



# THE THIRD PLATE

FIELD NOTES ON  
THE FUTURE OF FOOD

DAN  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

## **INTRODUCTION**

A corncob, dried and slightly shriveled, arrived in the mail not long after we opened Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Along with the cob was a check for \$1,000. The explanation arrived the same day, in an e-mail I received from Glenn Roberts, a rare-seeds collector and supplier of specialty grains. Since Blue Hill is part of the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, a multipurpose farm and education center, Glenn wanted my help persuading the vegetable farmer to plant the corn in the spring. He said the corn was a variety called New England Eight Row Flint.

There is evidence, Glenn told me, that Eight Row Flint corn dates back to the 1600s, when, for a time, it was considered a technical marvel. Not only did it consistently produce eight fat rows of kernels (four or five was the norm back then; modern cobs have eighteen to twenty rows), but it also had been carefully selected by generations of Native Americans for its distinctive flavor. By the late 1700s the corn was widely planted in western New England and the lower Hudson Valley, and later it was found as far as southern Italy. But a brutally cold winter in 1816 wiped out the New England crop. Seed reserves were exhausted to near extinction as most of the stockpiled corn went

to feed people and livestock.

The cob Glenn had sent was from a line that had survived for two hundred years in Italy under the name Otto File (“eight rows”), which he hoped to restore to its place of origin. By planting the seed, he wrote, we would be growing “an important and threatened historic flavor of Italy while simultaneously repatriating one of New England’s extinct foodways. Congratulations on your quest, Dan, and thank you for caring.” Glenn added, in case I *didn’t* care, that the Eight Row was “quite possibly the most flavorful polenta corn on the planet, and absolutely unavailable in the U.S.” At harvest he promised another \$1,000. He wanted nothing in return, other than a few cobs to save for seed.

If his offer sounds like a home run for Stone Barns, it was. Here was a chance to recapture a regional variety and to honor a Native American crop with historical significance. For me, it was a chance to cook with an ingredient no other restaurant could offer on its menu (catnip for any chef) and to try the superlative polenta for myself.

Yet I carried the corncob over to Jack Algiere, the vegetable farmer, with little enthusiasm. Jack is not a fan of growing corn, and, with only eight acres of field production on the farm, you can’t blame him for dismissing a plant that demands so much real estate. Corn is needy in other ways, too. It’s glutinous, requiring, for example, large amounts of nitrogen to grow. From the perspective of a vegetable gardener, it’s the biological equivalent of a McMansion.

In the early stages of planning Stone Barns Center, I told Jack about a farmer who was harvesting immature corn for our menu. It was a baby cob, just a few inches long, the kernels not yet visible. You ate the whole cob, which brought to mind the canned baby corn

one finds in a mediocre vegetable stir-fry. Except these tiny cobs were actually tasty. I wanted to impress Jack with the novelty of the idea. He was not impressed.

“You mean your farmer grows the whole stalk and then picks the cobs when they’re still little?” he said, his face suddenly scrunched up, as if he were absorbing a blow to the gut. “That’s nuts.” He bent over and nearly touched the ground with his right hand, then stood up on his toes and, with his left hand, reached up, high above my head, hiking his eyebrows to indicate just how tall a corn’s stalk grows. “Only after all that growth will corn even *begin* to think about producing the cob. That big, thirsty, jolly green giant of a stalk—which *even* when it produces full-size corn has to be among the plant kingdom’s most ridiculous uses of Mother Nature’s energy—and what are *you* getting for all that growth? You’re getting this.” He flashed his pinky finger. “That’s all you’re getting.” He rotated his hand so I could see his finger from all angles. “One tiny, pretty flavorless bite of corn.”



One summer when I was fourteen years old, Blue Hill Farm, my family’s farm in Massachusetts, grew only corn. No one can remember why. But it was the strangest summer. I think back to it now with the same sense of bewilderment I felt as a child encountering the sea of gold tassels where the grass had always been.

Before Blue Hill Farm became a corn farm for a summer, I helped make hay for winter storage from one of the eight pasture fields. We began in early August, loading bales onto a conveyor belt and methodically packing them, Lego-like, into the barn’s stadium-size sec-

ond floor. By Labor Day the room was filled nearly to bursting, its own kind of landscape.

