

Dan Barber

Silver Spoon *Food Arts* presents the December 2006 SILVER SPOON AWARD for sterling performance to **Dan Barber**, the chef whose ongoing dialogue between city and country has pushed the ecological/ethical food movement from a softly focused nostalgic longing to the nuts-and-bolts high-tech reality of the 21st century. As the chef/co-owner of **Blue Hill** in New York City and **Blue Hill at Stone Barns** on David Rockefeller's estate in Pocantico Hills, New York, Barber has applied the principles of local, sustainable agriculture to two for-profit restaurants, financially benefiting both his businesses and the farms that supply them.

"I go to great lengths to know where my food is coming from, who's growing it, and how it's getting to us," says the 37 year old Barber, a New Yorker who was rusticated during childhood summers spent on his grandmother's Blue Hill Farm in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. "I'm in the right place at the right time because all of sudden people are interested in how food choices are affecting their health, their communities, and the environment. I'm riding a wave started by others, taking their lead and implementing it beyond the call of duty."

Since opening at Stone Barns in 2004, four years after his city startup, Barber has been insistent on two points: a workable economic symbiosis between the nonprofit farm that's part of the property's Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture (of which he serves as creative director for its educational programs) and that the restaurant exist as a modern entity in decor, service, and cooking techniques (such as sous-vide), not as a "throwback supporting some sort of Shaker village." He's scored on both aspects, although he can't shake the perception that the restaurant is a Rockefeller-supported toy chest that has free-range access to the produce and livestock raised in the fields surrounding it.

"We buy what we can get at fair-market value from the farm, and that's expensive from a farm in Westchester County," notes Barber, adding that his bottom line often forces him to purchase elsewhere. "This is not Disneyland. The farm charges what it needs to survive."

After graduating from Tufts, Barber contemplated his future while kneading bread at **La Brea Bakery** in Los Angeles, "where I learned the fantasy of what I was doing is different than the reality." Lesson learned, he cut his teeth in restaurants from Santa Monica to Paris, learned the dos and don'ts at The French Culinary Institute in New York City, toiled at the original **Bouley** (NYC), and worked as chef of a downtown bistro while starting a catering company that was cossetting blue-chip clients in no time flat. A search for a bigger kitchen led him to the Blue Hill space in Greenwich Village. Success has brought him the James Beard Award this year as the top chef in New York City and bylined columns on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*.

For Barber, farm life is one thing, what's done in the kitchen is another. "I don't want my cooking to be perceived as a precious example of what's been lost over the last century."

Not to worry. It isn't.

—JIM PORIS

