

Restaurants and Food Justice in Boston: A Case Study of Mei Mei

A thesis submitted by Valeria Menendez

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Environmental Policy and Planning

Tufts University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

May 2023

Adviser: Julian Agyeman

Reader: Penn Loh

Abstract

Despite Boston city hall's recognition of the local food economy as a bastion of potential for food justice (FJ), research is lacking on how these establishments, and the people who comprise them, think they fit into the conversation. My thesis conducted a case study of Mei Mei, a local restaurant and dumpling manufacturer, literature review, 11 interviews, and site observations to answer, "How can Mei Mei provide insight into a restaurant's role in furthering food justice in Boston?". Major themes from the data indicated that Mei Mei cannot be *the* restaurant for FJ, but it can leverage its platform to support those who more directly tackle the issues. The data also informed five suggestions for Mei Mei to bolster its positionality in Boston's FJ landscape. These potential areas for growth are intended to deal with a variety of challenges simultaneously, while making use of Mei Mei's strengths.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning (UEP) that has supported me financially and emotionally throughout my research endeavors. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Julian Agyeman, and my reader, Penn Loh, both of whom have provided insightful guidance and feedback. Thank you for creating dialogue around the importance of food in urban policy and planning, as this emphasis was one of the reasons why I came to UEP. I would also like to thank Laurel Williams and Maria Nicolau, the UEP administrators, for holding the department together and ensuring that all of us submit everything we need to adhere to Tufts University deadlines and regulations. My fellow UEPers also deserve my gratitude, as they enriched my graduate experience with great conversation, good laughs, and unending support.

Thank you to Irene Li, chef and owner of Mei Mei, for agreeing to make her restaurant/food manufacturing business my case study subject, and to all the interviewees who took time out of their extremely busy schedules to talk with me. The enthusiasm to speak with me, and the sincerity throughout the interviews was so valuable to making my project as robust as possible. Thank you to all the food workers in Boston, who often give so much and get so little, but who make up an essential part of the urban fabric.

I would also like to express my sincerest gratitude to my parents, who instilled in me the love of food and who were always willing to listen as I developed the idea for my thesis project. I am also grateful for my partner, who always encouraged me throughout the long research and writing process. Thank you to all who feed my mind, heart, and soul.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Literature Review	6
What is Food Justice	6
Why Food Justice is Important	10
Food Justice in Boston	14
The Importance of Food and Restaurants for Urban Identity	18
Chapter 2: Methodology.....	20
Interviews	21
Site Visits	22
Chapter 3: Case Study of Mei Mei	23
Mei Mei Profile	23
Interview Findings	24
Site Visit Findings	40
Chapter 4: Discussion	42
COVID-19 Demonstrated the Importance of a Just, Resilient and Equitable Food System	42
Food Justice in Boston Has a Lot of Potential	44
Boston's Government Has Obstacles Built Into its Systems that Dissuade Food Justice	45
Mei Mei's Strengths in Boston's Food Justice Landscape	46
Mei Mei's Challenges in Boston's Food Justice Landscape	50
Chapter 5: Potential Areas for Growth	55
Chapter 6: Closing Remarks.....	57
Limitations	58
References.....	60
Appendix A. List of Interview Participants.....	72
Appendix B. Interview Guide.....	73

List of Figures

Figure 1. A Diagram of the Food System

2

Restaurants and Food Justice in Boston: A Case Study of Mei Mei

Despite Boston city hall's recognition of the local food economy, food chain workers, and restaurants as beacons of potential for food justice, little localized research has been done examining how these establishments, and the people who comprise them, think they fit into the conversation. My research project aims to delve into those questions through a deep case study of Mei Mei, a local restaurant and dumpling manufacturer. The research question is "How can Mei Mei provide insight into a restaurant's role in furthering food justice in Boston?"

The city of Boston, under Mayor Wu's leadership, has vowed to make food justice (FJ) a priority through the creation of the OFJ and her Food Justice Agenda for a Resilient Boston (FJA). OFJ's website defines its mission as,

"We want everyone to have access to nutritious food. That food should be affordable, easy to find, and reflect the many cultures of our City. Our goal is to create food-secure communities with vibrant and inclusive food cultures. We want to reflect the diversity of the residents of Boston" ("Food Justice", n.d.).

In the FJA that Mayor Wu wrote when she was city councilor and a candidate for Mayor of Boston, FJ is defined similarly, as, "affirming that consistent access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food is a universal human right; and it means enshrining the right to self-determination for communities to own and manage land for their own food provisioning" (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). Accordingly, FJ encompasses social justice, environmental justice, racial justice, and economic justice (Ibid). Though the FJA is not yet a policy or law, it appears to be a guiding document for the city, especially in its development of the OFJ (A. Wasserman, personal communication, March 28, 2023). The goals of the FJA are "investing in Boston's food chain workers, supporting Boston's restaurants and food economy",

increasing residents' access to “fresh, nutritious, affordable, and local food”, and aiding the wider food system through strengthening coalitions and “leveraging public procurement” (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020).

Though the conversation around FJ often centers on opening supermarkets in food deserts¹, FJ encompasses the entire food system. “The food system spans the people, activities, inputs, outputs, and outcomes involved in getting food from seed to plate” (Driver, n.d.). The five major stages of the food system include production, processing, distribution, retail, and consumption (see Figure 1) (Johns Hopkins, 2011).



Figure 1: A Diagram of the Food System. This figure demonstrates the interconnected components of the food system (Crothers, 2020).

¹ Food desert is a contested term due to its imagery as a natural phenomenon. Writer, teacher, and anthropologist Ashanté Reese introduced the alternative, food apartheid, to more directly address the intentional political, racial, and cultural factors that caused the lack of access to nutritious and affordable food. I chose to use the term food deserts as it is more commonly used across a variety of organizations and agencies.

Grocery stores encompass the retail and market stages of the food system. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), restaurants are facilities that prepare, sell, and serve food directly to customers (FDA, 2022). Food manufacturers make food from “one or more ingredients”, creating a new commodity from raw agricultural commodities for retail sale (Ibid). These kinds of establishments involve many parts of the food system, as is the case of a restaurant that typically has direct relationships with producers, processes ingredients into new creations, is in direct contact with the consumer, and occasionally deals with waste recovery through donations or compost. Food businesses that process and sell their gastronomical creations directly and indirectly, occupy a unique space in the food system that links production, processing, and consumption. Despite the FDA’s attempt at delineating the differences, there is a lot of overlap that makes the beginning of one process in the food system and the next difficult to distinguish.

Mei Mei, a woman-owned “dumpling business” is a perfect representation of these overlaps, as it is a restaurant and a manufacturer. As a “factory, café, and classroom” that makes dumplings, serves them to customers directly or through delivery or catering, and teaches classes, Mei Mei spans across many aspects of the food system, which indicates the potential to influence many actors (“Our Story”, n.d.). Mei Mei’s café area technically qualifies as a restaurant according to FDA definitions, but most of Mei Mei’s sales are through dumpling sales on site, at farmer’s markets and through delivery (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022; FDA, 2022). This capacity is bolstered by Mei Mei’s Owner and Head Chef, Irene Li’s, explicit commitment to address Boston’s food system issues (I. Li, Personal Communication, November 14, 2022). Mei Mei as the subject of my case study provides an opportunity to examine the issues of FJ from a plethora of perspectives, all within the same locale. Throughout

this thesis, Mei Mei will be referred to as a restaurant, restaurant/manufacturer, café, or dumpling factory. This type of research that deeply examines FJ through a restaurant or food retail manufacturer, is scarce.

Businesses like Mei Mei that sell or serve their food products directly to customers, play an enormous role in the United States (US) food economy, as people in the US spend more money eating out than at home than ever before in the nation's history (Bioneers, 2017). Due to this trend, the restaurant industry is the fastest growing and the second largest industry in the nation, despite pandemic setbacks (Ibid; "2023 State of the Restaurant Industry", 2023). Though Mei Mei encompasses various stages of the food system, the business' role in retail and consumption also inevitably connects it to the local community. These kinds of food businesses are especially adept at catering to a multitude of consumer wants and needs, and can do so through the menu offerings, dress code, design, and décor to create seemingly personalized experiences (Guillemin, 2022). Therefore, restaurants occupy a unique space in the food system because in addition to feeding us, they build relationships directly with the customer. Thus, businesses like Mei Mei have a significant stake in society.

These strong bonds often make food retail manufacturers and restaurants part of the urban fabric of a neighborhood. They can go as far as defining a neighborhood, or a city, because of their capacity to build community, represent tradition, and serve as a gathering space (Roseberry, 1996). "Chefs have a platform" from which to push for what they believe in, in a way that other actors in the food system do not (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022). As customer facing food businesses are so deeply intertwined with our quotidian lives, they have a greater potential to influence society than other parts of the food system. Thus, if they are at the forefront of FJ initiatives, the impact could be enormous. This project explores

these unique and maintained relationships with customers and their importance to the urban fabric. As “food justice for a community will depend on the shared vision and priorities of community members”, we must hear the perspective of those that nourish our communities, physically and psychologically (“Measuring Progress”, n.d.). Mei Mei’s connections to the Boston community and local food producers can provide a unique understanding of how other restaurants and, or food manufacturers in Boston can play a role in FJ if they so choose.

My research question is: How can Mei Mei provide insight into a restaurant’s role in furthering food justice in Boston?

In the following chapters, I will explore the research question through a literature review, explanation of methodology, case study results, a discussion of these themes, a delineation of potential areas for growth, and a conclusion about the potential role of restaurants in Boston’s FJ landscape. In the first chapter, I analyze the literature about the FJ movement and its importance, the FJ issues specific to food retail and consumption, the FJ context in Boston, and the importance of restaurants and food retail manufacturers for urban identity. Chapter two is a review of the methodology that I used—a case study that comprised of interviews and site visits—and is followed by the third chapter that goes into detail about the emerging themes from the case study. Chapter four discusses and contextualizes the data to better understand the information and how it connects to the research question. Based on this analysis, chapter five delineates suggestions for Mei Mei that would ideally serve as a guide for areas of growth when the restaurant/manufacturer gets settled into its new model and neighborhood. Finally, chapter six includes closing remarks on what Mei Mei has elucidated about how restaurants could or struggle to promote FJ in Boston, and what that could mean for the city’s efforts towards orienting Boston towards FJ.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

What is Food Justice?

A brief history of the movement. Similar to how the environmental justice movement arose as a response to the color-blind and ahistorical mainstream environmentalist movement, FJ came about as a response to the Alternative Food Movement (AFM) that promotes local, organic, and unprocessed foods, but ignores the positionality and proclivities of privileged people who make up the bulk of the AFM (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). The AFM in the United States is cited as having begun roughly in the 1970s and 1980s as a counterculture response to the widespread industrialization of food that was detrimental to the health of people and planet (Janzer, 2018). With roots in California, UC Davis master farmer Alan Chadwick, Chez Panisse's Alice Waters, and Slow Food founder Carlo Perini, are credited with leading the once fledgling AFM (Janzer, 2018; McNulty, 2017). Albeit the good intentions of the founders and promoters of the food movement, such as Michael Pollan, Barbara Kingsolver, and Eric Schlosser, they failed to acknowledge how policies and historical inequities impacted peoples' agency to make healthy decisions (Ibid).

The FJ movement acknowledges the food movement's assertion that food is tied to "ecological sustainability, community, and health" but goes further by highlighting that food is also tied to racial, economic, environmental, and social justice (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p.4). Born from the Community Food Security movement, FJ attempts to connect the previously narrow advocacy campaigns about specific food system issues into a more holistic understanding of the food system within socioecological realities (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996). Though environmental justice advocates saw food system issues as distinct and irrelevant to their cause in the late 1990s, FJ, like environmental justice, borrows the strategies and rhetoric of the civil

rights movement of the 1960s (Ibid). Essentially, FJ is connecting the tenets of the AFM to realities of diverse and marginalized communities. The FJ movement explores the who, how, and why of the AFM's goals. Who can achieve them? How are they able to succeed? Why is it easier for some to attain these goals than others? The equity-centered frameworks of FJ were generated in community organizing and activist circles to address systemic problems within food systems (Mares & Peña, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2011). Instead of suggesting lifestyle changes to combat a broken food system, the FJ movement is attempting to overhaul the system itself by centering the experiences of those most oppressed to rally, educate, and empower people, and gain political momentum to implement change (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

Food justice defined. Just Food, a leading FJ non-profit founded in New York City in 1995, defines the movement as “communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat food that is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of land, workers, and animals” (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p. 5). Despite slight variations in how FJ is defined between the OFJ, the FJA, and this organization, all the definitions include similar core tenets of access, security, and empowerment. Therefore, to better understand FJ, one must define its principles.

Food access is one's ability to consume healthy food (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Factors impacting food access include affordability, nutritional content, cultural relevance, availability of food assistance, ability to prepare food, and travel distance to food (USDA National, n.d.). Food security is defined as providing all people with access to enough safe, nutritious, and culturally relevant food always (USDA Economic, 2022). Access is a prerequisite to food security but does not necessarily guarantee it, as food security considers the duration and frequency of access (Ibid). These concepts are often used in conjunction, as measures of FJ. For example, how many

grocery stores with fresh produce are in a ½ mile radius will represent food access, but how consistently that store stocks their produce at affordable prices, will demonstrate food security. This question highlights the “consistent access” element of the FJ definition.

