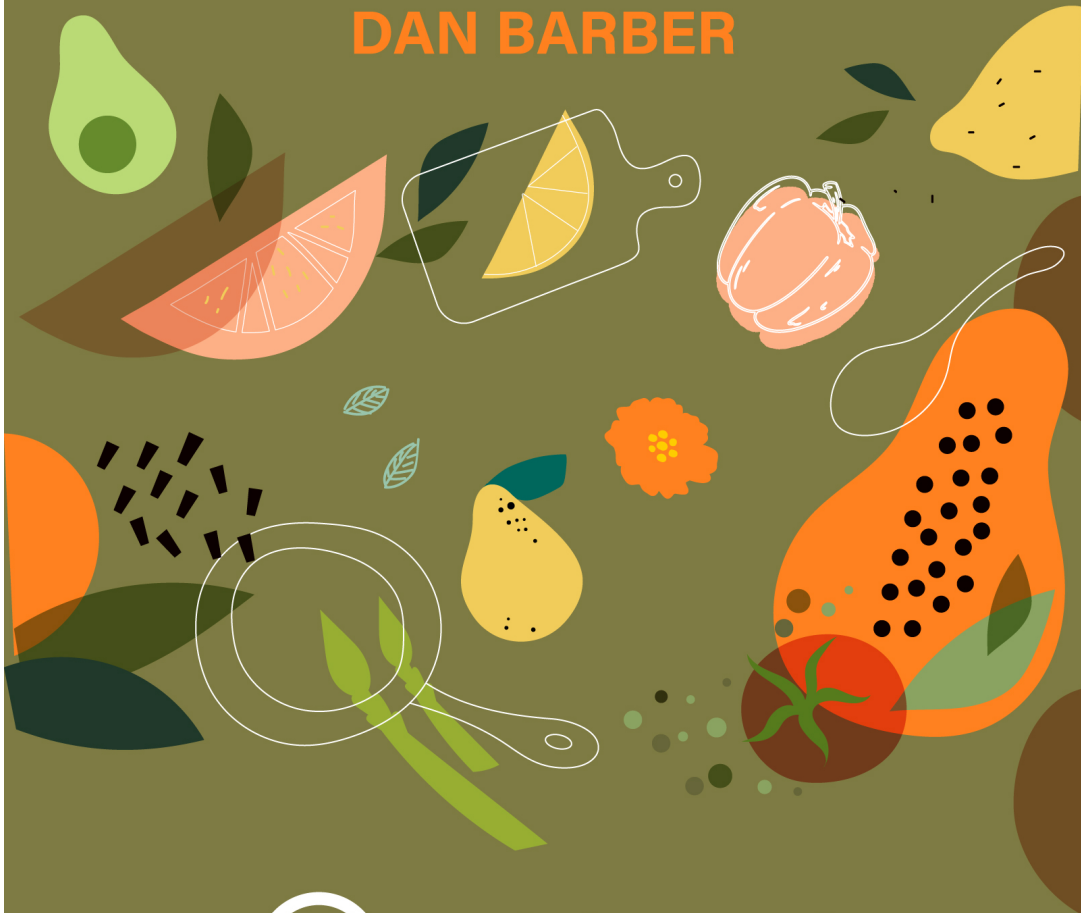


SUMMARY

THE THIRD PLATE

DAN BARBER



Summary of “The Third Plate” by Dan Barber

Written by Alyssa Burnette

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food.

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Introduction

Dan Barber is a big fan of flavor. In fact, to say that Dan Barber is a foodie would be kind of like saying that a whale shark is a fish. In short, it would be a gross oversimplification. Barber is a superior chef and co-owner of the famous five-star restaurant Blue Hill in Manhattan. He's also the founder of the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, an experimental farm designed to shape the conversation on ecology and food culture. *The Third Plate*, therefore, is written as an honest love letter from the heart of a true foodie. Barber doesn't claim to be a self-help guru and he isn't writing to lecture anyone. Nor does he pretend to be an expert on anything other than the causes that are near and dear to his heart. Instead, he writes simply and sincerely about his journey to find taste, truth, and ethics in the food industry. *The Third Plate* follows his search for sustainable and delicious food and outlines his roadmap for making the world a healthier and yummier place.



