how to improve taste in tomatoes while preserving the shelf-life and disease resistance of the breed. Progress is being made. In Florida, At this point, all seems hopeless for the tomato industry. Only now does Estabrook provide hope for both the industry and the tomato itself. He brings in Lady Moon Farms, which grows organic produce in Florida (thought to be impossible by some experts). Not only does Beddard, the owner, turn a profit, he pays his workers fairly and provides free housing when the staff must migrate to Georgia and Pennsylvania. He also presents Tim Stark, owner and operator of Eckerton Hill Farm in Pennsylvania, who grows tomatoes and pays his workers a fair wage. There is a way to sustainably produce tomatoes and pay workers fairly. The tomato industry of Florida should take note-it can be done. If not for the sake of treating their workers humanely, then for the sake of bettering their public relations, which would improve their bottom line.

As someone interested in researching what happens to the tomato culls not sent to be packed and sold, I was a little disappointed that Estabrook did not elaborate on this ridiculous amount of waste. However, that is a small issue for me. I am so glad someone wrote this book and the information is compiled for those interested in this subject. This book provides something for everyone: science, social justice, sustainability, economics, law, government. Everyone should read it, especially if you live in Florida. Estabrook has provided the information to the public, and it remains to be seen what the public will do once they know the truth behind the tomato industry.

Linda Watson says

Tomatoland is this year's irresistibly juicy page turner. Investigative journalist Barry Estabrook first exposed the horrific conditions in Florida's industrial tomato fields in Gourmet magazine. The article won a James Beard award (think Oscar) and allowed him to continue investigating sunny Florida's dark secrets about the $10 billion fresh-tomato industry.

Much of the book tells the story promised by the subtitle: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed our Most Alluring Fruit. You'll learn why "salad tomatoes" feel and taste like tennis balls: gassed from green to greenish-red without developing any unwanted softness or character. You'll learn why the big growers in Florida don't care about taste: it's too hard to breed for and anyway, taste happens after the sale, so who cares?

More importantly and grippingly, Estabrook described the forced servitude—the slavery—that the tomato pickers endure. Slavery is not too strong a term when shackles, shotguns, and brutal beatings keep unwilling workers on the job. Other "incentives" for working including manufactured and inescapable debts and threats to the workers' families and co-workers.

But if Tomatoland were all gloom and despair, I wouldn't be urging you to read it. Estabrook also introduces you to a wide range of people trying to create decent conditions for the workers, better environmental practices, and yes even tasty tomatoes. Read moving interviews with day-care operators, lawyers, housing developers, tomato breeders, and sustainable farmers. Tomatoland's David-and-Goliath vignettes make it a page turner, complete with spies and prison breaks. These sections not only offer hope and a few laughs. They also suggest ways to vote with your fork against slavery and poison and for human dignity and fragrant, heavy, truly ripe tomatoes.

Who should read Tomatoland? Everyone who eats. Everyone who cares about babies, social justice, immigration, the environment, or good food.

What groups should read and discuss Tomatoland? Book clubs. Co-ops. Farmers' market associations. Groups interested in ethics, from churches to political organizations. Next summer, I hope many universities pick Tomatoland as the freshman book assigned to all incoming students to stimulate conversation across disciplines. This lively read would provide a starting point for conversations on everything from architecture to genetics to writing.

Linda says

“Tomatoland” is one of the very best investigative books I have read in many years. The topic is 21st Century slavery and related abuses in the tomato fields of Florida, in locations not far from Disney’s Magic Kingdom and Naples, one of the wealthiest communities in the US. I really respect and appreciate Barry Estabrook’s obvious compassion and empathy for the migrant workers whose tragic stories he includes in this very well-written, thoroughly documented and truly compelling book.
Barry is a highly regarded journalist and was for many years a contributing editor for the late Gourmet magazine. His writing has been featured in the Atlantic, The New York Times Magazine, the Washington Post and other publications. He was the founding editor of Eating Well magazine. Barry recently received a James Beard Award for his blog: www.politicsoftheplate.com
Florida produces about one-third of the fresh tomatoes grown in the US and sold to supermarkets and big box stores such as Wal-Mart. This is where “winter tomatoes”, that can be purchased in January in Chicago for example, most likely originate. In addition, these tomatoes from Florida are used by fast-food operations

such as McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, and Chipolte.