Making hay meant first cutting the grass, which—for me, anyway—meant riding shotgun in a very large tractor for hours each day, crouching silently next to one of the farmers and studying the contours of the fields. And so, by way of no special talent, just repetition, I learned to anticipate the dips and curves in the fields, the muddy, washed-out places, the areas of thick shrubbery and thinned grasses—when to brace for a few minutes of a bumpy ride and when to duck under a protruding branch.

I internalized those bumps and curves the way my grandmother Ann Strauss internalized the bumps and curves of Blue Hill Road by driving it for thirty years. She always seemed to be going to town (to get her hair done) or coming back (from running errands). Sometimes my brother, David, and I were with her, and we used to laugh in the backseat, because Ann (never “Grandma,” never “Grandmother”) rounded the corners in her Chevy Impala at incredible speeds, maneuvering with the ease and fluency of a practiced finger moving over braille. Her head was often cranked to the left or to the right, antennae engaged, inspecting a neighbor’s garden or a renovated screened-in porch. (She sometimes narrated the intrigue happening inside.) During these moments her body took over, autopiloting around corners without having to slow down, swerving slightly to avoid the ditch just beyond Bill Riegleman’s home.

Often, on the last leg of the drive, Ann would tell us the story of how she came to buy the farm in the 1960s, a story she had told a thousand times before. Back then, the property was a dairy operation owned by the Hall brothers, whose family had farmed the land since

the late 1800s.

"You know, I used to walk up this road every week for years; sometimes every day," she would say, as if telling the story for the first time. "I loved Blue Hill Farm more than any place in the world." At the top of Blue Hill Road was four hundred acres of open pasture. "But what a mess! I couldn't believe it, really. They had cows pasturing in the front yard. The house was run-down, and so dirty. They didn't have a front door—climbed in and out through the kitchen window, for heaven's sake. And you know what? I loved it. I loved the fields, I loved the backdrop of blue hills, I loved that I felt like a queen every time I came up here."

Whenever Ann saw the Hall brothers, she would let them know she wanted to buy the farm. "But they just laughed. 'Ms. Strauss,' they'd say, 'this farm's been in our family for three generations. We're never selling.' So I'd return the next week, and they'd say the same thing: 'Never selling.' This went on for many years, until one day I arrived at the farm and one of the brothers came running over, out of breath. 'Ms. Strauss, do you want to buy this farm?' Just like that! I couldn't believe it. He didn't even let me answer. 'This morning my brother and I got into the biggest fight. If we don't sell now, we're going to kill each other.' I said I was interested. For sure I would buy a piece of it. 'Ma'am,' he said, 'we're selling it now—the whole thing, or forget it. Right now.'

"So I said yes. I hadn't even been inside the farmhouse, and I didn't know where the property began and where it ended. But it didn't matter. What else was I going to say? I just knew this was the place."

The dairy part of Blue Hill Farm disappeared with the Hall broth-

ers, but Ann began pasturing beef cattle, because she wanted the fields to remain productive and because she enjoyed showing off the view to her friends; the image of cows dotting the iconic New England landscape is still fit for a coffee table book.

At the time, I didn't know about the importance of preserving that kind of view. I just enjoyed the tractor rides, the look back at the field lined with the long, curving windrows of just-cut grass, and then, as I got older, the hard work of baling and storing hay for the winter.

Which, as it happened, suddenly came to an end because of the summer of corn. The maize invasion meant the cows grazed at another farm, which meant the hours of fixing fences and lugging salt licks and watching the herd lie and chew cud before a rainstorm came to an end, too. And since you don't tend to a field of corn—in the same way you don't really tend to a houseplant—it meant the baler and the hay wagons, the farm interns, the red Ford F-150 pickup truck, the big iced tea jug, and all the sweaty work went with them.

To look out from the front porch at what had always been fields of grass transformed suddenly into amber fields of corn felt not quite right. Same home, new furniture. Endless rows of corn are one of those things that are beautiful to behold at a distance. They tremble in great waves with the slightest breeze, and you think of beauty and abundance. Up close it's a different story. For one thing, the abundance is relative. We can't eat feed corn—I tried to that summer. The enormous cobs line the stalks like loaded missiles, tasting nothing like the sweet stuff we chainsaw through in August. And there's little in the way of beauty. The long, straight rows take on a military-like discipline. They cut across bare soil, hard corners and creased edges replacing the natural contours of the field that I once knew so well.



I handed Jack the Eight Row Flint cob from Glenn and explained the situation, fearing that if the idea of growing corn offended him, the check for \$1,000 might upset him even more. But I was wrong about both.