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What “The Third Plate” Really Means

If you’re a fan of the popular NBC police comedy Brooklyn Nine Nine, you might recall the character of Charles Boyle, who is an avid foodie. Throughout the show’s seven seasons, most of the jokes about Charles’ character center on his penchant for trying bizarre foods like octopus testicles. In one particularly humorous episode, Charles attempts to introduce his friend Jake to fine dining. Upon hearing the menu options, Jake exclaims, “That sounds terrible! Do you have chicken tenders?” And it’s precisely this type of food culture that the author wants to address. Because whether you consider yourself a foodie like Charles or a chicken tender aficionado like Jake, most of us are more concerned with how the food tastes to us than how it impacts the environment.

And it might surprise you to learn that both of the meals described in this example are problematic in their own unique ways. The chicken fingers, for example, are of course processed and unhealthy. But we might assume that fine dining is somehow more ethical or more nutritious because we associate it with being elegant and sophisticated. However, the author argues that nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, contrary to our expectations, exotic dishes can actually be more of a drain on the environment’s resources! In an interview with The New York Times, the author explained that he wrote *The Third Plate* to criticize his own attitudes towards food as well as the food culture which is espoused by most of America. He feels that his position as an acclaimed chef gives him a unique platform with which to address these issues.

As a result, he told interviewers, “We weren’t addressing the larger problem. The larger problem, as I came to see it, was that a farm-to-table philosophy allows, even celebrates, a kind of cherry-picking of ingredients that are often ecologically demanding and expensive to grow.” So, he decided to initiate a direct and immediate change, starting with his restaurant. First, he tried altering the menus. Then he attempted to abolish menus altogether. But neither of these experiments provided him with the solution he was

seeking. As he told The New York Times, this didn't work because "I was still sketching out ideas for dishes first and figuring out what farmers could supply us with later, checking off ingredients as if shopping at a grocery store." And that's how he realized that he wasn't simply trying to revolutionize his restaurant, he was trying to revolutionize the whole system of agriculture. In short, he wanted to initiate a new type of cuisine into the world. And that's exactly what he did. He calls it "the third plate."

Reporter William Grimes aptly summarizes Barber's "third plate" philosophy when he explains that the name originated from another interview, when a "magazine asked Barber to show, in a sketch, what Americans would be eating in 35 years. Mr. Barber drew three plates illustrating the recent evolution of the American diet. The first showed a seven-ounce corn-fed steak with steamed baby carrots. The second reflected the farm-to-table values that Mr. Barber has championed for years, with grass-fed steak and heirloom carrots grown in organic soil. The third plate, a look into the future, offered a slab of carrot "steak" with a sauce of braised second cuts of beef." The difference between these plates was Barber's visual attempt at articulating his vision for the future of food.



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The Danger of Monocultures

What does the term “monoculture” mean to you? If we break it apart linguistically, we know that “mono” means “one,” so a monoculture is a culture characterized by only one thing. We already know that a lack of diversity in human society is never healthy, so it makes sense that the same would be true for plants. And that’s exactly what the author wants to explore in his investigation of monoculture. This term is typically used to describe the phenomenon of planting only one type of crop in a given area and monocultures typically occur when people plant crops like corn or wheat. But why would it be a bad thing to have a field of only wheat or only corn?

It might surprise you to learn that this practice is detrimental because the lack of diversity among the crops places undue strain on the earth and its resources. To flourish, the soil needs to soak up nutrients from a variety of different plants. If an entire field is populated by only one type of plant, the soil’s nutrients will quickly be depleted. So, how can we counteract this problem? The author’s solution draws on the teachings of Native American environmental biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. A member of the Potawatomi tribe, Kimmerer often draws on her heritage to teach important concepts about environmental biology. She frequently relies on one story in particular: the tale of The Three Sisters. The story of The Three Sisters is a Native American parable that has been used to teach the value of sustainability and reciprocity in our attitudes toward food and farming.

As the story goes, there were once three sisters who visited a Native American village in search of food and shelter. The villagers didn’t have much to offer, but they took pity on the sisters and shared everything they had out of the kindness of their hearts. The sisters later revealed that they were the spiritual guardians of three crops: corn, beans, and squash. And to thank the villagers for their kindness, they promised that the villagers would always have a bountiful harvest of each of these three crops. As a result, the villagers always planted corn, beans, and squash together. And not only did they reap a consistently plentiful harvest, they found that their land was

healthier and more fertile as a result. This might sound like a lovely story but the principles of environmental biology have revealed that it's more than just a lovely myth. The mythical guardians of corn, beans, and squash might not exist, but keeping these "sister plants" together is always a good idea. That's because these crops work together, pulling mutually beneficial nutrients from the air and soil and sharing those resources with one another. These shared resources enable the three of them to flourish and the soil is healthier as a result.

