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Book Review

The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food

Dan Barber
Penguin Press, 2014: 496 pages

Review by Sarah J. Martin (University of Waterloo)

Serving the Future of Food, One Plate at a Time

It is hard to avoid the question of the future of food these days. Filmmakers, scholars, activists and book authors are fretting over what is to be done. Joining the fray is Dan Barber, 'chef activist' at Blue Hill Restaurant at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills, New York, and at Blue Hill New York City. His book, *The Third Plate* offers a culinary vision of the future where "the entirety of the landscape, and how it fits together" is served on a dinner plate (8). Barber has famously been a practitioner of the farm to table cooking, a cooking that is reliant on a host of farmers and chefs who work together to produce good food while also trying to make a living in two enterprises—farming and restaurants—that are famously money-losers.

By looking past the back door of his kitchen and into the fields, Barber rethinks what he serves to diners. He uses three dinner plates to work through where the industrial agriculture diet has come from and where it needs to go. The first plate is the restaurant meal of the past, a seven-ounce, corn-fed steak with steamed baby carrots. The second plate is the current idealized farm to table dinner, a local grass-fed steak with local, heirloom carrots grown organically. On the third plate—the future—a carrot 'steak' is served with a sauce of braised beef. Barber's third plate is a thoughtfully crafted meal that is the essence of the sustainable landscape of the farms that serve his restaurant.

Barber is a terrific storyteller and he takes us on a series of field trips to landscapes where 'nature' does the work with the help of animal husbandry, farmers and fishers.[1] His wonder and

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respect for the practitioners of the soil, sea and animals is infectious. He dreams of a future where 'flavor drives genetics', a future that he has seen and tasted on pilgrimage-like journeys to meet the people, animals and plants that 'fit together'. For example, he shares the work, and wisdom of Klaas Martens, an organic grain farmer in Upstate New York, who moved from feeding animals to feeding people after experiencing pesticide poisoning. Barber also travels to Extremadura, Spain, where he introduces us to geese with 'free will', and their liberator, Eduardo Sousa. "To taste his foie gras is to kick-start a chain of understanding about geese, the ecology that supports them and the centuries-old culture that supports the whole system" (193-4).

The book is hopeful and ambitious, as are all spiritual books. Barber's ambition is grounded in heroic parables, and is enlivened with quotes from American environmental philosophers—from Aldo Leopold to Wes Jackson—who envision a better future because, as Jackson states, "we are living in a fallen world" (176). In the end, the book is a call to move away from our fallen despoiled world of industrial food landscapes by walking, talking and reflecting with farmers. In turn, Barber aims to 'narrate the message' with the food on the plates he serves.

What is left off of Barber's plates? Barber works in rarified landscapes: two high end restaurants, one in New York City and one at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, which was established by a Rockefeller family donation (yes, the same Rockefellers who shaped US agriculture and promoted the Green Revolution abroad through their foundation). The depiction of heroic practitioners may help to engage one class of eaters, but it also leaves aside political contexts, and the complex interactions of state, capital and social relations that have facilitated industrial agriculture and 'industrial diets' (Winson, 2013). For example, Clapp (2014) reminds us that while we are fiddling with our carrot steak, food and agriculture are being shaped by new kinds of financial actors.

In my experience, the chefs of high-end restaurants have a narrow view of what is 'good food', even when practicing farm to table cooking. There are few Blue Hill restaurants in this world, and indeed not everyone wants Barber's third plate. Eduardo Sousa rejected one of Barber's dinner invitations and instead chose to tuck into the quintessential American food: a hamburger, fries and a coke in a diner across the street. Just as Barber ate the Extremadura landscape, Sousa ate the industrial agriculture landscape of the US. "The food Dan makes isn't bad. But this is really *delicious*" (195). Fallen worlds have their pleasures.

Barber has pulled a series of stories together in order to paint a big picture of agricultural practices and what ends up on our plates. The work is engaging and a pleasure to read and I would recommend it with a few caveats. Of course no one book can offer the 'future of food' – there are many futures. What are the ways and mechanisms that will take us to a different future? Diverse experiences and practices can come together on plates, and there is no 'best' way. As Friedmann recently wrote in this journal (2014), there is not one path but many paths that come together to create foodsheds. Landscapes are important, but new ways, new cooks and new kinds of social relations—that are not exclusively elite—nourish what goes on our plates and into our bowls.

In the end, it is hard to fault Barber. There has always been nostalgia for the pastoral and rural idyll. He is a thoughtful, likable man on a mission who urges us to follow him to a sustainable, delicious future, all the while readily sharing his foibles and failures. However, it is important that we do not to get too distracted by the beautiful small plates he serves up. The industrial diet has many resourceful supporters who are working hard to maintain the status quo.

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[1] See Barber's talks at: https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_barber_s_surprising_foie_gras_parable and www.ted.com/talks/dan_barber_how_i_fell_in_love_with_a_fish