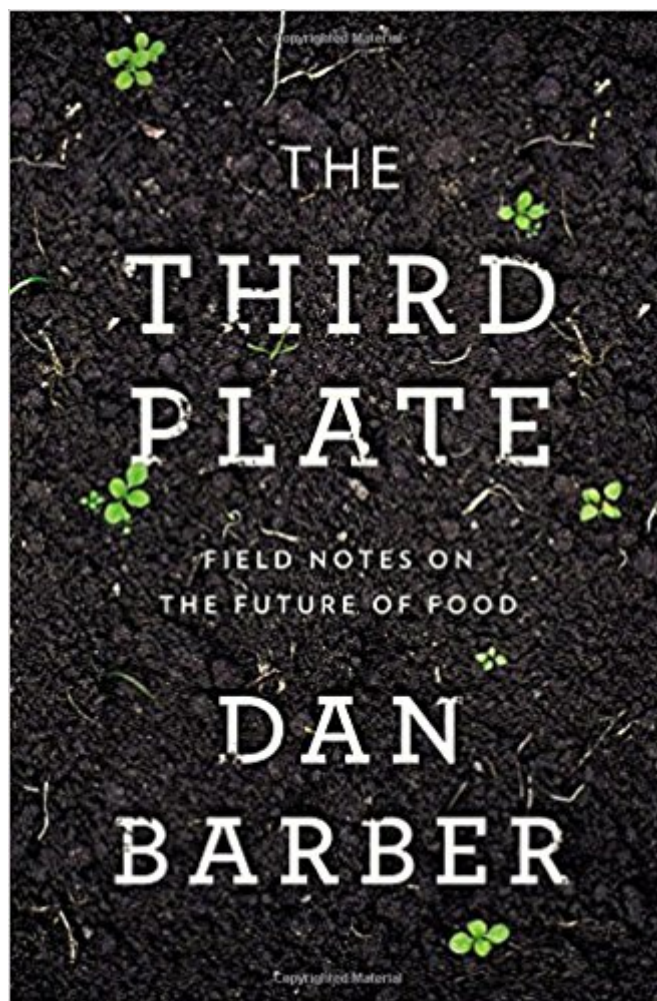


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The Third Plate: Field Notes On The Future Of Food



Synopsis

"[E]ngaging, funny and delicious... I would call this *The Omnivore's Dilemma 2.0*." --Chicago Tribune

At the heart of today's optimistic farm-to-table food culture is a dark secret: the local food movement has failed to change how we eat. It has also offered a false promise for the future of food. Our concern over factory farms and chemically grown crops might have sparked a social movement, but chef Dan Barber, recently showcased on Netflix's *Chef's Table*, reveals that even the most enlightened eating of today is ultimately detrimental to the environment and to individual health. And it doesn't involve truly delicious food. Based on ten years of surveying farming communities around the world, Barber's *The Third Plate* offers a radical new way of thinking about food that will heal the land and taste good, too. The Third Plate is grounded in the history of American cuisine over the last two centuries. Traditionally, we have dined on the "first plate," a classic meal centered on a large cut of meat with few vegetables. Thankfully, that becomes largely passé. The farm-to-table movement has championed the "second plate," where the meat is from free-range animals and the vegetables are locally sourced. It's better-tasting, and better for the planet, but the second plate's architecture is identical to that of the first. It, too, is damaging—"disrupting the ecological balances of the planet, causing soil depletion and nutrient loss"—and in the end it isn't a sustainable way to farm or eat. The solution, explains Barber, lies in the "third plate": an integrated system of vegetable, grain, and livestock production that is fully supported—in fact, dictated—by what we choose to cook for dinner. The third plate is where good farming and good food intersect. While the third plate is a novelty in America, Barber demonstrates that this way of eating is rooted in worldwide tradition. He explores the time-honored farming practices of the southern Spanish *dehesa*, a region producing high-grade olives, acorns, cork, wool, and the renowned *jamón ibérico*. Off the Straits of Gibraltar, Barber investigates the future of seafood through a revolutionary aquaculture operation and an ancient tuna-fishing ritual. In upstate New York, Barber learns from a flourishing mixed-crop farm whose innovative organic practices have revived the land and resurrected an industry. And in Washington State he works with cutting-edge seedsmen developing new varieties of grain in collaboration with local bakers, millers, and malt makers. Drawing on the wisdom and experience of chefs and farmers from around the world, Barber builds a dazzling panorama of ethical and flavorful eating destined to refashion Americans' deepest beliefs about food. A vivid and profound work that takes readers into the kitchens and fields revolutionizing the way we eat, *The Third Plate* redefines nutrition, agriculture, and taste for the twenty-first century. The Third Plate charts a bright path forward for eaters and chefs alike, daring everyone to imagine a future for our national cuisine that is as sustainable as it is

delicious. The Wall Street Journal "[F]un to read, a lively mix of food history, environmental philosophy and restaurant lore... an important and exciting addition to the sustainability discussion." • The Atlantic "When *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan's now-classic 2006 work, questioned the logic of our nation's food system, 'local' and 'organic' weren't ubiquitous the way they are today. Embracing Pollan's iconoclasm, but applying it to the updated food landscape of 2014, *The Third Plate* reconsiders fundamental assumptions of the movement Pollan's book helped to spark. In four sections "Soil," "Land," "Sea," and "Seed" "The Third Plate outlines how his pursuit of intense flavor repeatedly forced him to look beyond individual ingredients at a region's broader story" and demonstrates how land, communities, and taste benefit when ecology informs the way we source, cook, and eat." •