However, if you're not an agricultural expert, this might not sound like such a bad thing. So what if the soil isn't all that healthy? You probably don't go through your day worrying about the quality of the soil around you, so why does it matter? Well, the problem with growing plants in a monoculture is that the lack of nutrients in the soil affects the crops. Because the soil has nothing to offer the plants, they must depend on chemical-based fertilizers for their nutrients. That's the equivalent of raising your plants solely on junk food. So, when your plants are raised on an unhealthy diet and you eat the food that is made from those plants, it's not very nutritious and it doesn't taste very good. That's not really what you want for your food, is it? The author knows from personal experience that he doesn't want that in his kitchen. So, he started by experimenting with different growing processes at Stone Barns. All vegetables at Stone Barns are nourished in healthy soil that is bursting with nutrients. And every time he tastes or tests food from his garden, the author has found that his vegetables are both healthier and tastier. This means that he's doing the right thing whether you look at it from the viewpoint of an agronomist or a foodie!

So, from this example, we can see that modern American planters favor monocultures because they are conducive to mass production. If you only grow wheat that needs little in the way of agricultural attention, it's more profitable to harvest and sell that wheat crop in bulk. But in the long run, it's damaging to the soil. And if we continue to prioritize profit over plants, we'll eventually destroy the earth to such an extent that nothing else can grow. But if we embrace indigenous wisdom and return to traditional, sustainable farming practices, we can eliminate monocultures and literally restore the earth.



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The Future of Food

So, now that we've evaluated some problematic food practices and considered some healthier alternatives, it's time to think about what we can do to create a more sustainable future for our food. For example, how will we implement healthy practices in our restaurants and our cooking practices? How will that impact what we eat? To answer this question, the author offers us a first-hand example from his own kitchen: the Rotation Risotto. Most people love a good risotto and it's a staple of fine dining. But it also relies heavily on foods that are typically grown in monocultures, such as wheat or rice. Rotation Risotto, however, is different. In fact, the New York Times called it "a manifesto on a plate." That's because this dish is a tactile summation of the values Barber is trying to articulate. Instead of relying on rice, it utilizes a number of less common grains such as rye, barley, buckwheat and millet.

The author affirms that these substitutions are important because of their impact on the earth. In fact, the dish even gets its name from the practice of growing these crops in rotation. Growing plants in rotation is the opposite of growing in a monoculture because it necessitates a shift in priorities. Rather than growing what is low-maintenance or most profitable, you grow in a cycle that's designed to replenish the earth and give the soil what it needs. When grown in the following order, rye, barley, buckwheat, and millet have the power to cleanse, purify, and rejuvenate the soil in which they grow. In this respect, planters are literally giving back to the earth while they raise their crops!

And as you can see from this example, it wouldn't take much to substitute our standard dishes with a more sustainable alternative. After all, would we really miss the traditional rice of a risotto that much? Probably not. So, why can't we make some small sacrifices to cultivate a more sustainable future? The author argues that we can easily do the same with meat dishes as well by utilizing a method known as "blood to bone." By following this method, chefs would use every single part of any animal that goes into a dish. The

author has already implemented this practice in his own restaurant by breeding Ossabaw pigs. These pigs have a uniquely beneficial relationship with the environment which means that they are also enriching the soil around them as they grow. When the pigs are slaughtered, the author and his team of chefs take care to use every part of the meat in a fashion that enhances both the flavor and sustainability of every dish. His example proves that it's possible to implement "the third plate" model in our daily food practices, so let's do it!



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Final Summary

We already know that our current relationship with food is problematic. Documentaries highlight the epidemic of unhealthy eating in America and the dietary problems we're creating for ourselves. But the author's experience has shown that philosophies like "farm to table" can be problematic in their own right as well. Although we typically associate "farm to table" philosophies with healthy and organic living, the prevalence of monocultures and unhealthy farming practices have placed significant strain on the environment.

However, the author posits that we can eliminate these unsustainable habits and replace them with healthier alternatives. He calls this futuristic farming model "the third plate." By embracing indigenous wisdom and returning to traditional farming methods, the author believes we can cultivate a culture of sustainability through reciprocity. And if we implement rotational farming practices and make a few simple changes to our standard dishes, we can grow food that is healthier, tastier, and more sustainable.



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