FJ expands beyond food security by considering food as a human right instead of a “nutritional commodity” (Mares & Peña, 2011). FJ is the progressive branch of food systems movements that works toward equity and sustainability by redistributing power through increased community involvement and agency (Holt-Giménez, 2011). The movement goes beyond access to food and its benefits and strives for control over the food system (Loh & Agyeman, 2019).

How food justice is measured. Understanding the definition of FJ is necessary to determine if and how it is manifesting in a community. These analyses are often done quantitatively, yet qualitative research provides context and personal stories that supplement the facts and figures. Notably, some studies indicate a difference between real, quantitative FJ measures and perceived food insecurity or injustice, which duly exemplifies the importance of mixed methods in providing a more comprehensive image of FJ (Caspi et al., 2012).

Much of the research concerning FJ revolves around investigating areas’ availability and accessibility of good, nutritious food (Driver, n.d.). Food deserts are areas with limited access to reasonably priced, healthy, culturally relevant food, while food swamps are places that have a preponderance of fast food and junk food that make healthy food choices difficult (Nargi, 2021). A food swamp can be a food desert, but a food desert is not necessarily always a food swamp. Though these terms are widely used due to their strong imagery, their connotation of natural environments has been heavily critiqued for implying that these FJ situations were created naturally, instead of through targeted classist and racist policies (Ibid).

As the definition of FJ is quite multifaceted, it can be measured in a multitude of ways. Some metrics include measuring food insecurity, the density of convenience stores, restaurants, grocery stores, and snack stores within a given radius, rate of participation in food assistance programs, “Number of hours per week spent in transit to and from food shopping”, and the existence of food education programming in the community (Rodman-Alvarez & Colasanti, 2019). To analyze the issue from the food system workers’ perspective, measures could investigate “number of food-based business owners”, “Gap in median hourly wages between whites and people of color” in food businesses, and the treatment and benefits or lack thereof of food chain workers (Ibid). These indicators can be gathered quantitatively and/or qualitatively through surveys, interviews, and questionnaires. One can also determine metrics for ideals of justice, fairness, strong communities, vibrant farms, healthy people, sustainable ecosystems, and thriving local economies (Abi-Nader et al., 2009). The list of possibilities is extensive, but if they fit within the definition and are measured by demographic characteristics like race, income, education, they are valid in ensuring a holistic understanding of FJ (Ibid).

‘Local’ is a common descriptor that is used to characterize community-based food standards. The term “local” is often idealized as the gold standard of sustainable food systems, yet it does not have a universal definition (Leighton, 2017). Nevertheless, many advocates believe that the definition of local should not be standardized. Instead, they suggest a customized location-specific concept that encompasses geographic features, climate, and politics (Born & Purcell, 2006; Leighton, 2017). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines local as food that is marketed, grown, and distributed within a specific geographic area, but the exact geographic scale is unclear (USDA Economic Research Service, 2022).

Though defining “local” is important in tracking progress towards local food goals, literature suggests that setting a goal of local production may be counterproductive if it does not take broader scale forces into account (Born and Purcell, 2006; Dupuis et al., 2011). Born and Purcell coined the term the “local trap,” which cautions against the assumption that local is somehow better, as setting the local scale as an end goal can divert attention away from the multiscale approach necessary for holistic sustainability and justice (2006). Those who use the term local should think about the intent of its usage and what they hope to achieve through that rhetoric. Though local is a valid priority, it should not obscure the other, equally relevant, goals of FJ.

Why Food Justice is Important

The FJ movement is critical to undoing the harms of a corrupted food system that puts profits over people and planet. The AFM made this critique, but FJ goes further in attempting to dismantle the hold that capitalist perceptions of food have on the country. Throughout the food system, from production to consumption, people, mostly low income, and people of color, are put at risk. The prioritization of large corporate interests is not compatible with FJ.

The current state of the food system. The five basic phases of the food system—“production, processing, distribution, retail, and consumption”—are governed by decisions made by businesses, scientists, policy makers, and consumers (Johns Hopkins, 2011). Production involves primary food production, including agriculture, raising animals for meat, and fishing (Eit Food, n.d.). Processing, which is also referred to as manufacturing, is the process of making food “from one or more ingredients” through processes like baking, cooking, dehydrating, cutting, cooking, trimming, waxing, amongst many more (FDA, 2022). The processing phase often also includes packaging (Eit Food, n.d.). These goods are then distributed to retailers like

wholesale holding facilities, grocery stores, and farmers markets, or restaurants, who will sell the food to consumers. The final consumption phase is the buying, preparing, and, or, consuming of food, and typically includes the disposal of food as well (Ibid).

Many of the injustices begin at the production and processing phases before the issues of food deserts arise for consumers (Johns Hopkins, 2011). As the food system exists within society and the limits of the environment, studying the food system is studying “climate change, chronic illness, infectious disease, social inequality, animal welfare harms, environmental degradation, and the concentration of economic power” (Driver, n.d). The capitalist agro-industrial food system decidedly ignores how food, earth, society, and health are interrelated (Ibid). Nevertheless, by understanding and getting involved in the food system, influential actors and advocacy groups have the potential to create change (Johns Hopkins, 2011). Indeed, food system issues were not seen as being related to urban planning until the late 1990s/early 2000s and government and city planner concern on food as a holistic urban issue is relatively novel (Sonnino, 2009).

Health disparities. As the country with the most obese and under-nourished population in the world, the current state of the food system is killing us (Larson et al., 2009). Disinvestment in certain neighborhoods, legacies of inequitable land use policies, subsidization of monocrops and harmful products, and relaxed food health and safety standards have created huge health inequities between high income white people and low-income people of color (Ibid). These disparities can be seen at all levels of the food system. Many restaurant workers are food insecure, despite handling and cooking food every day (Rodman-Alvarez & Colasanti, 2019). Foodborne illnesses impact one in six people in the US per year due to the inhumane amassment of animals for meat and the unsanitary conditions of factories that handle produce (Ceccarelli &

Smit, 2017). Meanwhile, lack of convenient grocery store access and affordability in poorer urban and rural areas forces many families to choose high calorie, low nutrient foods that are more easily available (Larson et al., 2019).

Climate change and environmental degradation. The food system's impacts on climate change and environmental degradation are due to the massive scale operations that disregard environmental limits and externalities (Modlinksa & Pisula, 2018). Red meat production, food transport for distribution, and food waste are some of the largest sources of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions within the food system (Weber & Matthews, 2008). Nevertheless, the intersection of GHG emissions and the food system are complex. While some argue that reduced food transportation would reduce GHG emissions, in some scenarios increasing local food production may result in increases in GHG emissions due to high energy and fertilizer inputs from producing food in adverse environments (Mok et al., 2014). A life cycle analysis of GHG emissions suggests that sustainable farming practices and diet shifts, such as reducing red meat consumption, are more effective at decreasing GHG emissions in the food system than "buying local" and reducing food transportation (Weber & Matthews, 2008).

Ignoring the delicate balance of nature has led us to a point where antibiotics are infesting our waters, monocropping is reducing the biodiversity and stability of the food supply, and pesticides are killing off important pollinators and organisms (Johns Hopkins, 2011). Additionally, the food system is not merely doing things *to* the climate and environment, it is also impacted *by* them. Though there is still much uncertainty, some researchers are investigating how a changing climate will impact the types of foods and nutrients available to us (Lake et al., 2012). Our biodiversity suffers from these practices, which includes us humans. Those most negatively impacted by the environmental hazards are the marginalized workers, the

communities living near these farms and food processors, and those who cannot afford the price of organic, non-genetically modified food (Ibid).

Worker exploitation. If “access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food is a universal human right”, we must not forget the human rights of the food chain workers who get the food to our tables (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011, p.5). Countless headlines every year expose large corporations for a plethora of workplace violations, such as wage theft, unsanitary working conditions, and intense health and mortality risks with no health coverage (Driver, n.d.). For example, poor, often undocumented migrant workers suffer from long hours, pesticide exposure, and harassment from their bosses. Meat packers are knee deep in a slurry of animal entrails, blood, and waste, while the nearby communities, who are often poor, immigrants, and people of color, are being poisoned by the resulting noxious gases and waste (Ceccarelli & Smit, 2017). The existing policies and corporate pressures are grinding down a vulnerable work force with little regard to the health and wellbeing of those who depend on it. What is the true cost of food when we pay fair wages and include environmental externalities in its price point?

Food justice issues specific to retail and consumption. Worker exploitation, health disparities, and environmental justice issues also burden the workers in the customer-facing part of the food system. Similar to how environmental justice advocates did not at first consider food systems as linked to the movement, FJ literature and studies often exclude restaurants from the discourse (Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996). As Loh and Flagg explain, “though the workers at the retail end of the supply chain may not have to work in as hot or pesticide-laden conditions as farmworkers, their work is also low paid and often seasonal and without any benefits” (2018). They are also often immigrants, many of whom are undocumented (Lee, 2018). Restaurant workers often deal with unpredictable scheduling and long hours that make it hard to plan other

parts of their lives, as they are frequently told when they will be working a few hours prior to their shifts (Rea, 2018). Due to the low pay and erratic hours, food insecurity is common, and many are ineligible for unemployment (Li, 2022). “A 2014 study of almost 300 restaurant workers in New York City and San Francisco Bay Area found that almost one-third were food insecure as defined by the USDA” (Loh & Flagg, 2018). That number has ballooned after the pandemic, but exact numbers are hard to find. As the repercussions of the pandemic continue to be felt, rising food prices due to inflation pose a novel threat to restaurant workers who are forced to expend more of their minimum wage to feed themselves and their families (Beland, 2021).

Food retail and restaurants also have a unique role in FJ because these establishments can serve as gentrifiers in a particular neighborhood. Though the rhetoric is often about the need of establishing a grocery store in a food desert neighborhood, the type of store may indicate a change in the economic and development landscape of the area. The same is true for restaurants, which can create development pressures in an area due to the renewed excitement around a neighborhood’s food scene (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020). Though restaurants and food stores bring economic opportunity to the owners and the neighborhood, feed people, and play a part in fostering social interaction, developers and wealthy elites are also attracted to the ambiance they create, which has the potential to be problematic if that essence is commodified and ignores the people who created it (Ibid).

Food Justice in Boston

As the FJ movement often focuses more on agricultural improvements and inequitable urban food landscapes, Boston’s relationship with FJ began around concerns about consumer access and farmer’s rights, but has grown to include restaurant and retail food manufacturer labor

as well. Boston's history with FJ echoes that of many major cities around the nation, until recently, as longtime grassroots efforts, increased public awareness, and the pandemic have transformed Boston into one of the most FJ oriented cities in the country (Hunt, 2016). As with much of the nation during World War II, Boston boasted a Victory Garden in Fenway, with 500 plots that helped the city be self-reliant through local food production during the war (MacLean, 2021). Additionally, as the post war period saw a boom in grocery stores, Boston also became overtaken by large corporate supermarkets that pushed out the small local grocers (McClintock, 2011). With disinvestment, racist redlining, urban renewal, and a lack of food policy in planning, an increasingly inequitable urban food ecosystem emerged (Hanser & Hyde, 2014). The Boston neighborhoods most negatively impacted were Dorchester and Roxbury, which are home to large populations of minorities and people making low incomes (Loh, 2014). Concurrently, as supermarkets took over, development pressures and increased farm consolidation caused a precipitous decline in regional farmland in Massachusetts (MA) at such a rate that by 1978, 98% of the food sold and eaten in MA was from out of state (Watson, 2021). Nevertheless, activists in the state and in the city began to act to prevent further deterioration of the food system and aid those who were being most impacted by these gaps.

In response to the fragmented food system in Boston that disproportionately impacted people of color and the poor, the 1960s and 1970s saw a boom of food-centered non-profits and community initiatives. These included Boston Urban Gardeners, Fields Corner Farmer's Market, New Alchemy Institute, the Food Project, Haley House, and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), of which the latter three still exist (Watson, 2021). Many of these organizations aimed to deal with short-term pressing needs and long-term changes in the food system. For example, since its founding in 1966, Haley House has been "breaking down barriers

and connecting people through food” with a food pantry and soup kitchen, permanent affordable housing, an urban farm, and educational cooking programming aimed to excite kids and provide job training for people re-entering society after intense hardships like prison and homelessness (“At a Glance”, n.d.). The government also began to take notice and the state government of MA implemented the first agricultural preservation restrictions of any state in the US and created a Farm and Food Policy Framework in 1988. The early 2000s saw a proliferation of Food Policy Councils, one for the state and many in cities across MA (Metropolitan Area Planning Council, 2015). With the establishment of these organizations and an increased awareness of food system issues in the city, the momentum around this topic has continued to grow.

The current status of food justice in the city. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done, as indicated by independent food system evaluators, and demonstrated by the creation of the OFJ. In 2022, Health Leads, a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) focused health justice non-profit, found that the major issues in Boston’s food system included a confusing process to obtain food assistance services, insufficient accessibility of culturally relevant foods, financially fragile food distribution sites, and siloed systems between government, grassroots organizations, and the community (“Building an Equitable Boston”, n.d.). The recommendations written by the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City in 2015 pointed to increasing availability and access to foods by decentralizing distribution centers, increasing urban and local agriculture, and improving transportation infrastructure (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City). Additionally, the pandemic intensified many of the existing problems in the food system, forcing governments to reckon with the failings in their local systems (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020).