He loved the idea. “Look,” Jack said to me—and in Jack’s parlance, “Look” is a happy thing to hear. “Look” says: *I know I may have given you some differing opinion in the past, but there are exceptions to my rule, and this is one of them.* “This corn is the rare case of flavor driving genetics,” he said, reminding me of the generations of farmers who had selected and grown Eight Row Flint for its superior flavor, not solely for its yield, as is the case with most modern varieties. “How often do you get to be a part of that in your lifetime?”

So far, so good. But Jack went a step further. He planted the Eight Row Flint like the Iroquois planted most of their corn—alongside dry beans and squash, a companion planting strategy called the Three Sisters. On the continuum of farming practices, Three Sisters is at the opposite end from how corn is typically grown, with its military-row monocultures and chemical-fed soil. The logic is to carefully bundle crops into relationships that benefit each other, the soil, and the farmer. The beans provide the corn with nitrogen (legumes draw nitrogen from the air into the soil); the corn stalk provides a natural trellis for the climbing beans (so Jack wouldn’t need to stake the beans); and the squash, planted around the base of the corn and the beans, suppresses weeds and offers an additional vegetable to harvest in the late fall.

It was a masterful idea—mimicking the successful Native American strategy while taking out a small insurance policy on the Eight Row Flint. Even if the corn failed to germinate, Jack could still harvest the other crops, and in the meantime he'd show visitors to the Stone Barns Center a valuable historical farming technique. And yet I couldn't help but feel skeptical as I watched him plant the corn kernels and companion seeds into mounds of rich soil. I had nothing against honoring agricultural traditions, but I didn't need a sisterhood of beneficial relationships. I needed a polenta with phenomenal flavor.

As luck would have it (or maybe it was the sisterhood, after all), the Eight Row Flint had nearly perfect germination. Following the harvest in late September, Jack hung the corn upside down in a shed and waited for the moisture to evaporate. By late November, just in time for the long winter march of root vegetables, he triumphantly set a dried cob on my desk. It looked nearly too perfect, like a prop for an elementary-school production of the First Thanksgiving.

"Voilà!" he said, so pleased with himself he seemed to wriggle with the sheer joy of it. "They're ready to go. Tell me when you want them."

"Today!" I was feeding off Jack's energy. "We'll make polenta and then . . ." And then I realized something I hadn't considered: the corn needed to be ground. I didn't have a mill.

The truth is that I had never really considered the corncob behind the cornmeal. It hadn't crossed my mind once in twenty years of preparing polenta. Polenta was polenta. Of course I knew it came from corn, just as I knew bread came from wheat. Beyond the obvious, I had never needed to know more.

A week later, just before dinner service, our new tabletop grinder arrived. The engine whirred as it pulverized the kernels into a finely milled dust. I toasted the ground maize lightly and cooked it right away in water and salt. I'd like to say I cooked the Eight Row Flint the way Native Americans cooked it, stirring a clay pot all day with a wooden spoon over an open hearth. But the pot was carbonized steel, the spoon metal, and the hearth an induction cooktop that heats by magnetic force. It didn't matter. Before long the polenta was smooth and shiny. I continued stirring, which is when suddenly the pot began smelling like a steaming, well-buttered ear of corn. It wasn't just the best polenta of my life. It was polenta I hadn't imagined possible, so *corny* that breathing out after swallowing the first bite brought another rich shot of corn flavor. The taste didn't so much disappear as slowly, begrudgingly fade. It was an awakening. But the question for me was: Why? How had I assumed all those years that polenta smelled of nothing more than dried meal? It's really not too much to ask of polenta to actually taste like the corn. But back then, I couldn't have imagined the possibility until it happened. Jack's planting strategy, as artful as a sonnet, combined with the corn's impeccable genetics, changed how I thought about good food, and good cooking.

With remarkable, almost ironic regularity, I have found myself repeating this kind of experience. Different farm, different farmer, same narrative arc. I am reminded that truly flavorful food involves a recipe more complex than anything I can conceive in the kitchen. A bowl of polenta that warms your senses and lingers in your memory becomes as straightforward as a mound of corn and as complex as the system that makes it run. It speaks to something beyond the crop, the cook, or the farmer—to the entirety of the landscape, and how it fits

together. It can best be expressed in places where good farming and delicious food are inseparable.

This book is about these stories.



If that sounds like a chronicle of a farm-to-table chef, it is—sort of.