Florida's soil is quite sandy and theoretically inhospitable to the growth of tomatoes and other vegetables. To solve this problem tomato growers use an extensive array of highly toxic chemicals. Actually, Florida growers use 8 times as many chemicals on their fields as similarly sized fields in California. The tomatoes are then picked green, before ripeness, and gassed with ethylene to create the desired red coloration. A typical consumer of these tomatoes may also be consuming chemicals such as metribuzin (herbicide), mancozeb (fungicide) and avermectin (insecticide), all three of which, per the author, are known to be "developmental and reproductive toxins". Sometimes tear gas is even added to what the author calls a "witches brew" of highly toxic chemicals. The tomatoes are rubbery, capable of bouncing across a kitchen floor without breaking, and completely tasteless.

The author describes in meticulous detail several situations, such as in the Ag-Mart Produce fields, in which the toxins are knowingly and aggressively sprayed at the very same time workers are tending to the crops in the same fields, even in the next row. What results, for women working there who may be pregnant, is the strong likelihood of a still birth or a child born with severe disabilities. The author describes one child, Carlito, who was born with no arms or legs. Another child, Violetta, was born with no anus, no sex organs and other horrible deformities. Three days after her birth, she died. Both of these children mothers had worked in the Ag-Mart fields and had been subjected to direct contact with a variety of toxic chemicals in their daily work. The grower was in blatant violation of US EPA rules in spraying a field while workers were present and not allowing a specific amount of time to lapse before workers were allowed into the field. With no enforcement capability, bribery of inspectors, actual threats of violence and extortion of workers by their employers, nothing was likely to be done in many of these tragic cases. In the case of Carlito, a social worker eventually referred his family to an attorney, Andrew Yaffa, who was working with farm workers in a number of cases. After three years he was able to procure an undisclosed settlement to assist the family with Carlito's care.

The damage to the environment by the use of a wide array of highly toxic chemicals is further described in a story about Lake Apopka, at one time the fourth largest lake in Florida and home to a variety of wildlife, including wide-mouthed bass. Farming of tomatoes began here in the 1940's when swamp land was drained to grow produce in support of what was called the "wartime effort". Farming continued there, with of course the accompanying wide use of highly toxic chemicals, into the mid 1990's. The lake turned green and became the most highly polluted body of water in Florida. The fish of course were long gone and migratory birds were no longer present. Farming was eventually curtailed with local landowners bought out, at a profit, by the state. Attempts to rebuild the natural habitat have been a failure. When various migratory birds returned, they died. However, the farm workers, mostly African-Americans, were left behind, many suffering from a variety of illnesses, including kidney failure, Lupus, arthritis, vision problems and other disabilities. They to this date have received absolutely no compensation for the disabling injuries and diseases which are a direct result of Florida's agricultural practices and persistent violations of EPA regulations. Recently the Tea Party favorite and current Florida governor, Rick Scott, vetoed a state budget bill that would have provided a settlement to these workers. (Scott, a multimillionaire, was forced to resign as CEO of the Columbia HCA health care organization in the late 1990's after the company pleaded guilty to a variety of fraudulent Medicare billing practices and agreed to a $600 million settlement with the federal government.)

There are no buffer zones between the fields and the local communities, allowing the chemicals being sprayed to blow into schools, homes, and even churches. In one instance, described by the author, parishioners attending a church service had to leave, feeling quite unwell during the service as methyl bromide combined with tear gas was being sprayed in near-by fields on a Sunday morning.

In addition to the discussion of the extensive use of highly toxic, carcinogenic chemicals in tomato farming in Florida, what I found to be most stunning and horrifying was the reporting on the modern day slavery and utterly immoral abuse of farm workers in the rural area known as Immokalee, located about 50 miles from Naples, FL. The inhumane and illegal conditions suffered by migrant workers just 50 miles from one of the wealthiest communities in the US have existed for many years. It does not matter if a Democrat or