City government initiatives. Though inequities in the food system continue to exist, the Boston government has started to prioritize food in its policies. In 2010, former Mayor Thomas Menino created the Office of Food Initiatives to work on increasing “access to healthy and affordable foods”, foster local agriculture and Boston’s food economy, and promote public private partnerships to deal with existing gaps (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2015). During former Mayor, Marty Walsh’s term, he renamed the Office of Food Initiatives to the Office of Food Access, as he and his staff determined that that was the most pressing issue in Boston’s food system (Holt, 2022). In 2013, Boston adopted a new article in its zoning code, Article 89 Urban Agriculture—a legal document that establishes rules around land use, building dimensions, and permitting requirements for engaging in urban agriculture in the city (Article 89). Specifically, Article 89 focuses on reducing barriers to commercial agriculture, thereby promoting economic opportunity and self-sufficiency for food producers, which are a major focus for EJ communities (Ibid.). Though urban agriculture will not be sufficient to feed Boston’s population, it provides an avenue through which to promote community, increase food access, affordability, sovereignty and agency around food.

In 2019, Boston also instituted the Good Food Purchasing Program “that requires city food purchases and service contracts to satisfy standards that promote justice within the food system” (Healthy Food Policy Project, n.d.). The goal is to help small-scale regional farmers by paying fair prices for food, improving access to healthy foods, and creating incentives for procurement from producers with high standards of environmental stewardship (“Boston”, 2020). Though the program currently only applies to public institutions, the impact of this program is promising, as the public sector includes the Boston Public Schools (BPS), which is the largest purchaser of food in the city and comprises 125 schools with roughly 54,000 students

(Boston Public Schools, n.d.; A. Wasserman, personal communication, March 28, 2023). In May of 2022, the city of Boston granted City Fresh Foods, a progressive employee and BIPOC-owned food service provider, a \$17 million food service contract with BPS (Schools, 2022; “About Us”, n.d.). Through this contract, students will get nourishing meals with local ingredients, local farms will get city support, and City Fresh Foods has guaranteed financial security to continue its work and further its mission of supporting Boston’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods (“About Us”, n.d.).

Mayor Wu advocated for both policies when she was City Councilor and will continue to develop similar policies as her term continues (“Boston”, 2020). Indeed, many of the objectives outlined in the FJA call for an expansion of the existing legislation and for more progressive changes (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). With the current trajectory of FJ legislation and the transformation of the Office of Food Access to the OFJ, it seems as if Boston may be entering its most progressive FJ era yet (Holt, 2022). Nevertheless, government change can be slow and fragmented, especially as the political cycle can determine new priorities with new administration every four years (Rocha, 2016).

The Importance of Food and Restaurants for Urban Identity

Though the government has a lot of power to shape the city, urban areas were and continue to be shaped by the production and consumption of food (Hanser & Hyde, 2014; Steel, 2014). Food has always been an integral part of urban planning, whether planners were conscious of this or not, as ancient cities were established next to sources of food and food markets were, and continue to be, gathering places (Steel, 2014). In addition to guiding the physical and ecological structure of a city, “food becomes an important prism to understand the complex web of connections that tie cities to wider relations, places, and processes” (Sonnino,

2009, p.434). At a press conference about the newly named OFJ, Mayor Wu told the crowd, “Food is so intrinsically part of our identities, our cultures, and our humanity” as a justification for her focus on FJ (Holt, 2022).

Though people can connect through food at home, most people in the US eat out more than they cook for themselves, so restaurants and retail food manufacturers play a large role in feeding the population physically and psychologically (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). Restaurants and retail food manufacturers, especially the independent local ones, anchor neighborhoods, allow individuals to foster different parts of their identity, and make many residents feel connected to the city (Ibid). Boston recognizes this and has passed legislation to limit food chains in various neighborhoods (Holt, 2022). Indeed, many cities are associated with culinary creations that have been celebrated as representations of the city’s culture, such as the Boston Cream Pie or Clam Chowder.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This project aims to answer the research question, “How can Mei Mei provide insight into a restaurants’ role in furthering FJ in Boston?” by examining and synthesizing existing literature and comparing that information with an in-depth case study of Mei Mei through interviews and site visits, based on protocol from Gaber and Gaber’s “Qualitative Analysis for Planning and Policy: Beyond the Numbers” (2007). As case studies can include a range of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, using multiple approaches is highly recommended for increasing the “internal validity of the study” (Crowe et al., 2011). As much of Boston’s FJ research is quantitative, I wanted to take a more qualitative approach to capture the feelings and emotions that cannot be depicted by numerical data (Rahman, 2016).

My primary methodology is the case study, defined by Yin as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). The case study goes beyond data points and delves into the physical and psychosocial realities that provides perspective on the macro, seemingly unbiased representation of points or trends. Case studies are naturalistic, in that they do not exert control or change variables for the study, in contrast to a controlled experiment (Crowe et al, 2011). I chose to combine site observations and interviews because though site observations allow for seeing everyday life unaltered by my presence, the interviews allow for more intentional, guided data gathering, despite the potential pressure for the interviewees to fit into a particular role or represent themselves to me in a particular way (Silverman & Patterson, 2014). The case study approach is best suited for this project as it “lends itself well to capturing information on more explanatory 'how', 'what' and

'why' questions, such as 'how is the intervention being implemented and received on the ground?'" (Ibid.).

I chose Mei Mei as a case study because this small local restaurant and retail food manufacturer is staunchly dedicated to FJ and has been doing the work since before Mayor Wu's administration made it a priority for the city of Boston. Mei Mei's efforts fit within the city's definition of FJ and have the potential to influence the city's initiatives as well. Despite Chef Li's many accolades and commitments, she graciously accepted to make Mei Mei my case study.

Interviews

The main portion of data collection was through 11 interviews conducted between January 26th and March 17th, 2023. Interviews were conducted mostly through the Zoom platform, two were conducted via phone, and three were in person on site at Mei Mei's location in South Boston. All the interviews were recorded, and I took notes throughout, which were all saved on Tufts Box for ensured confidentiality. Seven of the eleven interviews took roughly 45 min to an hour, but four of them were limited to 30 minutes due to explicit requests from the interviewees. The interviews were all conducted in English, as there were no participants who did not feel comfortable speaking English. The interview guide was divided into three sections, the first asked about respondents' experiences with Mei Mei, the second asked questions about opinions on Boston's food system and FJ, and the last section inquired about feelings on local government involvement with their business and in pushing for FJ initiatives. Though FJ is an admittedly broad term and movement, I wanted to let the interviewees define their own measures or indicators of FJ, rather than coming in with a preconceived focus that sways people away from their natural inclinations.

Chef Irene Li of Mei Mei was the key source to access the interviewees, all of whom were Mei Mei staff, had worked at Mei Mei previously, or had somehow collaborated with the establishment. I was able to interview nine people presently working for Mei Mei, which represents roughly half of the current staff. The sample size was relatively constrained by these factors, but the data from the interviews was plentiful and enriching. All interviewees have granted me permission to use their quotes with their names attributed.

I used NVivo software to capture trends in the interview responses. I found over 60 motifs that provided insight on what are the strongest views of the participants and helped explore any consensus on their establishments' roles in FJ in Boston. In the discussion section of this document, I supplemented these findings with existing literature for wider discussion, contextualization, and conclusions.

Site Visits

To supplement the claims and perspectives from the interviews, I visited Mei Mei's South Boston location to conduct some "ground truthing" by seeing how things are run on a daily basis (Deshmukh, 2017). The site visits occurred on February 2, 2023, from 2 pm to 4 pm and again on February 23, 2023, from 12:50 pm to 3pm. The hours of observation were limited by my school and work schedules and to not take up a space that could fit a potential customer. Physically being at the location allowed me to see the manufacturing in action, get a tour of the facilities, taste the food, and see how employees and customers interacted in the space.

Chapter 3: Case Study of Mei Mei

Mei Mei Profile

Mei Mei is a woman and Asian American owned dumpling business that highly values fresh and local ingredient sourcing, high quality and livable jobs, and community involvement (“Our Story”, n.d.). The website highlights that Mei Mei is a place that forefronts “inventive and exciting food & beverage, kind and generous hospitality, and a hopeful vision for a future that is just, equitable, and delicious” (Ibid). Co-founded by the Boston born-and-raised Li siblings, sustainability and equity have always been a part of Mei Mei since the company began as a food truck in 2012, opened a brick-and-mortar restaurant the following year, and has, since the pandemic, shifted its model to primarily retail food manufacturing, hosting dumpling making workshops, and selling dumplings at farmer’s markets and online (Ibid). Mei Mei is a relatively small local business with roughly 20 team members and only one physical location. Though the dumpling operations were located at the 506 Park Drive restaurant location until 2020, Mei Mei opened a new “Dumpling Factory, Café, and Classroom” in South Boston in January 2023 (Ibid).

The business supports small farms and local agriculture, despite its inefficiencies and cost, because the team prioritizes building a good and connected, local food system (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022). Additionally, Mei Mei only uses pasture raised meat to avoid many of the negative externalities of factory farm meat production (Ibid). After the dumplings are made, Mei Mei composts scraps, reinforcing a vision of a closed and hyperlocal food system (Ibid).

Mei Mei has also given special attention to worker’s rights and their role in food system sustainability by providing good jobs with livable wages and opportunities for advancement. One of the things that Chef Li, the sole owner since 2018, is most proud of and has gotten a lot of

press coverage for, is Mei Mei's open book policy (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022; Spencer, 2020). Every staff member, from dishwasher to operations manager, is educated in financial management skills to understand the business finances and have a stake in the outcomes of the company (Snaiderman, n.d.). Everyone knows all the company numbers—revenue, costs, employee salaries—and can collaborate to cut costs where needed (Spencer, 2020). With this policy, Li believes she's been able to reduce turnover, create a deeper connection amongst her team, and make people proud to work at Mei Mei (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022; Spencer, 2020).

The pride is intended to come from the business' strategy for tackling social issues and increasing community involvement through collaborating with other organizations to build power (I. Li, personal communication, November 14, 2022). Though bandwidth and budget are big limiting factors, Chef Li believes that chefs have a platform and should use it in whatever way they can (Ibid). For example, during the pandemic, Chef Irene Li, Pagu's chef Tracy Chang, Lilly Huang, and Dr. Marena Lin co-created Project Restore Us, a nonprofit for emergency food distribution ("Our Story", n.d.; "About PRU", n.d.). Mei Mei continues to work with a variety of community organizations and Li serves on the board of Haley House, Lovin' Spoonfuls, The Food Project, and Project Bread, which all use food as a tool for empowerment and change ("DEI Programming", n.d.). Mei Mei's social justice theory is that if a bunch of these socially and ecologically minded small businesses collaborate and create alliances, they will be able to build more power and transform the food system (Ibid).

Interview Findings

The 11 interviews highlighted 10 major themes from 60 total codes of often mentioned motifs. The top 10 themes included the importance of Mei Mei's community, the impacts of

coronavirus on the food industry, being pro Boston government, being skeptical about Boston's government, Mei Mei's conundrum of aiming for a mission while functioning as a for profit business, and a general alignment with FJA goals and visions of FJ. Though direct opinions on local government involvement were explicitly inquired in the interviews, the rest of the top themes were mentioned by the interviewees organically, without prompting questions.

Mei Mei's community is its greatest asset to work towards food justice. Mei Mei's community plays a large role in determining the restaurant/food manufacturer's role in the food system and its ability to work towards FJ. Thirty-six references were made to the Mei Mei community throughout the 11 interviews. Everyone who has worked for or with Mei Mei is astutely aware of the community reach that the company has garnered since its food truck began in 2012. Indeed, many of the respondents came to work with Mei Mei because they were initially fans of the business or the Li siblings. The majority of the respondents indicated that Mei Mei prioritized and achieved cohesion and a sense of belonging within the staff and through its customer base and dedicated followers, despite new challenges from moving to South Boston.

The food, the mission, and the employees led by "fearless leader", Irene Li, have cultivated Mei Mei's following and made the business a standout name in the Boston food scene (J.Coughlin, personal communication, February 17, 2023). Farmer's market patrons love seeing Mei Mei at their local markets and past customers recount their positive experiences with the brand to many of the employees I interviewed. Making these connections is part of the job, as former Mei Mei employee Katelyn Lipton remarks:

"That's something I really loved about working there at farmers markets. They would encourage you to talk to different vendors, get to know farmers, and I know I personally

created different farm relationships just chatting with my neighbors at the farmers market” (K. Lipton, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Mei Mei’s robust community provides a powerful platform. Additionally, many attribute the positive food system work of the business to co-founder, owner, and chef Irene Li’s adavance in pursuing Mei Mei’s mission of “improving the food system one dumpling at a time” (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023). As Jessica Coughlin, part-time publicist and marketing and development consultant to Mei Mei explains, “Irene is someone who has a platform around racial equity [and] financial empowerment. I mean, she really has always run Mei Mei like it is a mission-driven organization” (J. Coughlin, personal communication, February 17, 2023). Indeed, respondents believe that perhaps the most impactful work that the business is doing for FJ, is using its influence and platform to serve as a business model and, or educational tool for others.