Blue Hill has been defined by that term since Jonathan Gold, the head reviewer for *Gourmet* magazine, called us a farm-to-table restaurant just a few months after we opened Blue Hill in New York City in the spring of 2000. He visited our Greenwich Village restaurant on a night when asparagus was everywhere on the menu. It might have been because of the achingly short asparagus season, or because they were at the height of their flavor. Or because they had been grown locally and driven down to the city by Hudson Valley family farmers.

It was all of these things, but it was something much more straightforward, too. After returning from the farmers' market that morning and unloading a mountain of asparagus packed into the trunk of a yellow cab, I discovered another mountain of them already in the walk-in refrigerator—a week's worth, at least—and went into a rage about the disorganization in the kitchen. How could the market order have included asparagus when we were already overloaded? I had the cooks clean out the refrigerator and prep the cases of asparagus that were piled high and getting old. And I told them that they had to be used in every dish. I must have sounded serious, because they appeared in *every* dish. Halibut with leeks and asparagus, duck with artichokes and asparagus, chicken with mushrooms and asparagus. The asparagus soup that night even had the addition of roasted

asparagus floating on its surface.

Instead of writing with puzzlement at the asparagus blitzkrieg, Jonathan Gold celebrated what he misinterpreted as intent. “What does it mean to be a farm-oriented restaurant in New York City?” he wrote as the opening line for the review, describing Blue Hill as a true representation of farm-to-table cooking. Farm-to-table is now a much abused descriptor, but back then the review pithily defined who we were, before we even knew who we were.



*Farm-to-table* has since gone from a fringe idea to a mainstream social movement. Its success comes with mounting evidence that our country’s indomitable and abundant food system, for so long the envy of the world, is unstable, if not broken. Eroding soils, falling water tables for irrigation, collapsing fisheries, shrinking forests, and deteriorating grasslands represent only a handful of the environmental problems wrought by our food system—problems that will continue to multiply with rising temperatures.

Our health has suffered, too. Rising rates of food-borne illnesses, malnutrition, and diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes are traced, at least in part, to our mass production of food. The warnings are clear: because we eat in a way that undermines health and abuses natural resources (to say nothing of the economic and social implications), the conventional food system cannot be sustained.

Fixtures of agribusiness such as five-thousand-acre grain monocultures and bloated animal feedlots are no more the future of farming than eighteenth-century factories billowing black smoke are the future of manufacturing. Though most of the food we eat still comes

from agriculture that's mired in this mind-set—extract more, waste more—the pulse of common sense suggests this won't last. It will, in the words of the environmental writer Aldo Leopold, “die of its own too-much.”

Farm-to-table—whose enthusiasts are called artisanal eaters and locavores—took root as the new food movement’s answer to the conventional food system. It was also, undeniably, a reaction against a global food economy that erodes cultures and cuisines. It’s about seasonality, locality, and direct relationships with your farmer. It’s also about better-tasting food, which is why chefs have been so influential in broadening the movement. Most chefs support the farmers’ market for the same reason that most doctors are drawn to prenatal care. As someone whose job it is to address the end result, how can you not care about the beginning? A growing number of chefs have joined the ranks of activists advancing the agenda of changing our food system.



The idea of chef as activist is a relatively new one.

It was the nouvelle cuisine chefs of the 1960s who, breaking with an onerous tradition of classic French cuisine, stepped out of the confines of the kitchen and launched modern gastronomy. They created new styles of cooking based on seasonal flavors, smaller portions, and artistic plating. In doing so, they established the authority of the chef, giving him a platform of influence that has only continued to expand.

Fifty years later, chefs are known for their ability to create fashions and shape markets. What appears on a menu in a white-table-cloth restaurant one day trickles down to the bistro the next, and

eventually influences everyday food culture. After Wolfgang Puck reimagined pizza in the 1980s at his fine-dining restaurant Spago, in Los Angeles—smoked salmon instead of tomatoes; crème fraîche instead of cheese—gourmet pizza spread to every corner of America, eventually culminating in the supermarket frozen food aisle. We now have the power to quickly popularize certain products and ingredients—in some cases, as with certain fish, to the point of commercial extinction—and increasingly we do, with dizzying speed and effect. But we also possess the potential to get people to rethink their eating habits.