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the most interesting books I have read that discusses everything wrong with our food culture today. That said, it's also one of the most obnoxious. It's packed full of fascinating information about the way our food is grown, and it's worth the read...if you can get past the author's idealism and snobbery. Let me start off by saying that I had no idea who Dan Barber was until I picked up this book. All of my impressions of him (and his beliefs) are based on what I read in *The Third Plate*. The Good: (and I mean REALLY good) This book essentially examines the relationships between our food and the environment in which it is raised/grown. That sounds simple, and has been looked at before, but this book takes it to a whole new level. I don't think I've EVER read something that managed to turn my beliefs upside down quite the same way this book did. I have a

fairly large organic backyard vegetable garden & keep chickens, and before this book I would have called myself an environmentalist. I would have told you I was doing things the *right* way because it's organic, it's local, it's healthy, etc. This book turns those notions upside down. Barber made me really think about how I see "my" garden, "my" chickens, and "my" yard - and start to think of really and truly integrating the things I want to grow with all the other stuff that naturally wants to live there. Barber's ideas aren't terribly original, but he presented them in a way that was completely and utterly fascinating - and certainly made ME re-think my place and my role in growing my own food. The other thing I loved about this book was that Barber covers the same familiar ground as others - the evils of monoculture crops, the dangers of pesticides, fishing species to extinction, etc. - but he does it in a way that is fresh and interesting. He weaves his research throughout the narrative, and the result is short bursts of information that hit you hard and make you stop & think, but then he moves on before you get bogged down. In reading this book I felt like I was learning a lot, but I never felt like I was reading a textbook. To compare - I liked Omnivore's Dilemma as much as the next person, but I can't deny that my eyes would glaze over if I read too much at once. Barber's book is the complete opposite - lots of personal stories, reflections, and anecdotes are woven WITH the research in a way that is highly readable. No caffeine required.

The Bad: (and it's unfortunately REALLY bad) Barber believes that in order for change to occur in this country it has to start at the top. The top being elite chefs, like himself. He describes himself as the "conductor" of a large "symphony," and he uses that analogy frequently throughout the book. From what I gather from this book, Barber essentially works in the food equivalent of an ivory tower. His restaurant is funded by the Rockefellers, and he is surrounded by his own personal organic farm, where he can grow anything he wants. He then takes that "superior" food and charges exorbitant amounts of money for the wealthy folks who can afford to eat at his restaurant. His book is dripping with elitism, and most of the time I felt like he was so out of touch with reality it was laughable. Barber contrasts the monoculture crops in America (and all their evils) with what he thinks are better examples of the way food *should* be grown. He visits farms and interviews the farmers who are changing the way we think about farming in general (which is good). Unfortunately his "examples" were of things like foie gras and jamón ibérico - some of the most expensive products on the planet. It's VERY hard to appreciate the science behind what Barber is trying to say when he backs it up with \$700 goose liver examples. His ideas would have been a LOT more meaningful if he had found examples of people growing tomatoes and potatoes according to his idealistic vision of how farming *should* be. Instead, the only successful examples he seems to have found were of people who made it work because their way of farming is essentially supported by the wealthy. While I can appreciate those

farmers and what they are trying to do, I was extremely put off by the rampant elitism and snobbery. I also couldn't stomach the 'top down' approach that Barber takes - mainly that change won't ever happen until the best chefs in the world take it upon themselves to start a revolution on behalf of the rest of us. Although I could appreciate Barber's perspective, it was still obnoxious. I also happen to think he has it completely backwards. He's preaching to the wealthy few who can eat at his restaurant, thinking "his" views will naturally trickle down. They won't, simply because the "rest" of us (myself included) are concerned with putting affordable food on the table every week of the year. Most people have no idea that the tomatoes they buy at Walmart don't taste anything like real tomatoes. They don't know because "real" tomatoes don't have any place in their lives - not in the stores or the restaurants they eat at - much less that there are thousands of different TYPES of actual tomatoes. I had no idea until I grew a tomato plant, and I only did that because initially I was looking for ways to save money and still eat healthy foods. I wasn't on a quest for "elite" tomatoes, and it was only by accident that I discovered how MUCH better homegrown food tastes. REAL change has to start with the millions of people that Barber ignores - the regular, everyday middle class & poor. Those are the folks shelling out the money to support our food industry, one box of macaroni & cheese at a time. Until those dollars band together and begin supporting more sustainable agriculture, change won't happen. And until that sustainable agriculture becomes affordable, people will still buy those boxes of mac & cheese. What Barber serves or doesn't serve in his restaurant has virtually nothing to do with that cycle. Barber lives in his ivory tower and preaches about how things *should* be, while the rest of us are worrying about making ends meet. So on the one hand I appreciated Barber's research and agreed with his connections between "the land" and good food, but on the other hand it was a little offensive to wade through 400+ pages of an elitist chef go on & on about perfecting ingredients most people have never even heard of. He may have interesting things to say, but he is SO far out of touch with reality that it all just comes across as idealistic nonsense. Overall: solid 3 stars. Definitely worth the read, especially if you keep your own garden or backyard animals. It will make you think about the complex relationships between the soil, the plants, and the animals, and probably in a way you haven't considered before. It certainly did for me. But that 5-star research was seriously undermined by the 'Lord of the Manor' perspective, which was sometimes a little too tedious and obnoxious to stomach.

