

Food Fight: Dishing Up Controversy

By Mimi Sheraton

It seems that every generation thinks it invented the wheel and, one might add, that it is the first faced with certain dispiriting problems. Among those perennial problems, few issues seem as critical today as those pertaining to our food: the sustainability of its production, its equitable distribution and availability, and its effects on our health and well-being. Almost equal to the ink devoted to the aesthetic and social aspects of food whether in home-cooking (i.e. recipes), or eating out (restaurant and consumer food sources), is that spent detailing the obfuscations and corruptions that exist as part of the political and economic systems of food production. That is no surprise considering how vital food is to life and how dependent we are on the many vested interests that stand between the producer and the consumer.

Many of the issues we have today were already chronicled by Athenanus, the Greek who lived in 200 A.D. and wrote “The Deipnosophists: or The Banquet of the Learned.” In this fictionalized account of conversations held over lavish banquets, which featured many real local citizens as characters, Athenanus reports not only on aesthetic discussions, but many discussions related to the adulteration of foods, as in the breads of ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt. The Old Testament contains warnings about watered wine and impure olive oil, food sustainability, and its equitable availability. As proscribed in Exodus 23:11, farmers are admonished to let a portion of their land lie fallow every seven years so the poor could take whatever grew without payment. But that ruling also allowed the soil to renew itself by lying fallow for a year, an agricultural law that continues in present day Israel.

With an awareness of this – of what goes around, comes around – each of the four themes in this series covers a different aspect of these persistent food-related problems:

The ongoing corruption of food production and exploitation of labor in the Chicago stockyards is the subject of *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair’s influential 1906 novel. One of the so-called muckrakers of that era, Sinclair and others inspired such federal

legislation as the Pure Food and Drug Act and other anti-business laws pioneered by then president Theodore Roosevelt.

Among the most formidable present-day muckrakers is Marion Nestle, the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health and Professor of Sociology at New York University. Her revealing book, *Food Politics*, is a detailed account of ways in which the food industry, through political contributions and lobbying, influences government policies on food and nutrition.

Another persistent issue touched on in this series is the sustainability of the planet's food supply, particularly in light of the Earth's ever-increasing population and potentially devastating climactic changes. In short, the over consumption of high quality food resources by the rich occurs consistently to the detriment of the poor. A pioneer on this subject is France Moore Lappé, whose 1971 book, *Diet For A Small Planet* began, as its own blurb claims, a revolution in the way Americans eat. (Well, maybe some Americans, but hardly enough.) Now in its 20th anniversary edition, *Diet For A Small Planet* is a practical guide, recipes and all, to more responsible and, not incidentally, healthful meal planning.

“Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants” is by the famed mantra of Michael Pollan who, in addition to the book included in this series, *In Defense of Food*, is a regular advocate on the need to establish responsible eating. This book along with several others by Pollan, tell the reader not only why they should strive to eat well, but how.

A third theme included in this series relates to both fashionable and genuine concerns about health and diet. This subject has inspired as much chicanery as it has genuine, scientifically-based advice. Diets have fostered almost as many extreme cults as religion. Thankfully, however, sometimes diet fads have actual results.

One of the most entertaining books on the subject of health fads is T.C. Boyle's hilarious and nerve-wracking 1994 novel, *The Road to Wellville*. This novel is an account of the over-the-top spa and food regimens devised by John Harvey Kellogg, the creator of Corn Flakes, which gave rise to the now ubiquitous dry cereals we have all eaten.

Diet Cults by Matt Fitzgerald presents an even darker side of food extremism by way of describing the many fallacious principles behind some of the more bizarre eating regimens, including the currently fashionable Atkins and Paleo diets.

No book could be more appropriate to this discussion than Dan Barber's *The Third Table: Field Notes on the Future of Food*. A chef-restaurateur who creates delectable dishes straight from his heart, mind and soul, Barber combines ingredients that he thinks are natural, sustainable, locally sourced, and compatible, rather than relying on culinary tradition or pure, abstract aesthetics. This is his "third table." Barber began this crusade in his Manhattan restaurant Blue Hill, but is able to realize his ambitions to an even greater extent at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Upstate New York, which is part of the non-profit farm and educational foundation, Stone Barns Center for Food & Agriculture. Barber's aim is to find, raise, and use the most efficient ingredients. For example, he has championed the rebirth of many varieties of seeds that had fallen out of use. His efforts and results are recounted in the chapters, "Soil," "Land," "Sea," and "Seed."

If one wanted to anoint a patron saint of responsible eating there could be no better choice than Dan Barber.