Mei Mei does not have the resources and political power of the city government, but eight of the 11 respondents indicated that Mei Mei’s potential rested in the business’ ability to use and foster their connections through education. Education was one of the major ways that respondents believed that Mei Mei influences the food system. The education occurs within Mei Mei’s staff and externally by engaging customers and other food businesses. Through extensive on-boarding training with modules to understand the open book management and an integration into the ethos of local food consumption, many Mei Mei employees cited working at the establishment as their first real introduction to FJ and economic justice. The café/food manufacturer also hosts dumpling making courses in person and online, where they encourage people to come together to eat as a community (R. Cortez, personal communication, February 16, 2023). Tracy Chang, co-founder of Project Restore Us and owner and chef of Pagu, states

that owning and operating a restaurant is “not just being able to run a business, but mindfulness and engagement with your local community and figuring out how can you uplift others, and how can you build systems so others can uplift others” (T. Chang, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

With this following comes great responsibility. Mei Mei’s first brick-and-mortar location at 506 Park Drive was deeply ingrained within the Fenway and Brookline neighborhoods. Many nearby Boston University students would eat and work at Mei Mei, and the restaurant had developed relationships with all the nearby grocers and food businesses. During the pandemic, the restaurant hosted a community fridge that brought together neighbors to interact and exchange in one of the only manners that was still possible (J. Coughlin, personal communication, February 17, 2023; I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

Questions of community when moving into a gentrifying neighborhood. Nevertheless, the pandemic brought the end of Mei Mei’s time at Park Drive, and in January of 2023, Mei Mei opened a new café and dumpling factory space in South Boston, as part of a rebranding into more of a food manufacturer and less of a restaurant (“Our Story”, n.d.). Though the overall reception in the first months of opening has been quite positive, three respondents were a bit uneasy about their place in this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. “This is a weird neighborhood to become a part of, we are part of the gentrification of this neighborhood. We are part of the Ironworks Development,” said Laura Dyble, one of the operations managers at Mei Mei (personal communication, February 23, 2023). “South Boston is still in the process of gentrifying... so we are trying to be mindful of that,” admits Irene Li (personal communication, February 6, 2023). Jessica Coughlin explained, “we’re part of this development with a pickle ball court and a Tatte bakery and a cool brewery” with hopes that Mei Mei would not just attract

newcomers and hipsters to the detriment of Southie locals (personal communication, February 17, 2023). Despite these concerns, the respondents were generally optimistic that they would be able to foster new relationships with the nearby businesses, old and new, and that those who have been living in Southie for generations could become part of Mei Mei's community and that the restaurant/manufacturer could also become an integral addition to the neighborhood.

The pandemic brought focused attention, destruction, and opportunity to food system issues. In January of 2020, Mei Mei's reach was planned to increase exponentially with the opening of two additional Mei Mei affiliated spaces. Nevertheless, the pandemic pushed for a reconsideration of the restaurant's future role in the food system. COVID-19 exacerbated existing issues of the restaurant industry but created an opportunity for reflection and reinvention. With 28 references across all the interviews, the pandemic was at the top of many respondents' minds, particularly regarding its lessons on adaptability and how it exposed and exacerbated existing gaps in the food system.

The pandemic allowed Mei Mei to participate in a much more direct manner in the food system with the creation of Project Restore Us ("About PRU", n.d.). With federal and city grant money, these restaurants were able to use their wholesale grocer connections to supply groceries to those in need and momentarily become a mutual aid food program as the restaurant functions were essentially paused. Nevertheless, it was more of an immediate response to a fractured food system than a viable manifestation of Mei Mei's FJ goals. Though all the respondents mentioned the project and lauded the efforts, they were aware that they were able to achieve such direct work because they were not functioning as a restaurant during the pandemic. As Matt Ellison, a senior production and kitchen operations staff, noted, "We used the resources we had to pack and sell groceries, and we did meals for hospital workers. We have the equipment and the people

who know how to do it, but that's not our business. Our business is for profit food service” (M. Ellison, personal communication, February 13, 2023). Despite Mei Mei’s transition to working with Project Restore Us, Li still had to lay off most of the staff at the start of the pandemic in 2020 (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

Mei Mei and other Boston restaurants were trying to stay afloat and financially viable through whatever manner they could, by bridging gaps between grocers and consumers, applying to state, federal, and city grants, creating online courses, and offering dumpling delivery. Mei Mei had to change and adapt because the pandemic shattered many of the existing structures of the food system and highlighted inefficiencies and inequities throughout. Though the respondents were aware of the fragility of the restaurant venture pre pandemic, due to Mei Mei’s progressive open book management, the two-year pandemic period ultimately pushed the business towards a more financially sustainable consumer packaged goods manufacturing business. Despite the trials and tribulations since the proliferation of COVID-19, there was a general sentiment that more people became aware of issues in the food system, which validated the work that Mei Mei has done and could create the momentum to keep pushing for a more just food system in Boston. Matt Ellison realized, “there's a lot more awareness than there was a couple of years ago, especially pre-pandemic” (M. Ellison, personal communication, February 13, 2023).

Mei Mei’s staff and partners view food justice in ways consistent with the Food Justice Agenda for a Resilient Boston. When prompted to define FJ in their own words, before I read them the city’s official definition, respondents overwhelmingly mentioned quality of life, access as a right, culturally appropriate foods, equality, equity, community, and agency. These foci correspond with those outlined in the OFJ’s and the FJA’s definition of FJ. The FJA was

written during the pandemic and outlines that FJ comprises racial, economic, environmental, and social justice (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). The respondents were not told of these divisions but mentioned aspects of these throughout the interviews, indicating their overlaps. In addition to defining FJ, when asked how they or Mei Mei worked towards FJ, twelve references were made about Mei Mei's efforts to uplift other small businesses owned by BIPOC and creating good food jobs so their diverse staff can thrive. Seven references were about increasing access, agency, and economic independence for those in need of healthy food, on farmlands, and in urban areas. These comments refer to aspects of environmental and social justice, which all respondents hope to influence in some way.

Respondents and the Food Justice Agenda for a Resilient Boston concur that affordable and adequate housing is tied to food justice. Interestingly, housing came up several times in the interviews, and is mentioned 19 times throughout the 66-page FJA. Sprinkled throughout the document and brought up independently six times through my interviews, it is an issue that transcends the four categories mentioned prior. The research participants see it negatively impact themselves or their fellow employees. Alyssa Lee explains:

“Some of my staff might be making low twenties per hour, but still, with the cost of Boston rent and everything, even though they work in this working environment that has great food [and] has great food practices, they themselves still cannot afford to buy the same products that we are serving in the restaurant, which is a conundrum that bothers me a lot” (A. Lee, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

Despite Mei Mei's management team working hard to have exceptional business practices that prioritize workers, the leadership is unable to buffer their employees from the external pressure of the housing market. In other words, Mei Mei's wages are grossly outpaced by the

skyrocketing increases in housing prices in the city. Thus, affordable housing seems to be crucial to any kind of justice in the increasingly unaffordable city of Boston.

“Expanding access to fresh, nutritious, affordable and local food”. Of the FJA’s priorities, Mei Mei is doing the most work on the goal of expanding access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, and local food, with 25 references throughout the interviews. Accessibility was a huge concern for respondents, with roughly nine direct comments using the word “access” and various allusions and references to the term. Much of this is due to the local and sustainable sourcing practices and the initiatives during the pandemic. In Laura Dyble’s opinion, Mei Mei’s role in increasing accessibility to good food is that “we are making local food accessible to some people who don’t have time to cook, time to go to farmers markets, to buy local or go to other outlets to buy local food. If they don’t have the capacity to do it themselves, we do it for them” (personal communication, February 23, 2023). Mei Mei’s sourcing is one of the pillars of the business, as managing partner, Alyssa Lee’s, comment elucidates, “we have a standard of sourcing 70% of our produce from the New England and New York area throughout the year, and using those in our recipes, and we still serve only pasture raised meat” (A. Lee, personal communication, February 8, 2023). Nevertheless, as the food system is currently configured, procuring fresh, local, and organic ingredients is more expensive than conventional practices, and many respondents admitted that despite their establishment providing an easy avenue through which to eat good and local food, it is not the most accessible price point for consumers.

“Investing in Boston’s food chain workers” and “supporting Boston’s restaurants and food economy”. Despite the high price point, Mei Mei’s stringent sourcing efforts help support the local food economy and food chain workers in the New England and New York area by putting money into these smaller economies instead of corporate powerhouses. Accordingly,

respondents indicated that Mei Mei also reflects the FJA’s goals of “investing in Boston’s food chain workers”, and “supporting Boston’s restaurants and food economy” (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). “Constantly it’s just what is a great job, not a food industry job, but what is a great job that we can provide at Mei Mei,” Alyssa Lee, one of Mei Mei’s two managing partners, highlighted when asked what the restaurant/food manufacturer does well (A. Lee, personal communication, February 8, 2023). Indeed, 15 of the 16 references speak of the generous benefits, such as intensive hands-on training, flexibility in scheduling, transportation refunds, wages higher than the state minimum, five weeks of paid vacation, and a sense of employee community and care. Many of the employee policies have been integral to creating a positive workplace environment, as managing partner Annie Campbell explains:

“I really hate it when people say, ‘oh our business is a family’. I think it is ... unfair, but I think we can care about each other and employees in a way that is more than just the bottom line. That is really important to us here, and we work really hard to keep that up” (A. Campbell, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Mei Mei’s leadership invests in its workers and provides them with the opportunity to be directly involved with its finances with hopes of being an inspiration to other businesses in the food sector.

Though Mei Mei occasionally supports other local businesses with pop ups, hosts events, and collaborates with other restaurants, most of the responses specified that the responsibility to support fellow Boston restaurants and the food economy should not be solely on restaurants or food businesses themselves, but on the government. Many actors in the food economy know each other and have developed some sort of network but lack the capacity to extensively support

others. Respondents cited a need for food economy businesses to establish themselves before being able to help others, particularly because the restaurant model is so difficult to sustain.

Respondents are Cautiously Optimistic and Cautiously Pessimistic about

Government Involvement in Food Justice. Though Mei Mei's initiatives correlate with some of the FJA and OFJ goals, respondents generally agreed that the onus of this city-wide FJ initiative must be mostly on the government to provide support as a convener and coordinator of the existing FJ networks and food economy businesses. Though respondents indicated more hope than skepticism, overall, about Boston's city government and its FJ goals, many respondents were wary of being too excited due to prior experience with city government bureaucracy. Though the OFJ is relatively new, respondents worked with various city government departments in the past, which informed their responses. Most of the respondents were equally hopeful and cautious, with only two interviewees strongly in either camp of pro Boston government or thinking the government will not be helpful in any way.

The comments that were favorable towards city government involvement in FJ initiatives referenced the undeniable power of Boston's government to change how things work on a larger scale and legitimize existing efforts. Mayor Wu's creation of the OFJ and the FJA encouraged many interviewees to believe that the city is setting a progressive standard that all actors in the food system and all Boston residents will feel urged to follow. According to Angelle Castro, kitchen operations and farmers market staff, "Mei Mei is already going hard for food justice. This will encourage them to go even harder" (A. Castro, personal communication, February 23, 2023). Irene Li, thought, "I think it's really exciting. It feels very groundbreaking, even though it shouldn't be. It's one of those kinds of things where you're like, finally, we're so happy...Recognizing the issue of food justice with an office, even though it could be purely

symbolic, it is heartening” (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023). The recognition and, or financial boosts that could come from an administration focused on FJ, could allow businesses like Mei Mei to grow and the wider food system to flourish.

“Death by committee”. Though most respondents indicated a certain level of enthusiasm around Boston’s FJ vision, they wanted implementation to match the written plans and promises. Nevertheless, everyone agreed that the government bureaucracy would be the biggest impediment to implementation and to buy-in from businesses like Mei Mei. In describing the process to become eligible to become a vendor, Jessica Coughlin mentioned, “The bureaucracy that is associated with working with municipalities is so overwhelming that, as a college educated, white Jewish woman with an MBA, my head almost exploded trying to do this” (personal communication, February 17, 2023). The government processes act as a barrier to entry, especially to those who do not speak English or are unfamiliar with these procedures. An additional caveat was that change requires collaboration across government departments, so despite the OFJ’s progress, if the other departments are not collaborating, the potential for impact is limited. Matt Ellison ponders, “if you're going to really make a change, it's going to come from all the different departments in the city. And so how willing are they to let that office give its input to other decisions?” (M. Ellison, personal communication, February 13, 2023). The respondents were wary that despite an inspiring mayor with grand and exciting ideas, city government is so bureaucratic and not collaborative enough for positive changes in the FJ realm. As Irene Li sums up, “the offices that are designed to support community are very different from the ones that are designed to monitor, and ... keep us in line, and I think that overall, I think the city wants to be more supportive and they maybe don't exactly know how yet” (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

The government should use its power to make food justice a reality. Based on these confounding feelings about government, many of the respondents indicated that working towards FJ should be a multi-pronged effort that includes everyone, but with an acknowledgement that the government has the most power and levers at its disposal to support Boston’s robust FJ network of nonprofits, farmers, food distributors and manufacturers, processors, and businesses in the food economy. Ideally the FJ movement has people pushing from all levels and angles, but nine of the 11 respondents indicated that realistically those with the most resources to deal with existing issues, which often coincides with those who are most responsible for the existing flawed system, should be at the front of the struggle. Former Mei Mei employee, Katelyn Lipton, describes this sentiment, “Ideally, it’s the people in power who should be the ones on the ground working because they have the power, the connections, [and] the money to make these grand ideas a reality” (K. Lipton, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Mei Mei is limited in what it can do for food justice by the financial reality of a small for-profit business.