I thought Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma" was pretty much the last word about the food we eat, why we eat it, its cost to our health and the planet's health, and how we can do better. I wasn't alone in that view. But the gold standard is now Dan

Barber's *The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food*. Dan Barber is the chef at Blue Hill at the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture in Pocantico Hills, New York and at Blue Hill New York. At those restaurants, as the foodies among you know, Barber has taken farm-to-table dining to its logical extreme—he grows much of the food he cooks. The difference between his meals and the organic cooking of other chefs begins and ends with that fact. His carrots seem to be from a different, finer planet. Ditto his lamb. The wonder is that the source of his otherworldly food is this planet—Barber has found a way to tastes that most of us have never experienced. Perhaps no other chef in New York City does as enthusiastic an impersonation of the farmer in the dell as Mr. Barber, and perhaps no other restaurant makes as serious and showy an effort to connect diners to the origins of their food as Blue Hill. Frank Bruni wrote in the *New York Times*, awarding Blue Hill three stars. "Here the meals have back stories, lovingly rendered by servers who announce where the chanterelles were foraged and how the veal was fed. It's an exercise in bucolic gastronomy, and it might be slightly cloying if it weren't so intensely pleasurable. Sorry, but it is cloying. There is something borderline obscene about weeping over roasted asparagus with beet yogurt and stinging nettles or swooning over purple potato gnocchi with green garlic, ramp shoots and hon shimeji mushrooms while, not far away, children go hungry. But as I understand it, Dan Barber isn't serving this food only because he's gunning to unseat whatever restaurant is regarded as the world's best. He's doing it to explore the concept of *eddelicious*. The story of this book is how the meaning of *eddelicious* changed for him and how he came to a fresh, larger definition: bringing that level of satisfaction and nutrition to people who will never know his name or eat in his restaurant. Here's his understanding of the way food works in our country: The *first plate* is a hulking, corn-fed steak with a few vegetables on the side. The *second plate* is a smaller, grass-fed steak, no bigger than your fist, with vegetables that come from farmers who get name-checked by the waiters. This was what his restaurants served. As he writes, "It's better tasting, and better for the planet, but the second plate's architecture is identical to the first. It, too, is damaging—disrupting the ecological balances of the planet, causing soil depletion and nutrient loss—and in the end it isn't a sustainable way to farm or eat." The *third plate* represents a non-violent revolution. The steak looks like an afterthought. The carrots rule. Despite the book's title, the plate—the food prepared by a chef and served in a restaurant—is not the real subject of this book. *The Third Plate* is about farming. With that sentence, I'm in danger of losing half of you here, maybe more, so let's go to the

video of Dan Barber, at TED, talking about an astonishingly delicious fish and the man who figured out a way to farm it. It's a great story. A deeply entertaining, even thrilling story, completely worth your time. But if you want just the punch line, start around 14:45, because at that point this amusing observer ignites and breathes fire. His love story about a chef and a fish, he says, is also instructive: "You might say it's a recipe for the future of good food. What we need is a radically new conception of agriculture, one in which the food actually tastes good. This is not a small point. You can make a good case for America's weight problem on the idea that our food does not supply us with the nutrition we need, so we eat more to get it. The way out? The merger of pre-industrial agriculture with great cooking. Or, to put it more elegantly: "The ecological choice for food is also the most ethical choice. And, generally, the most delicious choice. Hold this thought. Underline it. It is on the final exam" no, it is the final exam. I mean: for us, for the planet. I'm making the book sound somber. In truth, it's mostly a collection of stories. Brilliant stories, mostly. (The ones you want to skip are in the first section of the book, where you can learn more about soil than you'll ever want to know.) Barber is as gifted a writer as he is a chef; he tells these stories largely in dialogue, as in a novel. Were they all taped? Did Barber rush home to scribble them down? There is no note about the accuracy of these conversations. That may not trouble most readers; it troubles me. I know I bang on about the length of books. "The Third Plate" fills 447 pages. That is "the metaphor is wrong, I know" a very rich meal. I grasp that foodies will devour every word, but this book deserves the widest possible audience, and its completeness works against that. I wish worthy but overstuffed books like this were like DVDs: a studio version and a director's cut that includes scenes that had to be deleted for the sake of a crisp viewer experience. A chef's cut, if you will. Still, give "The Third Plate" four stars. Call it "delicious." Then join a CSA and start doing your part to save the planet and your life.

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