Diners should pay attention to workers, not just the food

Americans have started to care deeply about how their food came to be. At restaurants, we ask probing questions: Are the greens organic? Were the cows grass-fed? We fret over whether our chicken could run around the farmyard. We take comfort in knowing that the pickles were prepared in-house, and that the cucumbers came from just an hour away. In short, we’ve come to demand high quality and sustainable sourcing in every part of a restaurant’s operation.

Well, except in how the employees who work there are treated.

In a series of editorials over the past year, the Globe has detailed the challenges that food service workers routinely face: wages too low to live on, minimal job security, few organizing rights, the risk of wage theft, and even human trafficking.

These are all inadequacies that, theoretically, should fall to lawmakers to address. But political will in Washington to raise the minimum wage has stalled, and labor enforcement, at both the federal and state levels, has been ineffectual.

No, more humane working conditions in restaurants aren’t likely to arrive until patrons start demanding them as part of their dining experience, too.

Contrary to the protests of industry bigwigs and some politicians, there is room in restaurant economics for higher pay and benefits — if customers are willing to pay a little bit more.

Ask top executives at Chipotle Mexican Grill. The burrito chain is red hot, achieving record margins and robust sales in recent years as Americans (and Europeans and Canadians) embrace its “Food with Integrity” motto. The company does offer its employees some luxuries rare in its industry — quick advancement, health insurance, regular full-time shifts, for instance — but its average wage for non-managers works out to be just slightly above $9 per hour (including bonuses).

Yet, in discussing proposals for a $10 minimum wage, Chipotle’s chief financial officer, Jack Hartung, shrugged it off. “A move to $10 would have an effect, but not too significant,” Hartung told analysts last January. In other words, an extra buck an hour isn’t a major threat to Chipotle’s bottom line, but the chain is also in no hurry to get there. For the Chipotle “crew member” trying to support a child, a raise to $10 represents a 11 percent pay hike and can mean the difference between making rent and being evicted, paying the gas bill, even putting enough food on the table.

Already, plenty of eateries and smaller
chains in the Boston area — up and down the price spectrum — have committed to compensating hourly employees more than the bare minimum: Shake Shack, Boloco, the Salty Pig, and Coda in the South End, Canary Square in Jamaica Plain, Porters Bar and Grill near North Station, Haley House Bakery Cafe in Roxbury.

In addition to a minimum wage of $10, Boloco offers employees at its burrito joints other perks, including 401(k) matching, transportation subsidies, and English-language courses. Virtue isn’t the only reward: “There are quantifiable savings in terms of lower turnover and training costs,” said CEO Patrick Renna. “Happier employees mean better service and higher customer satisfaction.”

But customers shouldn’t wait for other restaurant owners to figure that out on their own. The dining public must show that it wants better treatment for workers. Here’s how:

• Demand intelligence. Unlike health code violations, an eatery’s bad labor practices aren’t regularly catalogued in any city-run online databases. For now, the US Department of Labor’s “Eat Shop Sleep” app is one of the best tools available, listing past citations for wage theft or other labor violations. It allows users to search by location or a restaurant’s name, but the results are still limited.

• Patronize the good guys. There’s not yet a Yelp rating or a widely used “fair trade” label to identify restaurants whose managers take pride in treating workers well. But a simple Google search can provide some help. Pay attention to online reviews that mention good labor practices. Tell owners that’s why you are there. Tell your friends, too. (Boycot-

• Tip in cash. Servers who make the tipped minimum wage ($3 in Massachusetts as of Jan. 1) often must rely on generous tippers to make up most of their take-home pay. And, as backwards as it sounds in an electronic age, wait staff report that leaving cash is the best guarantee your tip will end up in the right pocket.

• Push for higher wages and workers rights. The Fight for $15 campaign continues. Polls suggest most Americans support an increased minimum wage, so be vocal about it. Sign petitions, attend hearings, join protests, confront politicians about their stances, trumpet the issue on social media.

Being a more conscientious consumer will pay off in unexpected ways. Restaurants today lie at the heart of 21st-century American life. These employers aren’t headed overseas; for the foreseeable future, millions of Americans will wait tables, cook food, or wash dishes for their livelihoods.

Meanwhile, an ever-more-frazzled public eats out instead of cooking at home. Neighborhood development and redevelopment plans increasingly hinge on attracting new restaurants. Having that local eatery on the corner, or a perhaps short drive away, has become an intrinsic part of what makes a community feel liveable.

That’s all the more reason for customers to make sure their friends, neighbors, and family members who work in these vital businesses earn enough to live on. And when restaurateurs, from small chef-owners to fast-food giants, see customers paying closer attention to equity in their industry, they’ll know what to do.