Which is where farm-to-table chefs have been most effective. Today the message has gone viral, highlighting the perils of our nation's diet and exposing the connections between how we eat and our heavy environmental footprint. We raise money for school lunch programs and nutrition education and shed light on the real costs of processed and packaged food. Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* are on our cookbook shelves, as much for reference as for inspiration. In Berry's words, we understand that eating “is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used.”



And yet, for all the movement's successes, and the accompanying shift in popular consciousness, the gains haven't changed, in any fundamental way, the political and economic forces shaping how most of the food in this country is grown or raised.

Nor, for that matter, have they changed the culture of American

cooking. Americans have more opportunities to opt out of the conventional food chain than ever before (farmers' markets are ubiquitous; organic food is widely available) and more information about how to do it (innumerable cooking shows and easy access to a world of online recipes), but the food culture—the *way* we eat, which is different than *what* we eat—has remained largely unaffected.

How *do* we eat? Mostly with a heavy hand. For a long time, the prototypical American meal has featured a choice cut—like a seven-ounce steak or a boneless, skinless chicken breast or a fillet of salmon—and a small side of vegetables or grains. The architecture of this plate has shifted little throughout the years. It's become a distinctly American expectation of what's for dinner, seven days a week, every week of the year, protein-centric proof that our nation can produce staggering amounts of food.

And it persists even among the most forward-thinking farm-to-table advocates. That much became clear to me on a summer night just a year after we opened Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Standing in the kitchen a few minutes into the beginning of service and staring down at a collection of newly sauced entrées ready for the dining room, I experienced what I think ranks as a revelation. I started asking myself a series of questions that took a turn toward abstraction. Among them was: *Is a restaurant menu really sustainable?*



Chefs are often asked how their menus are created, especially how new dishes come into existence. Some of us are inspired by a favorite food from childhood, or we're drawn to rethinking classic preparations. A new kitchen tool may spark an idea, or a visit to the museum.

As with anything creative, it's tough to pinpoint the origin, but whatever the process, the scaffolding for the idea forms first; assembling the ingredients comes later.

We forget that for most of human history, it happened the other way around. We foraged and then, out of sheer necessity, transformed what we found into something else—something more digestible and storable, with better nutrition and flavor. Farm-to-table restaurants promote their menus as having evolved in that order: forage first—maybe with a morning's stroll through the farmers' market—and create later. The promise of farm-to-table cooking is that menus take their shape from the constraints of local agriculture and celebrate them.

Blue Hill at Stone Barns was conceived with that promise of further shortening the food chain. David Rockefeller, grandson of patriarch John D. Rockefeller, set out to preserve a memory—the place where he sipped warm milk from the lid of the milking jug. (The Normandy-style structures were built in the 1930s as part of the family's old eighty-acre dairy farm, twenty miles north of New York City.) He was also intent on making a tangible tribute to his late wife, Peggy, who raised breeding cattle on the farm and founded the American Farmland Trust to curb the loss of productive farmland.

Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, along with the restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns, opened in the spring of 2004. Mr. Rockefeller donated the land and funded the renovation of the barns into an educational center, a place that he and his daughter Peggy Du-lany envisioned would promote local agriculture with programs for children and adults. He also funded a working farm. Vegetables and fruits are managed by Jack, who oversees a 23,000-square-foot

greenhouse and an eight-acre outdoor production field. The animals—pigs, sheep, chickens, geese, and honeybees—rotate around the more than twenty acres of pasture and woodlands, under the direction of Craig Haney, the livestock manager.

Take the harvests from the Stone Barns fields just outside the kitchen window, or from farms within a radius of a hundred or so miles, and incorporate them into the menu. How much more farm-to-table can you get?



But during that summer evening, the shortsightedness of the system—and perhaps the reason farm-to-table has failed to transform the way most of our food is grown in this country—suddenly seemed obvious. In just the first few minutes of a busy dinner service, we had already sold out of a new entrée of grass-fed lamb chops.

For much of that month, I had been preparing the waiters for the farm's first lamb—a Finn-Dorset breed fed only grass. The waiters learned about Craig's intensive pasture management, about how the sheep were moved twice a day onto the choicest grass, and how the chickens followed the sheep to help ensure even better grass for the next time around. It was among the more interesting things happening on the farm, if not the most delicious.

To honor the addition of lamb to the menu, we carefully sketched out a new dish, which included roasted zucchini and a minted puree made with the skins. I visited the farmers' market on an early-morning sweep to supplement whatever zucchini Jack promised to harvest.