Republican is governor, a US Senator or even President of the United States. The labor is cheap, the workers, mostly migrants who barely even speak English, are silent and fearful, and the abuse has continued. Coyotes (smugglers of human beings) routinely charge exorbitant fees to transport workers into the US, crowding them into stifling, dark trailer trucks, trading them off to another coyote as though they were a commodity, and sending them to live in conditions not even fit for a stray dog – in broken down trailers, shacks, tents hidden away in the woods with minimal food and a complete lack of sanitary conditions for cooking and bathing. The workers were subject to forced labor for long hours and could be beaten or fired for the most minor of things, such as taking a bathroom break or having a drink of water. Workers were routinely cheated out of wages and were not paid for transportation time or any other down time in the fields. Growers, such as Ag-Mart, even charged a worker $5 to take a cold shower under a garden hose, out in the open, after a typical 12+ hour day. They were paid by bushel of tomatoes picked (anywhere from 50 cents a bushel to at the most $1), not on any sort of hourly fair wage basis. They were not paid for transportation to and from the fields, meal breaks, or any downtime. Of course, they had no health insurance, worker's compensation for injuries, or unemployment insurance. How they survived at all is really hard to imagine.

Through the efforts of pro bono attorneys, social workers, church groups, and local organizations such as the "Coalition of Immokalee Workers", efforts are being made to file lawsuits and work for better conditions for the migrant workers. Several cases in particular are described in detail, including cases involving human trafficking, harboring and abusing aliens, unlawful detention (forced labor) and attempts to deny workers their salaries.

Lucas Domingo was hired onto the Navarette family operation. Domingo arrived here illegally. He was promised housing, meals, and what sounded to him to be a decent wage. He needed to send money home to support a sick parent. Instead, Domingo was sent to live in a "box trailer" in the backyard of a Navarette property, living in the trailer with 3 other workers and no toilet, much less a shower. Meals were of very poor quality and infrequent. Workers typically ran up debts to the manager, in this case Cesar Navarette. Wages were then taken from them to pay off these loans. When the workers threatened to leave they were severely beaten and locked up in the residences, these trailers, abandoned vans, and shacks, in the backyard. After 3 years of this, two workers on the Navarette property managed to escape one night. Miraculously, they made their way to CIW, the Coalition of Imokkalee Workers. After telling their stories to local law enforcement authorities, three Navarette brothers and their mother were indicted for among other things, forcing slavery. This is of course a violation of the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution which assures the right to be free of involuntary servitude. Sentences handed down after plea deals by the Navarettes included deportation to Mexico for the mother, 12 year sentences for 2 of the brothers, and almost 4 years for another brother.

Also discussed in detail are the efforts over many years to get large markets and fast food operations to agree to support the payment of better wages to the farm workers. Of course these corporations tended to resist efforts at reform for a number of years. Some, including Whole Foods Market, YUM Brands (which owns several fast food chains), certain major supermarket chains eventually agreed to support improved conditions and better wages for workers. To this day, however, Trader Joe's is holding out! Throughout the book there are also discussions of the failings of various elected officials, from Presidents on down, to correct the blatant wrongs being done with these deplorable agricultural practices.

The final chapters in the book report on some successes, overall ending the book on a positive note. There is the successful organic farmer, Tom Beddard of Lady Moon Farms, who sells his produce to among others, Whole Foods Market. Gregory Schell, an attorney who went to Harvard Law School with Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, is now working on migrant worker issues and has successfully won a number of court cases in an attempt to change conditions for workers around the country. Barbara Mainster is a teacher working with the Redlands Christian Migrant Association in providing child care, education, and other services to low income families living in farm worker migrant camps in the area. Steven Kirk has worked with others to provide decent housing for migrant workers, beginning his projects in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. And finally, there is the lovable Tim Stark, a Princeton graduate who farms organically

on his farm, Eckerton Hill Farm, in eastern Pennsylvania. Tim has quite a following at the Greenmarket in Union Square and also sells his produce to upscale trendy restaurants in New York. However, I remain haunted by the deplorable conditions of the migrant workers involved in our food production and the serious damage being done to the environment. I really hope Barry’s book gets much wider recognition and is included on the summer reading list for not just all of us normal people, but for government officials, non-profits, and religious groups who are in more of a position to do something about this. (What are the Obama’s reading this summer?)

Kevin says

More about modern day slavery than about tomatoes. Granted, the slavery was centered around the tomato industry, but it would just as easily be applied to any crop picking industry out there. It's hard for me to eat another tomato, honestly. Especially since I live in Florida and this is where the book focused on due to Florida's ability to get late harvests and meet the nationwide demand for tasteless, but perfectly round and consistent red colored tomatoes. Given that this book discussed situations a few years gone by, I do wonder how much has changed. The working conditions seemed wretched, from people being sprayed directly with pesticides and having birth defects caused by them, to 12+ hour days just to sleep in unhealthy conditions and having your work-master rack up your debt for every little thing.

