The Grimmway packing plant in Arvin, California, a drab farmworker town fifteen miles southeast of Bakersfield, is where carrots go to be reborn. After months of being coaxed and weeded in the nearby fields, the vegetables are yanked from the ground by a mechanical harvester. A convoy of open-bed trucks carries them to the plant, a cluster of tan, windowless buildings with mysterious-looking pipes and gadgets protruding from the sides. Here they are washed, sliced, sanded and emerge as "baby" carrots--the snackable treats in the cellophane bag familiar to health-conscious shoppers everywhere.

Once the carrots pass through an opening in the side of the main building, they enter a world that seems miles away from the fields and orchards outside. Dozens of machines fill the chilly air with a deafening noise. Employees wade through pools of water several inches deep on the plant's rubber floor. There are carrots everywhere--scattered on the floor, piled inside carts and vats, in heaps at the base of the metal equipment.

At the grading tables, the new arrivals float by teams of Latinas in masks and hairnets who separate the good ones from those with imperfections. Supervisors stand by to time bathroom breaks of no more than seven minutes and to scold the women if they speak or glance up from their work.
Here, surrounded by the rhythmic thwack-thwacking of the machines, Beatriz Gonzalez stands for eight hours a day and sorts. Wearing rubber gloves and down ski pants to keep her warm, she deftly reaches into the orange tide, plucking out defective specimens and tossing them into a center tub. Years of performing the repetitive motion have swollen her forearms and left her with arthritis in her knuckles. When she started working in the Arvin plant, she earned the state minimum of $6.75 an hour. Four years later, she makes $7.30.

A petite woman with fluffy bangs and rounded features, Gonzalez studied law in her native Mexico but left school for the United States in search of wealth. "Now," she says sadly, "I have neither money nor education."

Gonzalez's workplace looks like any number of packing sheds in California's fruit and vegetable industry, where the state that grows half the country's produce has for decades relied on a low-paid immigrant workforce to tend and harvest its crops. But this is no ordinary plant--Gonzalez's employer is a leader in the organic food business, an industry that prides itself on a gentler approach to the land and the people who work it. Her experience illustrates just how far the organic food movement has yet to go to fulfill its promise of a more socially just food system.

I visited Grimmway because I was curious about organic food and the people who grow it. I grew up eating vegetables from my mother's garden. Fresh-picked zucchini blossoms fried and stuffed with cheese, homemade bread soaked in the juice of heirloom tomatoes--these are some of my most vivid childhood memories. And when I go grocery shopping, I'm drawn to fruits and vegetables that look like the ones on which I was raised: real and imperfect, sometimes a little dirty, but looking and smelling like fruits and vegetables rather than waxy widgets that just fell off an assembly line. In other words, I buy organic, and I feel good about the decision, even if it means spending a little more.

I'm not alone. For many consumers, an organic apple tastes sweeter not only because it's healthier but because it conjures up a vision of a simpler, more pure world, where we produce our food without wreaking havoc on the environment and our relationship to it is unmediated by fear, guilt or the drive for excessive profits. This image of a food utopia has fueled the growth of the organic food industry, which is expanding by 20 percent each year.

But the farmworkers who bring in the organic harvest face a different reality, one largely invisible to food buyers. Whether they work in the fields or in processing plants, most workers on organic farms, like those on conventional farms, are immigrants from Mexico who earn minimum wage or slightly more and receive no benefits. Fieldwork on organic farms can be especially strenuous because farmers employ back-breaking methods like hand-weeding to avoid using pesticides.
California’s more than 2,000 organic farms range from multimillion-dollar companies like Grimmway, where temporary agencies and labor contractors supervise the workers, to small family ranches where owners enjoy good relations with employees but pay them so little that they rely on public assistance and charity. Organic farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley, the state’s largest agricultural region, often live in the same towns as conventional farmworkers, where poverty rates can reach one-third, pesticide drift is an ever-present problem and the food available for purchase is likely to be high in fat and low in nutrients. A 1999 study of 150 California organic farmers found that more than half paid their workers the minimum wage; less than 10 percent paid more than $7.50 per hour.

"Generally a consumer who goes to Whole Foods makes the assumption that if producers are growing in a way that’s conscious of the environment, that's going to be better for workers," said Martha Guzmán, legislative advocate for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, a farmworker advocacy group. "And that assumption benefits the organic industry. But when you look at the labor practices that matter most--paying decent wages, treating workers with respect--none of that is really related to whether you use a certain type of pesticide."