The restaurant industry is not ideal for a values-based business. Despite Mei Mei’s idealistic and inspired owner and its mission driven ethos the establishment is a for profit business that is constrained financially from focusing on much more than staying open. As Annie Campbell described:

“If I think about it from a restaurant perspective. The business model of restaurants is atrocious in this country, and it is untenable. I think it is totally unrealistic to push the server compensation back to the customers, but also to have continually rising food costs and dealing with raises in margins, is completely untenable” (A. Lee, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

All eleven of the respondents indicated that the restaurant business model is tough economically. As Matt Ellison elucidated, “the economics make a choice for you that you didn't necessarily want to make for other reasons” (M. Ellison, personal communication, February 13, 2023). Due to Mei Mei’s open book policies, the profit margin and costs of operating the business are available to every employee and are published online for full transparency (Becker & Citorik, 2023). Therefore, the seven respondents who mentioned financial constraints, including Irene Li, were hesitant about describing the restaurants’ role in FJ because of the preoccupation with staying financially viable as a business.

As Mei Mei is trying to work on fulfilling its mission, the team must manage staying at a reasonable price point, while continuing to maintain the ethical sourcing and business practices. Laura Dyble explained:

“The biggest thing that stops us from manifesting those values, is the tightness of the financial paradigm we are in...I already feel like our product is so expensive and inaccessible, but I get why it has to be that way. I wish we could bring down the price of our product, but I also don’t want to stop buying local ingredients or pay people I work with less” (L. Dyble, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Higher end restaurants with high prices can more easily sustain their hyper local and sustainable sourcing, but only cater to a particular audience and bypass focus on worker wellbeing, which is against Mei Mei’s ethos. Due to this tension, and the push from the pandemic, Mei Mei transitioned to a more manufacturing business, with hopes to greatly expand their brand and their vision of a healthy food system. The respondents agree that these changes will make Mei Mei more financially healthy as a business and increase the establishment’s ability to support local farmers and other FJ efforts.

The pandemic and this transition to more manufacturing has pushed many participants to reflect on the role of Mei Mei in the food system and its ability as a business to have an impact on FJ in the city. The major concern, highlighted by all six respondents within the coding category of “financial constraints”, was that perhaps restaurants are not the most appropriate actors to *directly* influence the pressing FJ issues, but can support other organizations that are more involved with direct actions and campaigns, and can potentially mobilize their middle-class customers to push for change. Mei Mei may not be the best organization to practice FJ because as a restaurant/food manufacturer, they sell food at the highest price point in the food economy. Yet, they can push for the ideals and practice FJ if it does not negatively impact the business’ margins. Irene Li admits:

“Nothing that we do is really about making food more accessible to people who deal with food insecurity, at least not directly. We support farmers markets, farmers markets support SNAP and EBT that supports food access for neighborhoods all over the State. We support local and regional agriculture that supports the proliferation of these smaller food systems that can then, hopefully ... create more access for people who have food security concerns. All that being said...the bottom line is we make a product for people with money who have disposable income, who can afford to pay more for food. And I think the reason I feel okay about that is that I do feel that we play an important role in educating and activating that demographic who arguably have a lot of power in our food system. I feel like that's where Mei Mei fits” (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023).

Though Mei Mei has a strong mission of being “a good company in every sense of the word” (“Our Story”, n.d.), Jessica Coughlin, presents a more business-oriented perspective on the company’s role:

“The mission is growth, and it is evolving into a successful consumer packaged goods company with, ideally, local then regional then national distribution. That is not mission first, that's business first, and the mission is integrated into all aspects of the business practices and certainly the management style. But at the end of the day, you're not running a nonprofit. You're running a CPG (consumer packaged goods) business, and that needs to be the primary focus and the role” (personal communication, February 17, 2023).

Therefore, there is a tension between a desire to follow all values of the enlightened mission and the financial reality of achieving the day-to-day business objectives.

Pressing daily tasks overwhelm Mei Mei’s ability to focus on external issues. In addition to financial constraints, Mei Mei, like many other organizations, also deals with capacity limitations to achieving grand, mission-driven projects. As Mei Mei is currently in a mode of transition into dumpling manufacturing, with a new location and some new hires, the daily, short-term tasks are prioritized over the long-term food system goals. New ventures in the past iterations of Mei Mei also proved difficult when the experiment required more time and energy than originally expected. “We usually got to do the projects we planned but the timeline was often really stretched out” Katelyn Lipton remarked (personal communication, February 23, 2023). Laura Dyble explains:

“The big theme of restaurant industry is that we want to do better, but the day to day is such an uphill battle, we, in a lot of ways, only have the capacity to do the convenient thing. Over time we can make progress on long term goals, but in the day to day we have to keep it running every day. We end up doing what we gotta do” (L. Dyble, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Thus, though all the respondents were conscious of issues in the food system and want Mei Mei to somehow have an impact on FJ, they recognize that there are limitations.

Mei Mei’s extent of environmental or climate initiatives seems to be food waste reduction. Something that was glaringly missing from the discussion around Mei Mei and FJ in Boston was environmental issues that went beyond the promotion of local and urban agriculture. Despite an emphasis on supporting farmers and local food ecosystems, echoing the FJA’s environmental justice definition, there was little specific mention of climate and other pressing environmental issues impacting food systems in the interviews. Food waste was mentioned three times, once in reference to Boston’s robust food rescue networks, and twice in describing efforts that Mei Mei is doing specifically to reduce food waste. These initiatives include improved quality control, composting, and collaborating with the app, TooGoodToGo, to sell surplus food at reduced prices. Irene and her sister Margaret also have an Instagram, website, and cookbook dedicated to reducing food waste in the home kitchen (“Cooking with Zero Waste”, 2023, K. Lipton, personal communication, February 23, 2023).

Irene Li also indicated an interest in phasing out single use plastics and hosted an “Kick Styrofoam and Plastic to the Curb” event on April 3, as part of a Green Restaurant Series by the Product Stewardship Institute (I., Li, personal communication, November 14, 2023).

Nevertheless, the sparse commentary on these topics was mostly about reducing the waste of

valuable ingredients and resources, not anything explicitly tied to the reduction of carbon or GHG emissions. Notably, the FJA does not particularly prioritize environmental concerns in its writings either, with most of the focus on the environmental and climate benefits to be expected from increased support of local agriculture and eating local (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020).

Site Visits Findings

In hopes to ground truth some of the discussions from my interviews, I went to Mei Mei twice to observe the physical space and its happenings. Many of the themes discussed above were reflected in my observations. People seemed really excited about Mei Mei and those who work there know it. During my first visit on February 2nd, two men, an hour apart, were ecstatic to be trying these dumplings. The first was a white man likely in his 30s, who, after completing his meal, went up to the person at the counter and exclaimed that the food was fantastic, and detailed that he had been following the company on social media for years and that now he works nearby and hopes to make coming to Mei Mei a tradition. Approximately an hour later, a white man, likely in his 40s entered the establishment with two friends and introduced himself to the staff. He was curious about Mei Mei's old location and the future vision for the restaurant here in South Boston. He told them that he and his family have been in the neighborhood for 70 years and that he is afraid that the area is going to get knocked down to build skyscrapers. Nevertheless, he told the staff that he was happy to have a restaurant he liked nearby and proceeded to order a bunch of things for himself and his friends to try. The staff offered him and his friends a tour, which I soon learned was available to anyone who wanted one. Though these two men stood out the most due to their extensive interactions with the staff, the crowd at Mei Mei was quite diverse in age, assumed gender, and assumed race.

Based on my two visits roughly 20 days apart and at different time periods, I realized that during lunch time, customers mostly come in to eat in, but past 2 o'clock most of the people entering Mei Mei are picking up take out or buying the dumpling packs that they can cook at home. Yet, the staff was not idle. Though they chatted amicably, when possible, everyone working was constantly doing something—making dumplings, refilling sauce containers, prepping food, helping with checkout or whatever else needed doing. I realized that I saw almost everyone I had seen on the Mei Mei website working on the two days that I happened to stop by and observe. As I left, I also noticed a “we’re hiring” poster on the exterior of the building, perhaps pointing to their expected growth at their new location.

Chapter 4: Discussion

COVID-19 Demonstrated the Importance of a Just, Resilient and Equitable Food System

COVID was not part of my interview guide but was brought up every single interview because evidently it had severely impacted the research participants and the food system in which they worked. The coronavirus pandemic highlighted food system issues by worsening conditions in a very visible manner, through production and distribution issues, inadequate COVID-19 precautions, and the jump in the prevalence of hunger and food insecurity (“Building an Equitable Boston Food System”, n.d.). Hopefully the emergency will motivate people to prioritize food system issues and build in preventative protections in the case that another similar event occurs.

In the case of Mei Mei, the business was forced to reconsider its business model and pushed out of its longtime location on Park Drive. Additionally, through the Project Restore Us non-profit, Irene Li was collaborating on bridging gaps between grocers and consumers, but simultaneously struggled to continue paying her restaurant employees, highlighting cracks in the current food system (I. Li, personal communication, February 6, 2023; T. Chang, personal communication, January 26, 2023). Nevertheless, this cooperative work was a lifeline as it gave employees something to do, as functioning as a restaurant was impossible at the time. Additionally, Mei Mei’s strong customer base and dedicated followers supported the establishment that was relying on virtual dumpling classes, delivery, and government aid to stay financially afloat. Though Mei Mei was forced to adapt, the robust Boston food ecosystem, from producers to consumers, relied heavily on each other to survive—financially, figuratively, and literally.

Many respondents indicated that the pandemic forced them to understand how adaptability needs to be built into their business model. Due to the tight profit margins and the fragility of the restaurant model, many respondents indicated that they were forced to adjust in the moment, and pushed to restructure the business model in a way that has flexibility built in to better prepare for future emergencies. Indeed, Mei Mei transitioned to their modified dumpling manufacturing model during this time to increase financial stability and be less dependent on walk in customers. Nevertheless, these changes would not have been as successful at sustaining Mei Mei if they did not have a supportive network and a loyal following.

Undeniably, the restaurant industry was one of the hardest hit sectors of the economy (Choplif, 2020). During the pandemic, food insecurity in MA rose 59% since 2018, the highest increase in the nation, while farmers were destroying their crops because they were not profitable (Nelson, 2021). Startling incongruities like these were apparent at all levels of the food system. In the restaurant industry people were either exposed to COVID due to unsafe working environments or laid off with little to no protection from the government, as many restaurant workers are ineligible for unemployment (Li, 2022). Nationwide, there was a lot of pressure on food suppliers, supply chain issues in distribution, and a forced change of operations on restaurants that increased their costs (Renner et al., 2021). Regardless of economic downturn and widespread illness, people still need food (“What is the Meaning of Retail Food?”, 2020). The pandemic made the general public acutely aware of the intersections and issues of the food system and pushed many to question the viability of a career in this industry (Nelson, 2021).

In this environment at the height of the pandemic, Mayor Wu wrote the FJA while campaigning for her the mayorship. She evidently was seeing these disparities and the renewed public attention on these issues. She saw a need and an opportunity, and ideally, we can all learn

from this difficult period and mobilize for food justice, particularly prioritizing the severely underappreciated and exploited workforce that keeps the food system running. Short term efforts are necessary to help the local food economy bounce back, but long term, we need to increase the protections in place to ensure a stronger and more resilient food system. These initiatives can come from the government, but their success relies on the support of all actors of the food system, which includes every single one of us, as we all consume food. Moreover, COVID highlighted more than ever the importance of an equitable, sustainable, and just food system to be able to be more resilient and have more defenses if emergencies like these occur again.

Food Justice in Boston Has a Lot of Potential

Fortunately, there does appear to be a concerted effort amongst many in Boston's food system and local government to work towards a more resilient food system through FJ efforts. Perhaps due to the FJA's timing amidst the pandemic, many of the respondents' responses indicated a general alignment with the priorities outlined in the FJA. The interviews seem to indicate that the FJA is in tune with some of the most pressing issues of Boston's food system. The interviewee's emphasis on expanding access to food, and the importance of food worker conditions and the wider food community, reflects many of the same priorities of the FJA and the national FJ movement. Additionally, through their own perceptions and experiences with FJ, the interviewees independent definitions of FJ echoed the plan's comprehensive definition. The respondents of this research know what's going on in the food system and Mei Mei is already working towards three-fifths of the FJA's goals and supports other organizations who do some of the work more directly. Therefore, if the OFJ were to adhere to the FJA to guide policy, it would be a useful general guide that seems in tune with the needs and desires of Mei Mei and the wider Boston food system.