That night, the waiters (convincing as waiters tend to be when they get their hands on a good story) succeeded in selling the lamb

chops to each one of those first tables, sometimes to every diner at the table. There are sixteen individual chops per lamb. We had three animals, so forty-eight chops were ready for roasting, three to a plate. After months of work, years of grass management, a four-hour round-trip to the slaughterhouse, and a butcher breaking down the animals with the patience and skill of a surgeon, we had sold out in the time it takes to eat a hot dog.



Craig's lamb chops were replaced with grass-fed lamb chops from another farm. Diners, unaware of what they were missing, were happy. So where was the problem? A year into the life of Stone Barns, the farm's harvests were better than expected, the restaurant was busier than we'd anticipated, and our network of local farmers was expanding. With my sudden qualms about our tactics, I might have been accused of looking for the hole in the doughnut.

And yet, the night of the lamb-chop sellout, I began to think that the hole in our doughnut was the menu itself, or our Western conception of it, which still obeyed the conventions of a protein-centric diet. Sure, our meat was grass-fed (and our chicken free-range, and our fish line-caught) and our vegetables local and, for the most part, organic. But we were still trying to fit into an established system of eating, based on the hegemony of the choicest cuts. By cooking with grass-fed lamb and by supporting local farmers, we were opting out of the conventional food chain, shortening food miles, and working with more flavorful food. But we weren't addressing the larger problem. The larger problem, as I came to see it, is that farm-to-table allows, even celebrates, a kind of cherry-picking of ingredients that are

often ecologically demanding and expensive to grow. Farm-to-table chefs may claim to base their cooking on whatever the farmer's picked that day (and I should know, since I do it often), but whatever the farmer has picked that day is really about an expectation of what will be purchased that day. Which is really about an expected way of eating. It forces farmers into growing crops like zucchini and tomatoes (requiring lots of real estate and soil nutrients) or into raising enough lambs to sell mostly just the chops, because if they don't, the chef, or even the enlightened shopper, will simply buy from another farmer.

Farm-to-table may sound right—it's direct and connected—but really the farmer ends up servicing the table, not the other way around. It makes good agriculture difficult to sustain.

We did away with the menus a year later. Instead diners were presented with a list of ingredients. Some vegetables, like peas, made multiple appearances throughout the meal. Others, like rare varieties of lettuce, became part of a shared course for the table. Lamb rack for a six-top; lamb brain and belly for a table of two. No obligations. No prescribed protein-to-vegetable ratios. We merely outlined the possibilities. The list was evidence that the farmers dictated the menu. I was thrilled.

And then, after several years of experimenting, I wasn't. My cooking did not amount to any radical paradigm shift. 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.

Over time, I recognized that abandoning the menu wasn't enough. I wanted an organizing principle, a collection of dishes instead of a

laundry list of ingredients, reflecting a whole system of agriculture—a cuisine, in other words.



The very best cuisines—French, Italian, Indian, and Chinese, among others—were built around this idea. In most cases, the limited offerings of peasant farming meant that grains or vegetables assumed center stage, with a smattering of meat, most often lesser cuts such as neck or shank. Classic dishes emerged—pot-au-feu in French cuisine, polenta in Italian, paella in Spanish—to take advantage of (read: make delicious) what the land could supply.

The melting pot of American cuisine did not evolve out of this philosophy. Despite the natural abundance—or, rather, as many historians argue, because of the abundance—we were never forced into a more enlightened way of eating. Colonial agriculture took root in the philosophy of extraction. Conquer and tame nature rather than work in concert with nature. The exploitative relationship was made possible by the availability of large quantities of enormously productive land.

Likewise, American cooking was characterized, from the beginning, by its immoderation—large amounts of meat and starch that grossly outweighed the small portions of fruits and vegetables. None of it was prepared with special care. In 1877, Juliet Corson, the head of the New York Cooking School, lamented the wastefulness of American cooks. “In no other land,” she wrote, “is there such a profusion of food, and certainly in none is so much wasted from sheer ignorance, and spoiled by bad cooking.” A real food culture—that way of eating—never evolved into something recognizable, and

where it did, it was not preserved. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the great gastronome who famously said, “Tell me what you eat: I will tell you who you are,” would have found that difficult to do here.