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The homesteaders and commune dwellers who pioneered sustainable agriculture in the 1960s saw their movement as a wholesale alternative to industrial agriculture, with its poisonous chemicals, soil-depleting techniques and exploitative labor practices. As culinary historian Warren Belasco explains in his book *Appetite for Change*, early farmers' "radical vision extended the organic farmer's cooperation with nature to a cooperative model in human relations."

Yet after spending several months visiting California organic farms and talking to consumers, workers, farmers and retailers, I heard a sharp debate about whether organic farmers should do better for their employees. The clamor has intensified in the past year, as farmers and worker advocates have clashed over state regulations intended to protect farmworkers. In the spring of last year, researchers at the University of California published a study showing that organic farmers widely oppose requirements that they pay benefits and allow farmhands to organize.

Nonetheless, there is a small but growing campaign, backed by some of organic agriculture's staunchest supporters, for a new kind of food labeling, one that would guarantee that food is produced in ways that benefit workers as well as the environment.

As organic farming comes of age, with demand outpacing supply, many are asking the same questions I did after my tour of Grimmway: How did organic farmers come to emulate the labor
practices of a system they fought so hard to escape? And when it comes to the way Americans treat the people who grow our food, is this as good as it gets?

"Farming is farming," says Fred Rappleye, a manager for Grimmway's organic division, when I tell him some criticize the company's low wages. "When you get into organic you are being more proactive with the environment, but [boosting] pay is a hard thing to do. Labor is always the highest cost, and it's one of the things we try to keep under control. All of organic is a business, too, and you have to make money."

And Grimmway does make money--$450 million in 2005, according to analysts. The firm sells more than 40 percent of the world's carrots, more than any other grower. Advocates for workers say the company skimps on labor costs using the time-honored practice of contracting out.

"The motivation for hiring contractors is to avoid direct responsibility for wages and benefits," says United Farm Workers (UFW) spokesperson Marc Grossman. "You have no job rights--when the harvest begins you have to come with your hat in your hand and beg for your job, even if you've worked for the same grower for twenty years."

Grimmway and contractor Esparza Enterprises currently face a lawsuit claiming contract workers were sexually harassed while working at the company. The state Department of Labor has also fined Esparza for failing to train employees to use dangerous equipment and for hiring children without work permits. The checkered record is typical of farm labor contractors. And indeed, nothing about Grimmway's business practices suggests that its workers fare worse than those on other large farms. The company's owners, conventional farmers with little connection to the organic movement, have simply chosen agribusiness-as-usual over the movement's social justice principles.

On a foggy day Rappleye, a tall twentysomething with startlingly clear blue eyes, drove me around the dirt roads of Arvin. Around us the company's fields seemed to stretch forever, some barren, others covered with fernlike carrot tops or a bright mix of collards and chards.

When Grimmway began farming organically in the mid-1990s, Rappleye explained, it found the new venture to be far more labor-intensive than conventional agriculture. In a conventional field, one worker can spray weeds with pesticides at a cost of $30 per acre, he said. Organic farming requires crews of laborers for weeding that can cost up to $1,000 per acre.

The physically demanding nature of organic farming sparked a recent battle that pitted organic farmers against farmworkers. The UFW had long drawn attention to musculoskeletal problems
suffered by people who work stooped over in the fields. In the 1970s the union led a successful campaign to ban the short-handled hoe, arguing that the tool caused back injuries. When union founder Cesar Chavez died, friends at the funeral placed one of the hoes on his casket. But growers soon found a way around the ban by requiring workers to weed by hand. Moisés Olivera, a migrant worker who's hopped from job to job throughout the Central Valley, explained to me how it feels.

"You go along on your knees," he said. "There is a constant, numbing pain. By the end of a year people develop a lot of problems with their bones."

In 2004 farmworker groups lobbied the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration to restrict hand-weeding. Organic farmers led the backlash against the proposal. While they have devised many creative tactics for banishing weeds without pesticides--singeing them with torches, slicing them with disks, allowing them to flourish before planting and then mowing them down--every organic farmer I talked to insisted there's only one way to completely rid your crop of the pesky plants: sitting, kneeling or bending, plucking them out one by one.