Nevertheless, though the FJ vision of this new administration is laudatory in many respects, it is still not clear what the implementation will look like, and if it will truly help Mei Mei, and similar establishments. As many respondents were hesitant about working with the government and a robust network of FJ actors already exists in Boston, perhaps the government would best serve the movement by acting as a convener of these groups. It is tough for restaurants or food manufacturers to work towards FJ independently; Mei Mei is just one of the many organizations and companies in Boston's progressive food system network, who have been supporting and doing FJ work for decades (Pitcoff et al., 2020). The potential for outreach and network building around FJ is ripe through this sophisticated social web, but many of these organizations, including Mei Mei, have many other pressing priorities and lack the resources to fully focus their efforts on this task. Food industry analysts see potential in capturing this energy to increase coordination between all parts of the food system and their governing bodies to establish goals that help deal with shared issues (Renner et al., 2021).

Boston's Government Has Obstacles Built Into its Systems that Dissuade Food Justice

Without a complete overhaul of our current economic system, restaurants can make some strides towards FJ but will continue to be reliant on financial and bureaucratic support from powerful financial and political actors, such as the government, to help fill gaps in the food system. If Mei Mei, and restaurants like it, are to thrive in the food justice landscape, fulfill all their food justice goals, and aid Boston in its FJ initiatives, the political and economic sphere must provide some leverage. Despite a local political climate that values FJ, respondents indicated a hesitancy towards working with local government towards these goals, based on their experiences with various other departments on the processes necessary to establish and maintain their business. Therefore, despite the creation of the OFJ and a quite progressive mayor, these

will not have the intended impact without alleviating the burdens the respondents' indicated. One major aid would be decreasing government bureaucracy and updating processes to increase equitable access to government aid and stimulate restaurants and retail food manufacturers to want to deal with the government. Based on the references to tight budgets as constraints to FJ work, the government should also provide financial incentives or grants to alleviate budgetary and capacity limitations in small, independent, and local food businesses who participate in activities aligned with FJ goals.

These efforts would relieve burdens outlined in my case study and be proactive about promoting more equitable opportunities for an increased diversity of actors in the restaurant and food economy space. Boston needs these progressive efforts to make Mei Mei's business model more viable and eliminate obstacles to the company's ability to continue and further its FJ efforts (Holt-Giménez, 2011). Alleviating these burdens will aid the entire city's transition to a more just, equitable, and healthy food system as restaurants will be better able to play a role in making Boston what Mayor Wu's government envisions. Indeed, much of the work towards FJ in Boston has been grassroots and a response to lack of government mobilization around these issues, thus government involvement must be a tool not an obstacle to organizations in the food system (Pitcoff et al., 2020).

Mei Mei's Strengths in Boston's Food Justice Landscape

Mei Mei can change mindsets through education and collaboration. Due to Mei Mei's robust community and mission driven, charismatic leader, the business has a platform that the staff uses to educate and inspire, with hopes to supplement the direct work the business does with farms and other local businesses. For a small, independent restaurant in a city like Boston that has roughly 3,000 food businesses, Mei Mei's following is impressive (Office of Boston

City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). The establishment's popularity seems to continue to grow, as their opening day in their new location in South Boston had the highest number of sales in Mei Mei's entire existence (Becker & Citorik, 2023). The restaurant/food manufacturer has a unique potential to reach their large "restaurant audience that...is hyperlocal, loyal, and carefully cultivated", including 23,400 followers on Instagram (Choplif, 2020). With efforts to influence those within the establishment and the greater public, Mei Mei emulates the idea that "hospitality starts from within" (Li, 2022). As many FJ scholars highly value education as an important step towards greater change, Mei Mei's reach is significant in the many manners in which it could and is potentially changing mindsets about the food system in Boston (Campbell, 2004; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 2000; Rodman-Alvarez & Colasanti, 2019; Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2015). Through vendor and customer engagement at farmer's markets, interactions in the store, collaboration with other businesses or organizations, and Mei Mei's food, the restaurant/manufacturer has been able to create a strong brand for itself, while fostering an attentive audience.

Irene Li's multiple board memberships in leading organizations, like Haley House, the Food Project, and Project Bread, represent the values that Mei Mei espouses but may not be able to do themselves ("Our Story", n.d.). Li has also often partnered with Commonwealth Kitchen, a Boston-based food entrepreneur space, most recently to launch the Restaurant Resiliency Initiative meant to support independent restaurant owners dealing with the impacts of COVID on their business ("Restaurant Resiliency Initiative", n.d.). Li's partnerships and positions on these boards indicate that these organizations trust and respect her input in making decisions in the food system. During the pandemic, when restaurant functions were paused, Irene Li launched *Unsung Restaurants* to raise money for mom-and-pop shops and co-created *Project Restore Us* to

provide cheap or free culturally relevant groceries to immigrant families (Li, 2022). In addition to nonprofits, Mei Mei has also worked with the city government on multiple occasions, as Boston's government recognizes the restaurant's appeal and platform. Mayor Wu worked with Project Bread, to increase awareness of food assistance programs, and officially lauded the work of Project Restore Us during the pandemic (Holt, 2022). Irene Li and her sister Margaret were also contacted to help with the city's new curbside composting service, by providing their input, creating promotional food waste reduction videos for the city, and by using their platforms to teach people how the program would work (Li, n.d.). Thus, Mei Mei's trajectory over the years has built trust in Li's input and leadership on FJ issues.

Through its meaningful partnerships and holistic hospitality, Mei Mei has become an important figure in Boston's foodscape—the food landscape that encompasses where we acquire, prepare, talk about, and gather around food (Joassart-Marcelli & Bosco, 2020). In addition to its FJ efforts, the restaurant/manufacturer also nurtures community among city residents and small businesses. Mei Mei has been part of the urban fabric of Boston since 2012 and is intimately tied by its food, its vision, and its staff to this city where the founders grew up (“Our Story”, n.d.). The context specific knowledge and memories that Mei Mei has fostered over the years plays a role in placemaking and identity creation within the city of Boston (Moskwa et al., 2015). “Restaurants serve as anchors to their neighborhood ecosystems” and contribute greatly to the character and economy of metropolitan areas (Brady, 2014; Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020, p. 20). Perhaps a restaurant cannot rid a city of food insecurity, but it can bring people together, keep money in the economy, and introduce customers to concepts through culinary experiences (Hanser & Hyde, 2014; Firth, 2022).

Mei Mei is trying to resist the food industry's economic paradigm. Mei Mei's community is what determines the restaurant/manufacturer ability to participate in FJ initiatives, partly because these partnerships and collaborations alleviate capacity and financial pressures by distributing responsibility. Though the restaurant industry is rapidly growing in the U.S., many restaurants have tough working conditions with low wages that makes restaurant workers three times more likely to experience poverty than employees in any other sector (Hunt, 2016). Nevertheless, the interview responses and numerous newspaper and blog articles indicate that Mei Mei provides a good food job, where the staff feel seen, respected, and pushed to grow (Choplif, 2020; Sniderman, n.d.; Becker & Citorik, 2023). Though Mei Mei's prioritization of its workforce and quality ingredients, through livable wages, worker benefits, and local sourcing, comes at a cost that reduces the funds available for other more direct-action initiatives or an emergency, it supports the livelihood of their employees and their supplier farms. Sourcing from smaller local farms is more costly and requires heightened planning, but creates relationships with the local food economy, supports agriculture in the region, and guarantees a quality product. Therefore, Mei Mei is achieving FJ objectives by prioritizing food chain workers, creating opportunities for economic advancement for people from all backgrounds, and supporting local agriculture (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). Through the restaurant/manufacturers valuation of workers and local ingredients, money is staying in the economy and supporting some of the most vulnerable actors in the food system.

Mei Mei is exceeding expectations in comparison to national standards, as, according to a Restaurant Opportunities Center survey, roughly 90% of restaurant workers are not provided paid sick leave or health insurance (Hunt, 2016). Additionally, while the state minimum wage in MA is \$15, Mei Mei's employees start with wages in the mid \$20s (Loh & Flagg, 2018). Many

well-known high-end restaurants who also source locally or sustainably, often only pay a fraction of their staff, refuse to pay overtime, or take employees' tips (Hatic, 2018). Mei Mei is not at that luxury price point, but still wants to serve customers a quality product, without sacrificing the wellbeing of their workforce. In a context where many restaurants in MA are struggling to stay open while trying to keep wages competitive, accommodate for shipping delays, and deal with increasing cost of resources, Mei Mei's commitment to its values is laudable (Kholi, 2022; Smith, 2022). Additionally, the food industry exists within an economic system that does not value the worker, or people, with enormous corporations controlling production, distribution, processing, and consumption of food (Holt-Giménez, 2011; Hunt, 2016). Pushing for higher working standards and keeping money in the local economy is an important part of the FJ movement and something for which Mei Mei continuously strives (Ibid).

Mei Mei's Challenges in Boston's Food Justice Landscape

As a business, Mei Mei is constrained from doing more direct and transformative food justice work. Though Mei Mei can be understood as redistributing power through its workforce and sourcing policies, and increased community involvement, the restaurant/manufacturer's potential to transform the food system is stifled because Mei Mei is a for-profit business that partly benefits from the agrobusiness capitalist structure that commodifies food. Eating at Mei Mei costs roughly \$15 and customers spending money directly benefits Mei Mei's ability to exist. Mei Mei is changing its model and hoping to transform other business models to work towards food justice but is not doing the most aggressive work to dismantle inequalities in the food system because it needs to make money. Mei Mei will continue the workforce and sourcing practices and highlight or collaborate with other organizations, but

the restaurant is constrained from pursuing more direct FJ efforts if they require much more financial expenditure or time.

The restaurant model is a microcosm of the inequities and disconnect in the food system, according to most of the research participants, and it may never truly be sustainable and provide the best jobs within a capitalist system that commodifies food (Firth, 2022). As a pressing example, several employees at Mei Mei are unable to afford the food they handle. Additionally, ironically, Mei Mei was only able to get directly involved with food insecurity and increasing food access for those most in need when it could no longer function as a restaurant due to the pandemic. Hopefully with the transition to a primarily manufacturing consumer packaged goods business, some of these financial pressures will be lessened and Mei Mei will be able to tackle some of the most pressing FJ issues that many respondents care about.

Despite best intentions, Mei Mei may be furthering gentrification in South Boston.

The ramping up of dumpling manufacturing was part of the impetus to move to South Boston. Nevertheless, Mei Mei's new location in South Boston does create some new challenges for how the restaurant/food manufacturer envisions their community. As has occurred all over the nation, when restaurants move to a cheaper locale, other restaurants begin to come, and tend to bring attention to an area, which becomes a new focal point for increased development (Hanser & Hyde, 2014). The process was coined "food gentrification" by Mikki Kendall, a Chicago scholar and activist, and Mei Mei may be a part of that process in South Boston (Ong et al., 2021). Though Mei Mei was not the first restaurant in South Boston's new Ironworks development, it is joining café/bakery Tatte, Castle Island Brewery, and Shybird (a café, bar, and rotisserie), all of which have two dollar signs on Google (KHG, n.d.; Google, n.d.). For reference, most dishes on Mei Mei's menu are in the mid-teens for 6 dumplings and a cappuccino at Tatte is roughly \$6.

The Ironworks development also hosts an indoor pickle ball court, an indoor rock-climbing gym, and the urban agriculture start-up Freight Farms (Ibid). Steps away from an iron workers union and in a gentrifying neighborhood, time will tell what occurs in Mei Mei's new neighborhood.

Though the FJA mentions gentrification in terms of corporations pushing out small businesses, and in terms of rising housing prices preventing people from buying fresh and nutritious foods, if the Boston government is going to get involved in FJ, it must also realize the impact that the small local restaurants they intend to support, can have on other existing small businesses, housing values, and rent prices (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). The respondents seemed quite aware of this strange position that Mei Mei is in, but the restaurant/food manufacturer's employees appear to be making connections in the area, and based on my site observations and interviews, South Boston locals seemed quite excited about Mei Mei's opening. Gentrification is an extremely complicated phenomenon. Restaurants are often opening wherever they can afford, but there is an inherent tension because though the restaurant is merely dealing with its tight budget and does not have control over what happens to the surrounding properties and their valuation, the restaurant can be the one of the reasons a longtime local business gets priced out. As alluded to above, restaurants are still functioning within a capitalist system and a political regime and have limited power to dismantle these systems as an individual establishment.

Mei Mei is missing an opportunity to forefront environmental issues. Though the potential to gentrify appears extremely difficult for Mei Mei to tackle alone, there are some issue areas that the restaurant/manufacturer can control. Compared to the restaurant's strides in workers' rights and in local sourcing, the environmental component of FJ appeared to be a bit of an afterthought for the Mei Mei respondents. The interview data emulates the idea that "the

locavore movement has done more to create a sense of place, build community, and educate around food than it has to increase food security or shorten food miles at the scale necessary to confront climate change” (MacLean, 2021). Much of the discussion of FJ centered on economic, racial, and social issues, but specific mentions of environmental issues that went beyond agriculture were relatively sparse. Perhaps the respondents were defining the environment according to Dana Alston’s definition of where we live, work, and play, instead of the more traditional, nature focused definition (1991). Maybe they felt like they had little control over the environment, or that other types of issues are more visible and, thus, easier to address. Possibly the question of focusing on specific types of justice is irrelevant, as long as some type of justice is the goal and outcome.