With few ingrained food habits, Americans are among the least tradition-bound of food cultures, easily swayed by fashions and influences from other countries. That’s been a blessing, in some ways: we are freer to try new tastes and invent new styles and methods of cooking. The curse is that, without a golden age in farming, and with a history that lacks a strong model for good eating, the values of true sustainability don’t penetrate our food culture. Today’s chefs create and follow rules that are so flexible they’re really more like traffic signals—there to be observed but just as easily ignored. Which is why it’s difficult to imagine farm-to-table cooking shaping the kind of food system we want for the future.

What kind of cooking will?



In a roundabout way, I was confronted with that question not long ago. A food magazine asked a group of chefs, editors, and artists to imagine what we’ll be eating in thirty-five years. The request was to sketch just one plate of food and make it illustrative of the future.

It brought out dystopian visions. Most predicted landscapes so denuded that we will be forced to eat down the food chain—all the way down, to insects, seaweed, and even pharmaceutical pills. I found myself sketching out something more hopeful. My one plate morphed into three, a triptych tracing the recent (and future) evolution of American dining.

The first plate was a seven-ounce corn-fed steak with a small side

of vegetables (I chose steamed baby carrots)—in other words, the American expectation of dinner for much of the past half-century. It was never an enlightened or particularly appetizing construction, and at this point it's thankfully passé.

The second plate represented where we are now, infused with all the ideals of the farm-to-table movement. The steak was grass-fed, the carrots were now a local heirloom variety grown in organic soil. Inasmuch as it reflected all of the progress American food has experienced in the past decade, the striking thing about the second plate was that it looked nearly identical to the first.

Finally, the third plate kept with the steak-dinner analogy—only this time, the proportions were reversed. In place of a hulking piece of protein, I imagined a carrot steak dominating the plate, with a sauce of braised second cuts of beef.

The point wasn't to suggest that we'll be reduced to eating meat only in sauces, or that vegetable steaks are the future of food. It was to predict that the future of cuisine will represent a paradigm shift, a new way of thinking about cooking and eating that defies Americans' ingrained expectations. I was looking toward a new cuisine, one that goes beyond raising awareness about the provenance of ingredients and—like all great cuisines—begins to reflect what the landscape can provide.

Since the best of them coevolved over thousands of years, tethered to deep cultural traditions and mores, how does one begin building a cuisine? In other words, how does the *Third Plate* go from imaginable to edible?



That question was not the starting point for this book; it is something that has evolved in the writing of it. I started, instead, with farmers, and with experiences like that Eight Row Flint polenta that challenged my assumptions as a chef and taught me, again and again, that truly delicious food is contingent on an entire system of agriculture.

To get a handle on what kind of cooking best supported this, I needed to uncover something more basic: What kind of farming is this? Local? Organic? Biodynamic? I learned that it goes beyond labels. It requires something broad to explain it. Lady Eve Balfour, one of the earliest organic farming pioneers, said that the best kind of farming could not be reduced to a set of rules. Her advice was prescient. She lived before organic agriculture became defined by just that—a set of rules—and before farming methods were used as marketing tools. The farming that produces the kind of food we really want to eat, she believed, depends “on the attitude of the farmer.”

That’s frustratingly vague advice, and yet I came to understand Lady Balfour’s idea when I heard one farmer speak about the ultimate goal of good farming. “We need to grow nature,” he said, and in doing so he revealed more than an insight. He was articulating an attitude, a worldview, and he might well have been speaking on behalf of all the farmers in this book.

To *grow nature* is to encourage more of it. That’s not easy to do. More nature means less control. Less control requires a certain kind of faith, which is where the worldview comes into play. Do you see the natural world as needing modification and improvement, or do you see it as something to be observed and interpreted? Do you view humans as a small part of an unbelievably complicated and fragile system, or do you view us as the commanders? The farmers in this

book are observers. They listen. They don't exert control.

It's hard to label these farmers, because it's hard to label an attitude, which was Lady Balfour's point. When King Lear asks the blind Gloucester how he sees the world, Shakespeare has him say, "I see it feelingly." The farmers in this book see their worlds feelingly.



If the future of delicious food is in the hands of farmers who *grow nature* and abide by its instructions, we ought to become more literate about what that means. By and large, we tend to calculate sustainability based on the surface level of agriculture. We take what is measurable (increases in the use of pesticide and fertilizers, inhumane conditions in animal feedlots) and push alternatives (buy organic, choose grass-fed beef). These things are easy to quantify. They are things you can see.