It's tremendously costly. Yet farmers say there's little alternative; long-handled hoes, which would allow workers to stand upright, can destroy some of the delicate specialty crops, such as baby leaf lettuce, that many organic farmers cultivate. At a minimum they would force farmers to space their plants farther apart, cutting into profits by yielding a smaller harvest on the same area of land.

"You're talking about growing five times as many acres," said Rappleye. "Your costs go outta sight. There's not enough ground or enough manure in the valley to farm that way."

The farmers ultimately triumphed, and OSHA exempted organic farms from the new rules, which went into effect last year. For labor advocates like Martha Guzmán, who had sought to reach a compromise, it was a slap in the face. "I realized then that I could get my organization to support a conservation act or greater subsidies for transitional assistance [to organic farmers]," she said. "But none of that was being really reciprocated. It's just not part of their vision."

Of course, workers benefit most obviously from organic farming by not being exposed to pesticides. But Don Villarejo, an agricultural policy analyst who conducted the largest-ever clinical study of farmworker health in California, argues that while pesticide exposure is important, it's not the most crucial health issue on the farm. Villarejo pointed to data on reported workers' compensation claims between 1990 and 1999. Of the major claims, where insurance companies paid $5,000 or more, only 1.5 percent stemmed directly or indirectly from pesticides. Almost half were strain injuries, followed by fractures, sprains and lacerations.
"Yes, pesticides are a concern, and it's good farmers are trying to figure out how to grow without them," he said. "But if you really want to deal with the fact that workers are being killed and maimed all the time, you have to look elsewhere."

After three straight weeks of rainy weather on Riverdog Farm, owner Tim Mueller is looking harried. Dressed like a stereotypical hippie farmer with a ponytail, 1970s-style glasses, shorts and galoshes, he dashes back and forth from the packing shed to the cramped trailer that serves as the farm's office, fixing computer problems, helping an employee translate documents into Spanish and checking in on crates of vegetables that packers are readying for shipment.

This spring's heavy storms have destroyed thousands of dollars in crops here in the Capay Valley, a narrow slice of land near Sacramento where small farmers like Mueller grow specialty produce for chic restaurants. Mueller estimates that he has lost 10 percent of the gross income from his 250-acre ranch, half of which goes to labor costs. The tour he takes me on is a trail of horrors: the peas that were sickened by the rain, the broccoli field with a flood at one end, the stacks of seedling trays by the greenhouse, waiting to be planted.

When Mueller looks at this wreckage, he sees numbers. More specifically, he sees his workers' paychecks. "I'm looking at their year-to-date earnings and I'm going, Not only are we behind on earnings, but all of them are behind," he says. "That's what these greenhouses full of plants symbolize."

Smaller farms like Riverdog make up the majority of organic farms in California. But their share of the profits and acreage is shrinking as organic giants like Grimmway and Salinas Valley-based Earthbound Farms increasingly dominate the market. Most survive through some combination of farmers' markets, wholesale and restaurant sales, and home deliveries. It's not an easy living. In a bad year Mueller might gross 2 percent less than his expenses. A fantastic year means 4 percent profit.

So how are Riverdog's workers faring in that eco-economy? I meet several of them in a soggy field where they are cleaning leeks, sitting on overturned crates, their legs ankle-deep in mud. They get along well with Mueller, they say, and like their job--except in months like this, when the least senior employees go days without pay because there is nothing for them to do. Most earn California's minimum wage of $6.75 per hour, and some have worked fewer than twenty hours in the past week.

"We're all waiting for summer, when the tomatoes are ripe; we work ten hours a day and we can send a little to Mexico to save or to build a house," says Consuelo Romo, a crew leader with a toothy grin and a tan bandanna wrapped around her head. "But in the winter, we don't have enough even to cover
our own expenses."

Romo is a single mother with two kids and one of a minority of workers whose salaries top the minimum. She makes $8.50 per hour, just below the poverty line for a family of three. She gets canned food and used clothing from local nonprofits, and struggles to pay $20 a day for childcare at an unlicensed center. I ask Romo if she ever buys organic food for her children. Usually when I've asked farmworkers this question, they've laughed at the idea of such luxury. Romo looks embarrassed. "It's an economic question," she says. "I buy food grown with chemicals so I can save to buy something else."

