

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: RED GOLD: THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE TOMATO INDUSTRY

February 18, 2025

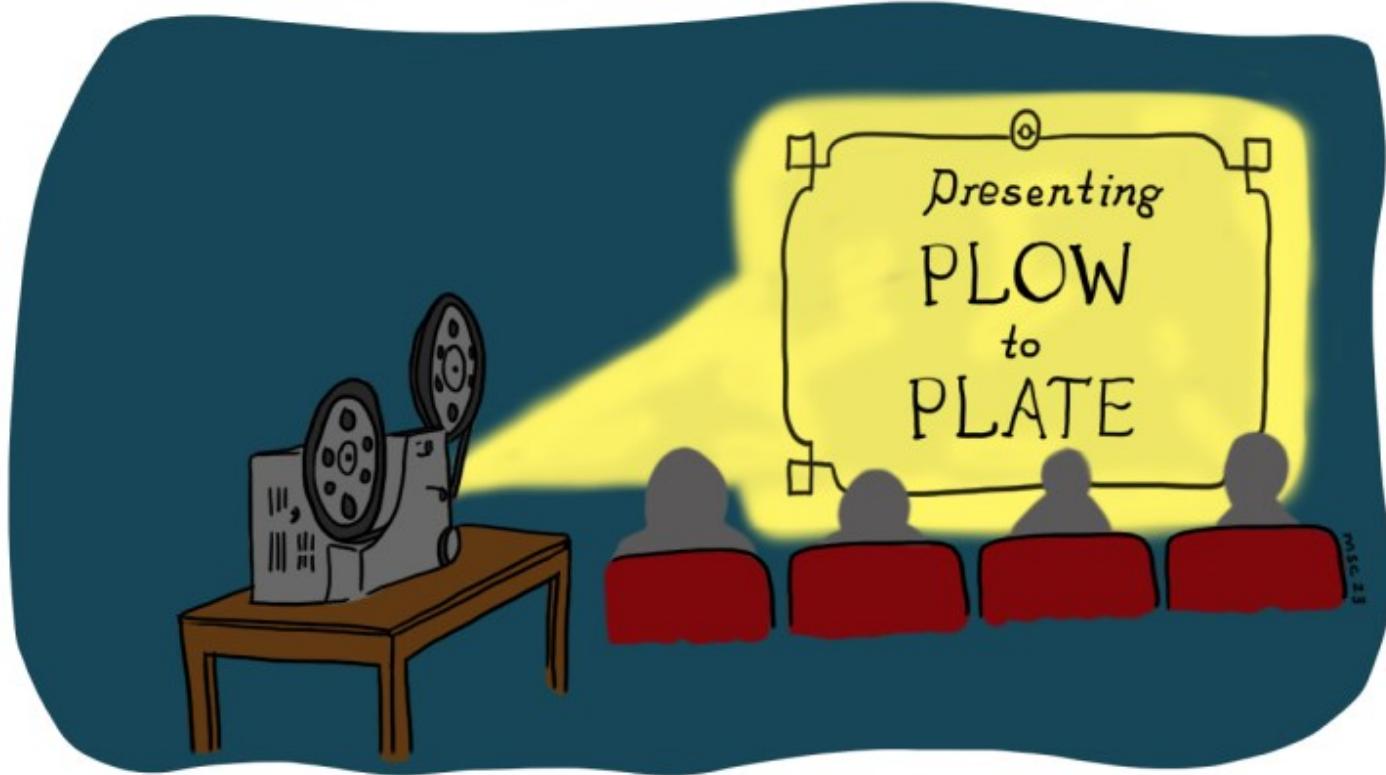


Illustration by Maggie Carson

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By Adam Rabiner

Like many *Plow to Plate* titles, *Red Gold* purports to reveal some dire hidden secrets. Yet, unlike General Motors CEO Roger Smith who famously evaded Michael Moore in *Roger & Me*, here tomato traders, suppliers and middlemen freely discuss the industry, tomato titans boast of their accomplishments and factory managers are all too eager—even proud—to show off their facilities to French film-maker Jean-Baptiste Malet.

Though Malet's thorough examination of the industry is interesting, and reveals some unsavory practices, he does not find a smoking gun. What he does highlight, if not so much reveal, is that the tomato industry operates under the inexorable laws of global-

ized capitalism which means, of course, that some people get massively rich, others are found expendable and lose their livelihoods, a great many are exploited in the fields, and that consumers should follow that wise dictum, "caveat emptor."

The central paradox that drives Malet's years-long investigation was why a Chinese company was investing in French tomatoes. After all, tomatoes are not a typical part of the Chinese diet. The answer appears to be a combination of economic opportunism, industrial policy and control of the Uyghur people and the Autonomous Region Xinjiang. The area attracts laborers from China's poorest regions where a husband-and-wife team may earn 25 to 50 Euros a day picking and bagging tomatoes, depending on the field's yield. Child labor is also not uncommon.

On the other end of the spectrum Liu Yi, or General Yu, has been appointed by Xi Jinping, to turn China into a global leader in production of tomato concentrate, or red gold, which, like crude oil, can be further refined into tomato sauce, paste, ketchup and other branded products. Beginning in the early 2000s, China has emerged to join the U.S. and Italy as one of the big three producers. How it got there is another one of Malet's dirty little secrets. Essentially China struck a deal with Italy which agreed to supply machinery, technology and training in exchange for raw exports for a period of five years. Both countries were enriched by this bartering agreement and neither country is blameless in hoodwinking unsuspecting consumers. Italian suppliers attempt to disguise the fact that their raw material comes from China with brand-names like Gino's and green, red and white can labels resembling the Italian flag. And the Chinese eventually create their own brand, Gina's, with a similar label to compete head-to-head selling "Italian Style" sauce.

Malet films one Chinese manufacturer using soybean fiber as a thickener. The floor manager claims the government allows additions of the substance to 20 percent, though Malet cites information that in some cases the additives can be as high as 55 percent. This is done not simply to thicken the sauce, but to lower the costs and increase the profits. The importers and distributors are in on the game, but the end consumer is fooled. This is a far cry from the 1800s practices of diluting milk with water,

dying it, spiking it with formaldehyde to preserve it or adding pureed calf brains to make it creamier. But it is still dastardly.

There is one revelation in the film worth noting. Value investor Warren Buffet is frequently portrayed as humble because he lives in a modest home bought decades ago and does not collect luxury cars. But he did not become one of the world's richest men by accident. In 2013 he acquired Heinz and a year later shut down a plant in Leamington, Ontario that employed about 1,000 of the City's 28,000 citizens and had been operating for four generations since 1909. He subsequently closed five plants and cut 7,400 jobs, a quarter of the company's workforce.

By now, few people believe that unbridled capitalism is a good thing. While we may be impressed by highly efficient automated factories, we rightly are wary of robots, computers and AI potentially taking away our jobs and livelihoods. It is good to press pause and consider the negative effects of economic globalization. But the film's main takeaways are a bit more prosaic: Carefully read your labels and buy fair trade if you can.

Red Gold Tuesday, March 11, 2025 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link.

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to plowtoplate@gmail.com.

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