The farmers in this book farm one level down. They don't think in terms of cultivating one thing. If your worldview is that everything is connected to something else, why would you? Instead, they *grow nature* by orchestrating a whole system of farming. And they produce a lot of things—delicious food, to be sure, but also things we can't easily measure or see. I learned this lesson many times, whether in wetlands or pastures. I was introduced to the kind of jam-packed diversity, both above and below ground, that I had read about but never really understood. It changed dramatically, and not only from farm to farm but from field to field. Each living community was vast, complex, and critical to the health of the whole system.

Had I been given a tour of Blue Hill Farm's fields during that summer of corn—or any monoculture field anywhere in the world,

really—I would have discovered little to write about. Monocultures do that. They impoverish life and all its fantastic little ecosystems. They depopulate landscapes.

I confess I kept getting pulled into visiting the farms in this book because I was in pursuit of how an ingredient was grown or raised—whether it was flint corn, whole wheat, a fattened goose liver, or a fillet of fish. I went in search of answers to practical questions. A core finding of my experiences was that I was asking the wrong questions. Each time I tried to parse the specifics of how something was grown, I was instead pointed in the opposite direction: to the interactions and relationships among all the parts of the farm and then, with more time, to the interactions and relationships embedded in the culture and history of the place.

I was learning what John Muir, the American environmentalist, observed a century ago: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” Or rather, I was *relearning* what I’d discovered with that summer of corn, which supplanted the natural contours of the farm, stripped away the community of farmers, tractors, and hay bales—what Wendell Berry called the “culture” in agriculture—and left me without much of a summer.

Science teaches us that the answer to understanding the complexity of something is to break it into component parts. Like classical cooking, it insists that things need to be precisely measured and weighed. But interactions and relationships—what Muir called hitching, and we call ecology—cannot be measured or weighed. I found, for example, that the health of an aquaculture farm in southern Spain is connected to how we treat our soil, and that how we treat our soil determines, to a considerable extent, how we grow our grain, espe-

cially wheat, which is impossible to separate from how we choose our bread.

What we refer to as the beginning and end of the *food chain*—a field on a farm at one end, a plate of food at the other—isn’t really a chain at all. The food chain is actually more like a set of Olympic rings. They all hang together. Which is how I came to understand that the right kind of cooking and the right kind of farming are one and the same. Our belief that we can create a sustainable diet for ourselves by cherry-picking great ingredients is wrong. Because it’s too narrow-minded. We can’t think about changing parts of our system. We need to think about redesigning the system.

A good place to start is with a new conception of a plate of food, a *Third Plate*—which is less a “plate,” per se, than a different way of cooking, or assembling a dish, or writing a menu, or sourcing ingredients—or really all these things. It combines tastes not based on convention, but because they fit together to support the environment that produced them. The *Third Plate* goes beyond raising awareness about the importance of farmers and sustainable agriculture. It helps us recognize that what we eat is part of an integrated whole, a web of relationships, that cannot be reduced to single ingredients. It champions a whole class of integral, yet uncelebrated, crops and cuts of meat that is required to produce the most delicious food. Like all great cuisines, it is constantly in flux, evolving to reflect the best of what nature can offer.

And its realization will rely, at least in part, on chefs. They will play a leading role, similar to that of a musical conductor. The chef as conductor is an easy comparison: we stand at the front of the kitchen, cueing the orchestra, cajoling and negotiating, assembling disparate

elements into something complete. I'm not the first to make the association. And yet there's a deeper, more interesting level of work related to the job of conducting, and it may inform the role of the chef for the future. This is the behind-the-scenes work, the preconcert study that investigates the history of the composition, its meaning and context. Once that's been determined, a narrative takes hold, and the job of the conductor is to interpret that story through the music. One could say that a cuisine is to a chef what a musical score is to a conductor. It offers the guidelines for the creation of something immediate—a concert, a meal—that will also ultimately be woven into the fabric of memory.

Today's food culture has given chefs a platform of influence, including the power, if not the luxury, to innovate. As arbiters of taste, we can help inspire a Third Plate, a new way of eating that puts it all together.

That's a tall order for any chef, not to mention eaters, but it's an intuitive one as well. Because, as the stories in this book suggest, it always takes the shape of delicious food. Truly great flavor—the kind that produces plain old jaw-dropping wonder—is a powerful lens into the natural world because taste breaks through the delicate things we can't see or perceive. Taste is a soothsayer, a truth teller. And it can be a guide in reimagining our food system, and our diets, from the ground up.