Like Romo, most organic farmworkers can't afford to eat the food they produce, says Gail Feenstra, food systems coordinator for the Sustainable Agriculture Program at the University of California, Davis. "They're in a community where they don't even have access to it," she told me. "What they do have access to is very processed food that is helping to create diseases like diabetes, and government food programs that give out lard and canned products high in sodium and fat."

In 2004 Feenstra and her colleagues surveyed close to 200 mostly small organic farmers on their labor practices; two-thirds supplied no benefits. Mueller has put together a health plan for workers but says it's a trade-off, leaving less money for wages. There are some success stories, like one man who got a free hernia operation he'd been putting off for years. But most Riverdog workers don't meet the plan's eligibility requirements of six straight months of full-time work.

As we sit in Mueller's truck, with the rain pattering on the roof, he tells me how he and his wife, Trini, started Riverdog fifteen years ago, with just five acres. "For most of us who got involved with organic farming then, it was about a social movement," he says. "It was about land reform, labor reform, bringing small farms back. That's all gone. It's been legislated away, economized away. There is no dollar for that. I think most small organic farmers know their workers and want to do right by them but have varying levels of feeling like they can afford to do it."

Mueller plants less lucrative crops like alfalfa in the winter so he can provide year-round employment, and is known to kick in a few hundred dollars as a no-interest loan to help a worker buy a car or a piece of furniture. Still, he rails against labor regulations that he sees as costly and inefficient, like a 2005 law requiring farmers to stop work in very high temperatures, passed after several farmworkers died from heat exhaustion.

"Farming is about common sense, which you can't really legislate," he says. "When people fuss about us watching the little numbers, we say, Look, we have to do that just to make sure we don't go under."
His comments capture the sentiments of many small organic farmers, who feel their financial situation leaves little room for idealism when it comes to working conditions. Farmers in the University of California study said they agreed in theory that labor standards were important but disagreed with adding them to the requirements for organic certification. Close to half said organic farmers should not have to allow farmworkers to organize--a right guaranteed under California law.

Small farmers' objections have derailed earlier attempts to set labor standards for organic farms. In 1990 Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act, directing the Agriculture Department to establish a board of growers, consumers and retailers charged with developing the first national rules for the organic industry. Third-generation farmer Michael Sligh, founding chair of the board, brought a labor organizer to address one meeting. According to Fred Kirschenmann, a North Dakota grain farmer who served on the board, the group batted around some ideas and came close to agreeing that organic farmers should be required to provide employee health benefits.

"Then one of the farmers from California raised his hand and said, 'I really agree that we should do this, but my problem is I can't even provide health insurance for my family.' It became such a complex issue that nobody really knew how to deal with it, so it fell by the wayside."

There's little hint of these dilemmas in the shelf displays at Whole Foods Market in Berkeley, California. Posters hanging over the produce bins feature smiling white farmers posed against backdrops of lush fields, the sun glistening on their hair. More signs plastered to the bins helpfully spell out everything from the nutritional content of a coconut to the pros and cons of produce wax. None address working conditions.

A gaggle of shoppers fill the aisles, peering at lists and hefting and prodding vegetables. Public school teacher Carmen Carreras is picking out artichokes for dinner. They were grown conventionally, but she almost always buys organic. "I buy it because it's better for everybody," she tells me immediately. "Better for the environment, better for me and better for the workers."

Carreras says workers on organic farms must work hard, "but I imagine they don't get as many illnesses related to their work. I guess it's easier for them, and I hope they feel more connected to nature because all the processes are natural."

Carreras's comments are typical of what market researchers call the "hard core"--those customers who buy mostly organic, shop at farmers' markets and are more likely to rank social justice issues as a high priority. While they may know little about actual working conditions on organic farms, they believe that their purchases are helping to create a more egalitarian food system. For them the word
"organic" evokes not simply a growing method but a political and lifestyle choice.

But not everyone thinks like Carreras, according to Laurie Demeritt, president of the Hartman Group, a market research firm specializing in the natural food industry. The mainstreaming of organic is creating a new kind of organic consumer, says Demeritt, one who's more concerned about the immediate health of her family than anything else. These shoppers tend to understand organic in terms of the narrow, technical definition put forward by the National Organic Standards Board: a growing method that does not involve the use of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides.

"Today's organic consumer looks like the average US consumer," says Demeritt. "They haven't put a lot of thought into what they're consuming until they have a child. Then they think, 'I want my child to be healthy, so I'm going to buy them organic milk.'"

