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Five Answers With Laura Reiley

By [Kirsten Ballard](#) May 25, 2016

Laura Reiley has been the Tampa Bay Times' food critic since 2007. She has received numerous state and national awards. She is a former critic for the San Francisco Chronicle and the Baltimore Sun and the author of four guidebooks in the Moon Handbook series. She has cooked professionally and is a graduate of the California Culinary Academy.

1. What drew you to working in news media?

I was an English major in undergrad and wanted to be a poet when I grew up. When I realized what an uphill battle that was, I decided I wanted to write about something else that I was passionate about—I had worked as a cook and server to make money during college, so I decided I would go to culinary school after college and then become a food writer—which miraculously worked out. I got an internship at a food magazine after school, and worked in magazines and then transitioned to newspapers, working at the *Baltimore Sun*, *The S.F. Chronicle* and then *The Tampa Bay Times*.

2. With your *Tampa Bay Times* series, [Farm to Fable](#), where did the inspiration come from, and how did you begin tackling the project?

A couple years ago I started doing a fair amount of agriculture writing in Florida. A lot of the farmers I wrote about complained that they were selling to restaurants nominally and the restaurants were keeping their names on menus and chalkboards long after sales had stopped. And as a food critic, I began to see an escalation in menu claims, as well as dubious vendor claims at the outdoor markets. I thought, “There aren’t enough local farms to make all these claims possible.” So I decided to drill down and see if I could trace the claims back to their sources. The paper gave me time off of my regular duties so that I could start sifting through menus and photographing chalkboards.

3. What is the most exciting thing you are currently working on?

I feel like I’m still digging out from the aftermath of the “Farm to Fable” series. As with any investigation, folks get in touch with you afterwards and say things like, “You think you reported on something exciting?! I’ve got something that will KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF.” So you have to investigate the claims that people bring to you. I’ve had a number of interesting story ideas that have come my way, so I’m starting to make some calls. These are all in the arena of food fraud of one sort or another.

4. Why did you decide to switch from food critiquing to investigative journalism and what were the biggest obstacles?

I haven’t switched. I am still the critic. The good thing about working at a paper that takes investigations, enterprise and long form seriously is that if you can make a compelling case for why you want to dive deep on your beat, they will let you do it. In the past couple years I’ve been given the freedom to explore topics like food waste, nutritional guidelines, GMOs, food safety and other things that relate to my beat but expand upon it.

5. What do you see for the future of news media?

Right this minute I am bullish about the future. There is a powerful hunger for serious journalism. We just have to figure out how to share the burden of paying for it! It will get worked out because enough smart people are devoted to figuring it out. Print papers may go away, but there will always be the need for boots-on-the-ground reporters with editors and photographers and all the infrastructure newspapers have. This “Farm to Fable” series showed me—with thousands of emails, voicemails and letters from around the country—that people want this stuff.

Five Answers is a weekly series that features a member of the news media industry answering five questions. If you’d like to participate, email [Kirsten Ballard](#).

Kirsten Ballard



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