

Chef Dan Barber: Farm-to-Table Philosophy is Flawed

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This undated image released by Blue Hill at Stone Barns shows Dan Barber. Many know Barber as a key champion of the farm-to-table movement, favoring locally sourced and produced food. But now, he's shifted his approach. In his book, "The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food," Barber argues that the farm-to-table philosophy, while wildly and increasingly popular, is fundamentally flawed, because it's based on cherry-picking ingredients. (AP Photo/Blue Hill at Stone Barns)

NEW YORK (AP) — At Blue Hill, his intimate, understated restaurant in Greenwich Village famous for its locally sourced ingredients — not to mention having hosted Barack and Michelle Obama on a much-publicized date night — chef and co-owner Dan Barber is featuring a Rotation Salad this week.

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Not the most inviting name for a dish, perhaps. But this salad epitomizes Barber's new approach to food — not only how we prepare it, but how we farm, consume and even conceive of it.

And so this particular salad includes soil-building crops: Barley, buckwheat, rye. And legumes, a natural soil fertilizer: Peas, kidney beans, peanuts. A so-called "cover crop," meant to replenish soil — pea shoots — is used in the vinaigrette. Seed crops include benne and rapeseed.

Why is all this significant? Many know Barber, who also has another well-known restaurant in leafy Westchester County, based on his own farm — Stone Barns at Blue Hill — as a key champion of the farm-to-table movement, favoring locally sourced and produced food.

But now, he's shifted his approach. In "The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food," Barber argues that the farm-to-table philosophy, while wildly and increasingly popular, is fundamentally flawed, because it's based on cherry-picking ingredients.

What we need instead, Barber says, is a cuisine based on what the land can provide — nothing more, nothing less. He argues for a nose-to-tail approach, not to one animal, but the entire farm. He recently sat down at Blue Hill with The Associated Press to explain. (The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.)

AP: For starters, what the heck is "The Third Plate"?

Barber: It's not a specific plate of food. You could say it's a metaphor for a way of eating.

AP: Is there a First or Second Plate?

Barber: The First Plate would be that seven-ounce (or eight- or twelve-ounce) steak that becomes the paradigm of everyday dining. It's protein-centric, with a few veggies to fill in, and maybe refined rice. The Second Plate is actually the same architecture, but you know where your ingredients are coming from a little more — hopefully you got them at the farmer's market or they're organic or sourced in a way that connects you to a farm or community. It's tastier, but it's not a way to think of our future diets.

AP: But with that Second Plate, aren't we doing everything right?

Barber: Yes, but we can't support the system. That's becoming abundantly clear from alarming forecasts about the future of the environment, soil, water. You know, with the farm-to-table movement, we feel good about what we're eating; we're lulled into thinking it's the answer. The evidence is actually saying the opposite. It's saying that in the last 10 years, big agriculture is getting bigger.

AP: A harsh assessment.

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Barber: It sounds hardhearted. I mean to sound hardHEADED. The recent census said that, for the first time in the history not just of this country but of the world, more than 45 percent of the money we spend on food is in the hands of one percent of the farmers.

AP: How did your new philosophy emerge?

Barber: About 10 years ago, I really wanted good flour in the restaurant. I met an amazing farmer named Klaas and bought his emmer wheat. The bread was jaw-droppingly delicious, and I was really proud: it was sourced locally, organically and was an ancient grain, headed for extinction.

I went up to visit his farm a few years later. I was standing in the middle of his field — 1,500 to 1,800 acres — and I didn't see any wheat! He showed me buckwheat, barley, bean crops, mustard plants and clover. He described these meticulously timed rotations of cover crops to restore lost nutrients to the soil. He's continually rotating them, to get his soil ready for the wheat.

But, what was I doing? I was supporting the wheat but not the other crops. They go into bag feed, for animals.

AP: But isn't supporting the wheat good?

Barber: It's cherry picking. At the farmers market this morning, everyone was buying asparagus, peas, and all these exciting vegetables, which are high-value crops. But it's the rotation crops we need to be more supportive of.

AP: So what else should we be eating?

Barber: Buckwheat and millet, barley and rye ... I could go on. How many kidney beans do you eat? Not enough. If you think back to truly sustainable ecologies, cuisines evolved from what the land could provide. French peasant cuisine. Italian cuisine. Cantonese cuisine. All the cuisines in India. When Parmesan cheese was invented in Italy, what did they do with the whey? They fed it to pigs, and made prosciutto de Parma. The pigs are fattened on the whey — that's what makes prosciutto so delicious — but it's a waste product of the cheese.

AP: You write a lot about soil.

Barber: Yes, the whole first quarter of my book. It's hard to get through. But it all starts with soil. I fell in love with soil.

AP: I'm the consumer. What's my job?

Barber: First, don't underestimate cooking — for yourself. Also, I would support chefs who are willing to break out of the paradigm of that seven-ounce steak, and are offering menus heavy on vegetables, grains and beans.

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AP: Don't you yourself offer some protein-centric plates?

Barber: I'm trying to get away from it. It's hard. But many chefs are trying to change the paradigm of the plate — because it's boring. A seven-ounce steak or lamb loin isn't really cooking, just heating. It's not culinary transcendence. Not even close.

That's not to say I don't enjoy a good steak. I love it, but in proportion. So, celebrate — but do it in proportion to what the land can provide.

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