Such consumers rank concerns about workers very low on their list, if at all. It's not that they're anti-worker, says Demeritt. They're just not as invested in their buying decisions as the hard-core group. "They don't really have a lot of information and they don't really want it--as long as they can think they're making a better choice, that's enough."

Consumers, of course, also care about price, and organic food's relatively high cost turns off many potential buyers. If higher wages equal higher prices, as any Wal-Mart spokesperson will tell you, wouldn't bettering working conditions on farms cement organic products' status as luxury items? Is agriculture a zero-sum game, where we must choose between access to affordable healthy food and decent living standards for the people who grow it?

Feenstra, the UC Davis researcher, doesn't think so. "I think it's a false choice," she says. "Most of the money in the food system, about 80 percent, is in the marketing, processing and distribution sector, compared with 20 percent for production. Organic food is not just fruits and vegetables; a lot of it is processed, and that shoots the price up. So when you're talking about labor costs, they're probably going to add 1 or 2 cents, compared with what you're paying for excess packaging, transport from here to there, all those layers of cellophane and bright-colored boxes."

Feenstra envisions a decentralized food network with people buying minimally processed food through direct markets, and schools and hospitals serving up organic meals made with ingredients from local farms.

"It's not just on the backs of organic growers to fix this thing," she continues. "It's going to take a long, slow shift to get us from a system that's hierarchical, with a few people controlling the
resources, to one that's more disaggregated."

Strawberry farmer Jim Cochran seems to agree. The owner of Swanton Berry Farm was the first and only California organic farmer to negotiate a union contract with his workers, after hearing UFW president Arturo Rodriguez speak at a conference in 1998. Swanton's employees form a labor aristocracy of sorts, with wages of $8 to $12 an hour, medical and dental care, pensions and paid vacations. During the workday, ranchera music wafts over Swanton's fields, which lie on the coast near Santa Cruz and have a sweeping view of the Pacific. The men talk and joke as they move down the rows, which are elevated to ease the strain of weeding and picking.

Cochran balances his budget by following a strict philosophy: He plants an older variety of berries that customers prize for its full-bodied taste. He processes, packs and distributes the berries himself, and avoids extra debt by leasing his land from a nonprofit land trust. The brand draws a loyal following in farmers' markets and natural food stores, bringing in enough money to pay his hefty labor costs.

"Farmers need to see that it can be done," says Cochran. "They're afraid because they look at their returns and they think it's impossible. But we need to go from saying 'I'm doing the best I can' to realizing we should do more."

Across the country, small bands of eco-crusaders are developing ways to reward organic farmers who make commitments to their workers. The Organic Consumers Association, a grassroots group that organizes buyers over the Internet, is working to get "sweat-free food" ordinances on the books in major cities. The Oregon-based Food Alliance offers a "sustainable agriculture" certification to farmers who earn high scores in categories that include training their workers and establishing procedures to resolve conflicts.

Sligh, the founding chair of the National Organic Standards Board, helps lead a coalition that is developing a social justice label to be used alongside organic certification. Placed on a fruit or vegetable, the sticker would signal to customers that the food was grown under equitable conditions, on a farm that provides healthcare and respects workers' right to organize. Members of the New Jersey-based Farmworkers Support Committee played a key role in developing the program, which hits natural food stores next year. The goal is to educate consumers about labor issues while helping small farmers differentiate themselves in their competition with agribusiness.

"When consumers vote with their food dollars, they have tremendous power," says Sligh. "Every time we go to the grocery store we're choosing what kind of food system we want."
One challenge could be convincing retailers. Whole Foods has resisted advertising products as "fair trade," a similar labeling system that guarantees Third World farmers an adequate price for their goods. "We find labeling products 'fair trade' is unfair because it insinuates that other products sold in our stores are unfairly traded. And that's simply not true," Ashley Hawkins, a spokesperson for the chain, told me.

In the end, whether such a labeling system succeeds may depend on the willingness and ability of consumers and workers to connect across boundaries of race, class and geography. Since 2003, Americans concerned about animal welfare have been able to buy meat, poultry and eggs with a "Certified Humane" label guaranteeing that the livestock were raised with good shelter and a nutritious diet. Can organic food buyers be persuaded to show the same care for their fellow humans? If the labeling advocates have their way, we're about to find out.