Nevertheless, the lack of mention of environmental initiatives does not mean that they are not occurring, as the few respondents who highlighted food waste initiatives demonstrated. Mei Mei’s composting, food waste reduction schemes, and TooGoodToGo membership encompass aspects of food justice and environmental justice and should be at the fore of Mei Mei’s marketing. This will not be greenwashing—claiming to be making environmentally conscious decisions merely for marketing with no real actions to support the claims—because these projects are indeed happening (Edwards, 2023). Nevertheless, perhaps the respondents do not think that they are doing enough to boast about it.

Indeed, there is more that Mei Mei could do in the realm of being green, such as using only renewable energy to power their operations, being in an environmentally friendly building with good energy efficiency, and eliminating plastic entirely from their packaging (which appears to be in progress). Though the upfront costs for some of the eco-friendly changes may be high, the long term pay-offs would be comprehensive (MacLean, 2021). Additionally, making

more environmentally conscious changes could also be useful as a marketing and brand building tool that excites their followers and attracts new ones (Firth, 2022). Nevertheless, based on Mei Mei's small profit margins and tight budget, it is understandable that these changes are not the priority, especially as the business focuses on growth as a dumpling manufacturer. Regardless, the most effective solutions for a business with such limited resources are those that solve multiple problems simultaneously, are genuine, and are relatively affordable (Moskwa, 2015).

Chapter 5: Potential Areas for Growth

As Mei Mei is in a moment of transition with its new space and ramping up of dumpling manufacturing, this phase is crucial for establishing norms and operational procedures that are integrated into the process and require less work in the future. If the restaurant/manufacturer is looking to bolster its positionality in Boston's FJ landscape as it settles into a new chapter of the business, I have compiled a few recommendations for Mei Mei based on the interview data. Based on limited time and capacity, these suggestions can be pursued when Mei Mei is better established, and the staff feel like they can and want to accommodate these suggested steps for growth.

1. Streamline quotidian operations to create more time and be able to dedicate more effort towards social missions.
2. Create mutualistic partnerships with more environmental organizations by catering their events and supporting their projects, so that these eco-friendly partners can inform Mei Mei's environmental initiatives and provide suggestions for greening the business.
3. Lobby or support local rent protection and anti-displacement campaigns for businesses and low-income households to fight the systemic producers of gentrification.
4. Dedicate time and effort to create relationships in South Boston by attending community meetings, collaborating with, and supporting local organizations, hosting meetings and events for the nearby Ironworkers Union, and prioritizing longtime South Boston residents when hiring new employees.

5. Incorporate more eco-friendly practices and explicitly highlight Mei Mei's existing environmental initiatives on the website and in the physical location.

The delineated actions and areas for growth are intended as avenues to deal with a variety of challenges and opportunities simultaneously, while making use of Mei Mei's strengths. The respondents were evidently reflective about the restaurant/manufacturer and some of these recommendations are likely already in progress. If so, my writing them here may serve as a reinforcement of the importance of that goal.

Chapter 6: Closing Remarks

The role of Mei Mei in furthering FJ in Boston seems to be as an example and educator that prioritizes people and nutritious local food in its operations, management, and customer service. Mei Mei's role is constantly evolving, and it will be interesting to see how the expected growth into more of a dumpling manufacturer will impact its ability to further support the causes important to the respondents in this research. Though their dumplings are not the most affordable option, they represent the internal costs of running a business that tries to forefront its values in the current economic system. Mei Mei is just one restaurant in a sea of restaurants in the city of Boston, and in the nation, but by delving into the thoughts and opinions of the staff and partners, this project is able to provide a deeper inspection of the trials and tribulations of trying to run a mission-driven for-profit food business.

Mei Mei is calling for reform of the current agribusiness food system, while challenging and changing the practices and norms it can control. The restaurant/manufacturer is poking and prodding for food systems change, using the tools at its disposal, some of which are a product of capitalism, like marketing, and others rooted in community. If Mei Mei were to depend wholly on the government for support in food justice work, then it would not be transformative systems change, yet it is not fair or logical to ask a business to change the economic paradigm either. If it had that power, it would put into question the power of private businesses in the government.

As the FJ efforts of the city continue, it will be interesting to see how the OFJ attempts to work with and support the food economy. Ideally, this research project can aid in the implementation processes of ideas outlined in the FJA by ensuring that actions to support restaurants and their workforce are attuned to what restaurants are truly able to sustain and what level of government involvement is helpful. For a more comprehensive understanding, further

research is required to examine how other Boston area restaurants envision their role in furthering FJ in the city.

Research on restaurants and retail food manufacturers and their place in FJ is lacking globally. Hopefully this project is the beginning of a new area of research, which will greatly inform other cities that want to prioritize FJ. The time is ripe for this kind of investigation, especially because it also works to connect all actors of a food system that many activists hope to mend.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this project was the constrained time frame. With the proposal approval in late January 2023, this project had to be completed essentially within three months to accommodate for the May 3, 2023, Tufts University deadline for theses. Therefore, the depth and breadth of the project were limited by time. With more time I would have been able to speak to more of Mei Mei's staff and conduct an additional case study of another restaurant to compare findings across varied food establishments. Though I wanted to focus on what the restaurant workers thought of their role in FJ, it would have also been interesting to see if the customers had any opinions on the restaurants' role in FJ. These possibilities would have potentially created a bit more nuance in the analysis of the findings. A longitudinal study would also have been interesting to see how responses may change over time. As I was conducting my research during a period of transition for Mei Mei, responses could be different in 6 months or in the coming years. As much of the methodology depended on interviews, the interviewees' time was also an important consideration. Occasionally, interviews had to be shorter than the original hour due to busy interviewee schedules, which decreased the amount of information I could collect from those participants.

During my observational site visits of Mei Mei, I wrote down notes about those who entered and exited the establishment. To avoid impacting their behaviors, they were not made aware of my observations. Therefore, I had to make assumptions on their sex, gender, and pronouns, and include these in my research, despite the potential of unintentionally altering data.

Additionally, due to this project being a deep case study of a small, independent restaurant with a small staff, the results and analyses are not generalizable. Nevertheless, because of Mei Mei's platform in the city of Boston, this research could help other players in the food economy get the support and recognition they deserve. My project provides a window through which to understand what a restaurant like Mei Mei is truly able to sustain when trying to participate in FJ efforts.

References

- Abi-Nader, J., Herrera, H., Hanna, J., & Paterson, C. (2009). *Whole Measures for Community Food Systems*.
- About PRU. (n.d.). Project Restore Us. Retrieved April 22, 2023, from <https://projectrestoreus.org/who-we-are>
- About Us. (n.d.). *City Fresh Foods*. Retrieved April 19, 2023, from <https://cityfresh.com/about-us/>
- Alkon, A.H., & Agyeman, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, class, and sustainability*. The MIT Press.
- At a Glance. (n.d.). Haley House. Retrieved December 14, 2022, from <https://haleyhouse.org/at-a-glance/>
- Becker, D. & Citorik, C. (2023, January 26). Mei Mei's Irene Li says "dumplings make the world go round." In Radio Boston. wbur. <https://www.wbur.org/radioboston/2023/01/26/mei-mei-irene-li-dumplings>
- Beland, A. (2021, December 11). How inflation is impacting food nonprofits and restaurants in Massachusetts. Wbur. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/12/11/inflation-food-nonprofit-massachusetts>
- Bioneers. (2017, November 20). *Saru Jayaraman - We the People: Workers Rising for Fair Wages* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35oHABq0Mbo>
- Born, B., & Purcell, M. (2006). Avoiding the Local Trap: Scale and Food Systems in Planning Research. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26(2), 195–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X06291389>

Boston, MA. (2020, September 10). Healthy Food Policy Project.

<https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/case-studies/boston-ma>

Brady, M. (2014). AN APPETITE FOR JUSTICE: The Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York. In R. Milkman & E. Ott (Eds.), *New Labor in New York* (pp. 229–245). Cornell University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh18v.15>

Building An Equitable Boston Food Ecosystem. (n.d.). Health Leads. Retrieved January 21, 2023, from <https://healthleadsusa.org/massachusetts-equitable-food-ecosystem/>

Caspi, C. E., Kawachi, I., Subramanian, S. V., Adamkiewicz, G., & Sorensen, G. (2012). The relationship between diet and perceived and objective access to supermarkets among low-income housing residents. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 75(7), 1254–1262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.05.014>

Ceccarelli, D & Smit, L. (2017, September 28). *Is Living Near a Farm Bad for Your Health?* Eos. <http://eos.org/editors-vox/is-living-near-a-farm-bad-for-your-health>

Choplif. (2020, April 28). MEI MEI: Dumplings, Delivery, and Delicious Doggedness. Digital Innovation and Transformation. <https://d3.harvard.edu/platform-digit/submission/mei-me-dumplings-delivery-and-delicious-doggedness/>

Cooking with Zero Waste with the City of Boston: The Recipes! (2023, February 7). *Food Waste Feast*. <https://foodwastefeast.com/recipes/2023/2/7/cooking-with-zero-waste-with-the-city-of-boston-the-recipes>

Crothers, L. (2020, June 22). *Regional Food Systems*. Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program. <https://sarep.ucdavis.edu/research/foodsystms>

Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11(1), 100.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100>

DEI Programming. (n.d.). Mei Mei. Retrieved December 14, 2022, from

<https://meimeidumplings.com/dei-programming>

Deshmukh, B. (2017). *Unit 9 Ground Truth Data Collection*. Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Driver, K. (n.d.). *The Food System*. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Retrieved December 14, 2022, from <http://www.foodsystemprimer.org/the-food-system/>

DuPuis, E. M., Harrison, J.L. & Goodman, D. (2011). “Just Food?” In A.H. Alkon & J.

Agyeman (Eds.), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (pp. 283-302).

The MIT Press.

Edwards, C. (2023, February 21). *What Is Greenwashing, and How Do You Spot It?* Business

News Daily. <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/10946-greenwashing.html>

Eit Food. (n.d.). *The food system*. FutureLearn. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from

<https://www.futurelearn.com/info/blog>

First, D. (2008, December 3). *The greenest of them all*. Boston.com.

http://archive.boston.com/lifestyle/food/articles/2008/12/03/the_greenest_of_them_all/?page=3

Firth, J. K. (2022). Crisis caring: Chef foundations, branding, and responsibility in foodscapes.

Food, Culture & Society, 0(0), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2022.2078931>

FDA. 21 C.F.R. § 1.227 (2022).

<https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfcfr/cfrsearch.cfm?fr=1.227>

Food Justice. (n.d.). Boston.Gov. Retrieved April 22, 2023, from

<https://www.boston.gov/departments/food-justice>

Gaber, J. & Gaber, S. (2019). *Qualitative Analysis for Planning and Policy: Beyond the Numbers*. 10.4324/9781351179614.

Germanos, A. (2019, March 20). Boston City Council Passes Groundbreaking Food Justice Ordinance. Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/03/20/boston-city-council-passes-groundbreaking-food-justice-ordinance>

Gottlieb, R., & Fisher, A. (1996). “First Feed the Face”: Environmental Justice and Community Food Security. *Antipode*, 28(2), 193–203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1996.tb00522.x>

Guillemin, R. (2022, November 16). *Restaurant Formats* [Zoom Lecture]. Retrieved from https://canvas.tufts.edu/courses/40675/pages/class-11-lectures?module_item_id=799701

Hanser, & Hyde, Z. (2014). Foodies Remaking Cities. *Contexts* (Berkeley, Calif.), 13(3), 44–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214545760>

Holt, S. (2022, March 9). Is Michelle Wu America’s Food Justice Mayor? *Civil Eats*. <https://civileats.com/2022/03/09/is-michelle-wu-americas-food-justice-mayor/>

Holt-Giménez, E. (2011). “Food Security, Food Justice, or Food Sovereignty.” In A.H. Alkon & J. Agyeman (Eds.), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (pp. 309–28). The MIT Press.