It's a shame about tomatoes, too. They were a sad sidebar to the already depressing slavery story. Tomatoes have been turned into a tasteless crop by a group of growers that were given a monopoly on what is legal and illegal to export from Florida to other states. The "ugly" tomato that was bred (not genetically engineered) for better taste was originally banned, then gradually allowed back in only under the condition it was labeled and treated like a GMO, even though it is not.

What I'm learning is that quality food doesn't fit well into commercial methodologies. If a commercial producer likes it, it's probably not healthy or tasty. Buying seasonally, locally, and growing your own produce can drastically cut the demand for crap like tasteless tomatoes and the slave work conditions it promotes.

Patrick says

Supermarket produce sections bulging with a year-round supply of perfectly round, bright red-orange tomatoes have become all but a national birthright. But in Tomatoland, which is based on his James Beard Award-winning article, The Price of Tomatoes, investigative food journalist Barry Estabrook reveals the huge human and environmental cost of the $5 billion fresh tomato industry. Fields are sprayed with more than one hundred different herbicides and pesticides. Tomatoes are picked hard and green and artificially gassed until their skins acquire a marketable hue. Modern plant breeding has tripled yields, but has also produced fruits with dramatically reduced amounts of calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C, and tomatoes that have fourteen times more sodium than the tomatoes our parents enjoyed. The relentless drive for low costs has fostered a thriving modern-day slave trade in the United States. How have we come to this point? Estabrook traces the supermarket tomato from its birthplace in the deserts of Peru to the impoverished town of Immokalee, Florida, a.k.a. the tomato capital of the United States. He visits the laboratories of seedsmen trying to develop varieties that can withstand the rigors of agribusiness and still taste like a garden tomato,

and then moves on to commercial growers who operate on tens of thousands of acres, and eventually to a hillside field in Pennsylvania, where he meets an obsessed farmer who produces delectable tomatoes for the nation's top restaurants.
Throughout Tomatoland Estabrook presents a who's who cast of characters in the tomato industry: the avuncular octogenarian whose conglomerate grows one out of every eight tomatoes eaten in the United States; the ex-Marine who heads the group that dictates the size, color, and shape of every tomato shipped out of Florida; the U.S. attorney who has doggedly prosecuted human traffickers for the past decade; and the Guatemalan peasant who came north to earn money for his parents' medical bills and found himself enslaved for two years.

Joe says

This is definitely one of my top five books about tomatoes. OK, OK, it's my absolute top book about tomatoes.

In "Tomatoland", Barry Estabrook discusses modern tomato farming practices in Florida, and how the ridiculous situations has gotten to this point. Tomatoes like dry conditions -- not humid, like Florida, where they are susceptible to fungal diseases; like most plants, they require nutrients from the soil -- although in Florida, tomatoes are typically grown in nutrient-free sand; tomatoes can benefit from a climate that has a cold winter, to kill off pests -- but in Florida, pests are a constant problem.

So why in the world does Florida grow about 1/3 of America's fresh tomatoes? Two main reasons: 1) the warm winters mean that it's possible to grow some sort of tomatoes there year-round, and 2) there continues to be a market for bland, lifeless tomatoes.

Tomatoland does a great job of going through the entire cycle of tomato growing, from the nasty chemicals that are used to prepare the land, to the enormous quantity of pesticides that are used during the growing season -- about eight times as much as California, per acre of tomatoes grown -- to the way they are picked ripe, then reddened with ethylene. The book continues, talking about the terrible conditions for workers: at best, exposed to terrible chemicals and poor working conditions, at worst stuck in true modern-day slavery.

Finally, the book talks about commercial alternatives: smaller farms growing better-tasting tomatoes, in some cases organically, people trying to develop tomatoes that have better natural resistance to pests or cold, and researchers trying to create tomatoes that have the strength and durability of market tomatoes, but have better taste and nutrition.

This book is easy to read, and absolutely compelling. It's well worth reading. The only problem I have with it is that it focuses almost completely on Florida's tomato growing; they do grow about a third of America's fresh tomatoes, but that leaves a lot of other tomatoes (including all canned tomatoes, a completely separate category) that this book almost completely ignores.
