

Restaurant workers deserve fair treatment, advocate says

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At a NewDay speaker series lecture on Monday (March 14), author and restaurant labor advocate Saru Jayaraman discusses unfair practices within the restaurant industry and how her organization tries to help low-wage workers. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Your barista serves up fair trade coffee, but is he himself treated fairly? Saru Jayaraman, co-founder and co-director of [Restaurant Opportunities Centers United](#) (ROC) posed questions like that one in a lecture to the Tulane University community on unethical treatment of workers in today's restaurant business. The lecture was part of the [NewDay Distinguished Speaker Series](#) on Monday (March 14) in Richardson Memorial Hall on the uptown campus.

Between the creation of Restaurant Opportunities Centers, an organization that works toward fair treatment of restaurant labor, and her book *Forked: A New Standard for American Dining*, Jayaraman has created a national conversation about what really happens behind the kitchen doors.

“Most of us are oblivious to what’s happening to those bringing out our food,” Jayaraman said. “I wanted to know why the restaurant industry is the largest-paying United States employer and yet, the farther back you go into the kitchen, you find darker skin and lower wages.”

Fair treatment issues include race, gender, sexual harassment, wages and unemployment in restaurants today. ROC attempts to improve the quality of life for restaurant workers, such as offering training in a simulated restaurant setting in order to provide low-wage workers with new skills that could lead to promotions.

“This is not just an issue of poverty ... it is the worst legal standard you can think of. We need to start seeing the restaurant industry as a valued profession and give it the same respect we would a doctor or lawyer.”

Jayaraman encouraged the audience to use the app ROC National Diners Guide and forkedthebook.com, as a way to prompt improvements within their everyday dining atmospheres.

“Taking the high road is not only the right and moral thing to do, it is actually better for business, and it is a place where we all should be headed,” she said.

The NewDay Distinguished Speaker Series is a program of the [Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking](#) at Tulane.

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