- Hunt, K. P. (2016). #LivingOffTips: Reframing Food System Labor Through Tipped Workers' Narratives of Subminimum Wage Exploitation. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(2), 2. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.062.021>
- Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC). (2015, May) *Resilient Food Systems, Resilient Cities: Recommendations for the City of Boston*.
- Janzer, C. (2018, June 22). *The History of the Farm to Table Movement*. Restaurant Insider. <https://upserve.com/restaurant-insider/history-farm-table-movement/>
- Joassart-Marcelli, P and Bosco, F. (2020). Contested Ethnic Foodscapes: Survival, Appropriation and Resistance in Gentrifying Immigrant Neighborhoods. In J.,Agyeman, & S., Giacalone (Eds.), *The Immigrant-Food Nexus: Borders, Labor, and Identity in North America* (pp. 177-205). MIT Press.
- John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. (2011). *Teaching the Food System*. FoodSpan.
- Kohli, D. (2022, Jun 06). 'There's little good news': Mass. restaurants wrestle with high food and labor costs. Boston Globe (Online) Retrieved from <https://login.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/theres-little-good-news-mass-restaurants-wrestle/docview/2673325336/se-2>
- Lake, I. R., Hooper, L., Abdelhamid, A., Bentham, G., Boxall, A. B. A., Draper, A., Fairweather-Tait, S., Hulme, M., Hunter, P. R., Nichols, G., & Waldron, K. W. (2012). Climate change and food security: Health impacts in developed countries. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 120(11), 1520–1526. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1104424>

- Larson, N. I., Story, M. T., & Nelson, M. C. (2009). Neighborhood environments: Disparities in access to healthy foods in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 36(1), 74–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2008.09.025>
- Lee, D. J. & City University of New York. (2018). *Delivering Justice: Food Delivery Cyclists in New York City* - ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2092234576?parentSessionId=uMG7eTd%2FGfEOPq4cTpwmUJ9qV3ONhRt8xmf39HyuArM%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=14434>
- Leighton, H. (2017, October 2). *Measuring Up: When, How, and Why to Define 'Local'*. Farm to Institution New England. <https://www.farmtoinstitution.org/blog/measuring-when-how-and-why-define-local>.
- Li, I. (2022, March 23). *Fighting Food Insecurity in the Restaurant Industry*. Project Bread. <https://projectbread.org/blog/fighting-food-insecurity-in-the-restaurant-industry>
- Loh, P., & Agyeman, J. (2019). Urban food sharing and the emerging Boston food solidarity economy. *Geoforum*, 99, 213–222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.08.017>
- Loh, P., & Flagg, L. (2018, November 18). *Will Work for Food: How Boston is Building a Just Food Economy*. Practical Visionaries. <https://pennloh-practical.vision/2018/11/18/will-work-for-food-how-boston-is-building-a-just-food-economy/>
- Loh, P. (2014, November 8). *Land, Co-ops, Compost: A Local Food Economy Emerges in Boston's Poorest Neighborhoods*. YES! Magazine. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/economy/2014/11/08/boston-s-emerging-food-economy>

- MacLean, A. (2021, June 23). Urban Abundance: An Aerial Survey of Metro Boston Reveals a Regional Food System on the Rise. LILP. <https://www.lincolnst.edu/pt-br/publications/articles/2021-06-urban-abundance-aerial-survey-metro-boston-reveals-regional-food-system-on-the-rise>
- Mares, T. M., & Peña, D. G. (2011) “Environmental and Food Justice: Toward Local, Slow, and Deep Food Systems.” In A.H. Alkon & J. Agyeman (Eds.), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* (pp 197–117). The MIT Press.
- McNulty, J. (2017, July 10). *Growing farmers and the food movement for 50 years*. UC Santa Cruz News. <https://news.ucsc.edu/2017/07/farm-50.html>
- Measuring Progress: Common Terms and their Limitations*. (n.d.). Healthy Food Policy Project. Retrieved November 18, 2022, from <https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/towards-equitable-and-just-food-systems/measuring-progress>
- Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Franklin Regional Council of Governments, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and Massachusetts Workforce Alliance. (2015). Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan.
- Modlinska, K., & Pisula, W. (2018). Selected Psychological Aspects of Meat Consumption—A Short Review. *Nutrients*, 10(9), 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10091301>
- Mok, H.-F., Williamson, V. G., Grove, J. R., Burry, K., Barker, S. F., & Hamilton, A. J. (2014). Strawberry fields forever? Urban agriculture in developed countries: a review. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, 34(1), 21–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-013-0156-7>

- Moskwa, E., Higgins-Desbiolles, F. & Gifford, S. (2015) Sustainability through food and conversation: the role of an entrepreneurial restaurateur in fostering engagement with sustainable development issues, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 23:1, 126-145, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2014.940046
- Nargi, L. (2021, September 16). *Critics say it's time to stop using the term "food deserts."* The Counter. <https://thecounter.org/critics-say-its-time-to-stop-using-the-term-food-deserts-food-insecurity/>
- Nelson, C. (2020). *Toward a Greener Tomorrow: Restaurants lead the way with win-win-win sustainability measures.* Edible Boston. Retrieved November 21, 2022, from <https://www.edibleboston.com/blog/2020/2/2/toward-a-greener-tomorrow-restaurants-lead-the-way-with-win-win-win-sustainability-measures>
- Nelson, M.E. (2021, March 2). The pandemic revealed our food system is broken. We can fix it. BostonGlobe.Com. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/02/magazine/pandemic-revealed-our-food-system-is-broken-we-can-fix-it/>
- Nittle, N. (2019, June 16). *Boston brings sustainability, equity to its food purchasing.* Salon. https://www.salon.com/2019/06/16/boston-brings-sustainability-equity-to-its-food-purchasing_partner/
- Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu. (2020, October). *Food Justice Agenda for a Resilient Boston.* City of Boston.
- Ong, V., Skinner, K., & Minaker, L. M. (2021). Life stories of food agency, health, and resilience in a rapidly gentrifying urban centre: Building a multidimensional concept of

food access. *Social Science & Medicine*, 280, 114074.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114074>

Our Story. (n.d.). Mei Mei. Retrieved December 3, 2022, from

<https://meimeidumplings.com/our-story>

Pitcoff, W., Peats, B., Miller, R., & Cole, J. (October, 2020). Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery. Massachusetts Food System Collaborative. Mafoodsystem.org.

<https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.145.201/ghl.292.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MALocalFoodPerspectives.pdf>

Rahman, M. S. (2016). The Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches and Methods in Language “Testing and Assessment” Research: A Literature Review. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 6(1), 102.

<https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v6n1p102>

Rea, T. (2018, April 5). How Restaurants Differ from Catering Companies. *LinkedIn*.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-restaurants-differ-from-catering-companies-tony-rea/>

Reimer, J., & Zorn, S. (n.d.). *What is the Average Restaurant Profit Margin? [2023 Data]*. Toast POS. Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://pos.toasttab.com/blog/on-the-line/average-restaurant-profit-margin>

Renner, B., Betts, K., & Cook, J. (2021, July 26). Future of work: The state of the food industry. Deloitte Insights. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/future-of-food-retail-workforce.html>

Restaurant Resiliency Initiative. (n.d.). CommonWealth Kitchen. Retrieved January 28, 2023, from <https://commonwealthkitchen.org/offerings/programs/restaurant-resiliency-initiative/>

Rocha, C. (2016) Opportunities and Challenges in Urban Food Security Policy: the case of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. In Deakin, M., Borrelli, N. and Diamantini, D., eds, *The Governance of city food systems: Case studies from around the world*. Milan: Fondazione Feltrinelli. Pages 29-40.

Rodman-Alvarez, S. & Colasanti, K. (2019) *Measuring Racial Equity in the Food System: Established and Suggested Metrics*. East Lansing, MI. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. Retrieved from <http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/measuring-racial-equity-in-the-food-system>

Roseberry, W. (1996). *The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States*. *American Anthropologist*, 98(4), 762-775.

Schools. (2022, May 18). *\$17 Million BPS Food Service Contract Announced with Roxbury-Based, Black-Owned Business*. Boston.Gov. <https://www.boston.gov/news/17-million-bps-food-service-contract-announced-roxbury-based-black-owned-business>

Silverman, & Patterson, K. L. (2015). Semi-Structured Interviewing. In *Qualitative Research Methods for Community Development* (pp. 72–86). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797762-12>

- Smith, T. (2022, May 11). *Restaurants that survived the pandemic are now threatened by inflation*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/11/1096975182/restaurants-pandemic-inflation-food-prices>
- Snaiderman, D. (n.d.). *How Open-Book Management Keeps Restaurant Employees Happy—On the Line | Toast POS*. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://pos.toasttab.com/blog/on-the-line/how-open-book-management-keeps-restaurant-employees-happy>
- Sonnino, R. (2009). Feeding the City: Towards a New Research and Planning Agenda. *International Planning Studies*, 14(4), 425-435.
- Spencer, E. (2020, March 9). *What Does It Really Cost to Run a Restaurant?* Eater. <https://www.eater.com/2020/3/9/21166993/how-much-to-run-a-restaurant-cost-mei-mei-boston-finances>
- Stahl, A. (2022, April 8). *5 Industries Experiencing Double-Digit Growth Over The Next Decade*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2022/04/08/5-industries-experiencing-double-digit-growth-over-the-next-decade/>
- USDA Economic Research Service. (2022, October 17). *Food Security in the U.S.*. USDA.gov. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>
- USDA National Agricultural Library. (n.d.) *Urban Agriculture*. USDA.gov. Retrieved December 15, 2022 from <https://www.nal.usda.gov/legacy/aglaw/urban-agriculture>.
- Weber, C. L., & Matthews, H. S. (2008). Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States. *Environmental Science & Technology*, 42(10), 3508–3513. <https://doi.org/10.1021/es702969f>

Yin, R. K. (2009). Case study research: Design and methods (Vol. 5). Sage.

2023 State of the Restaurant Industry. (2023, February 28). National Restaurant Association

(NRA). <https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/research/research-reports/state-of-the-industry/>

Appendix A. List of Interview Participants

Name	Role
Bing Broderick	Former Executive Director of Haley House
Angelle Castro	Production, Cafe Kitchen, Market Staff at Mei Mei
Annie Campbell	Managing Partner at Mei Mei
Tracy Chang	Owner and Chef of Pagu. Co-creator of Project Restore Us
Rachel Cortez	Dumpling Class Instructor at Mei Mei
Jessica Coughlin	Publicist and Consultant at Mei Mei
Laura Dyble	Operations Manager at Mei Mei
Matt Ellison	Senior Production & Kitchen Operations Staff at Mei Mei
Alyssa Lee	Managing Partner at Mei Mei
Irene Li	Owner and Chef of Mei Mei. Co-creator of Project Restore Us.
Katelyn Lipton	Former Mei Mei Employee

Appendix B. Interview Guide

This is a semi structured interview thus the questions may be asked in varying orders depending on the flow of the conversation. The questions with a + sign indicate that these are questions to be asked solely to Mei Mei employees.

BEGINNING OF INTERVIEW

Ask the interviewee how their day is going and thank them for taking the time out of their day to participate in this interview. Remind them how much time it will take and ask them if they have any questions about the signed consent form. Start recording on the Zoom/recording device and ask for consent to be interviewed to capture their verbal consent.

Introduce myself and what my project is and hopes to accomplish. Allow the interviewee to respond and introduce themselves.

- Ice breaker: What intentions have you set for yourself in your work this year? OR What is your favorite thing to eat in Boston? OR What is your favorite Boston restaurant?

What are these organizations doing, and how do their employees feel?

- Where do you work?
- What is your role within the organization?
- Describe the mission of your organization.
 - a. To what extent does your role further your org's mission?
- In what ways does your organization/business excel? What does your org/biz do well?
 - a. What is your favorite part about working at Mei Mei?+

- b. What do you find most challenging about working at Mei Mei? +
- *What challenges does your organization/business face?*
 - a. In what ways could your workplace/organization improve?
- What initiatives or projects are you most proud of? Why?
 - a. Are you aware of the work that Mei Mei does outside of the kitchen? What is your involvement with that work? +
- Are there any initiatives or projects that you were excited about, that didn't turn out as planned?
 - a. Why do you think they were not as successful as you would have hoped?
- What is your/your organization's relationship with Mei Mei and/or Irene Li?
 - a. How did your/your company's relationship with Mei Mei begin?
 - b. How does this collaboration impact your organization and the work that it does?
 - c. Why did you decide to work together?
- Do you think your establishment has a role in the local community/neighborhood? If so, in what way?

How do food workers perceive food justice?

- What is not working in the food system (preferably Boston's)?
- What is working in the food system (preferably Boston's)?

- Have you heard of the term food justice? What do you think it means? / How would you define it?
- When did you first become aware of the term?
- Do you center food justice work in your personal life? As part of your organization?
- EXPLAIN HOW BOSTON DEFINES FOOD JUSTICE. Food justice is defined by the city as, “affirming that consistent access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food is a universal human right; and it means enshrining the right to self-determination for communities to own and manage land for their own food provisioning” (Office of Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, 2020). How do you feel about that definition?
- To what extent do you feel that your organization fits into the definition the city has created for food justice?
- To what extent does your employer strive for food justice?
 - a. What additional work would you like to see your organization doing in the food justice space?

How can the local government support Boston’s local food retail manufacturers and restaurants that are dedicated to food justice?

- Whose responsibility is it to work towards food justice? Who should bear most of the responsibility?
- EXPLAIN BOSTON FOOD JUSTICE INITIATIVES. How does Mayor Wu’s Food Justice agenda and the creation of a dedicated office make you feel about your

organization's ability to achieve its mission? Do you think it has or will impact or inform your organization's work?

- a. BE SPECIFIC HERE ABOUT IF I AM TALKING ABOUT THE COLLAB WITH MEI MEI OR THE ORG'S OWN WORK. WILL DEPEND ON HOW CONVO GOES.
 - b. Do you believe these changes will impact the type of work you have been doing with Mei Mei? If so, how?
 - c. Will these outside-of-business collaborations be made easier?
- Should the Boston city government play a role in helping your organization further its mission? Its food justice efforts?
 - Do you feel like the Boston city government currently is an aid or an obstacle to your food justice work? If not, what should they do to better support you? If yes, how are they best supporting your organization?

Make the interviewee aware that the interview has ended. Ask them if they have anything else they would like to add, or any additional questions. Explain how the interviews will be used in the analysis of the project. Make the interviewee aware that they can contact you any time with questions and that you will be in touch about direct quotations and with the final deliverables by the end of May. Thank the interviewee again for their time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Do not forget to download the Zoom recordings and transcripts and then upload them onto Box immediately.