

SPECIAL HOME ISSUE

PLUS  
20 COOL  
DESIGN IDEAS

# Town & Country

ESTABLISHED IN 1846

## DESIGNS FOR FAMILY LIVING

**L.A.**  
KEEPING  
IT NATURAL

**DALLAS**  
LOVING  
THE MODERN  
LOOK

**NEW YORK  
CITY**  
COOKING  
FOR A CROWD

**BERKSHIRES**  
RENEWING  
A FAMILY FARM



OCTOBER 2009

\$4.50

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L.A. interior design  
by Alexander  
Michael Miscan  
with son

# THE BARBERS OF BLUE HILL

Who's on the farm? Just us chickens.... Aidan (far left) and Jacob Barber gather the day's yield with their mom, Laureen, before heading up to the hayloft in the family's Berkshires barn (opposite), where their father, David (left), and uncle Dan watch over a growing herd of dairy cows.



IN THE  
BERKSHIRES,  
RESTAURATEURS  
**DAN AND  
DAVID BARBER**  
RECONNECT  
WITH THE FAMILY  
FARM THEY LOVED  
AS CHILDREN,  
CHALLENGING  
THEMSELVES  
TO REMAKE  
IT FOR THE NEXT  
GENERATION.

By Anthony Barzilay Freund

Photographs by  
William Abranowicz



Laureen, the Blue Hill restaurants' design director, enjoys a solo walk back to the barn.



IT'S A SANCTUARY ON WEEKENDS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, WHEN THE LANDSCAPE IS DOTTED WITH BARBER KIN AND COMPANY.

lightly smoked, with local shellfish, curried almonds and tomato "clouds," or braised 'Violetta di Firenze' eggplant with "this morning's egg" and eggplant broth. In May, at its annual awards ceremony, the James Beard Foundation anointed him the nation's outstanding chef for his palate-thrilling farm-to-table cuisine; in the same month he was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people. He's frequently been called his generation's Alice Waters, furthering a culinary revolution that places the highest value on regional, sustainably grown ingredients.

David, three years older than his brother, runs the business side of the operation. He's also Blue Hill's gregarious front man, who can often be found in the restaurants, meeting, greeting and charming patrons (among them: President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, who famously stopped by for a meal during a late-spring date night in New York City). Then there's Laureen, David's wife and the restaurants' design director. She oversees every

**IN FICTION**, the storyteller first sets the scene. If it is done well, his characters will spring from that vivid landscape seemingly inevitably. This is usually the case in real life, too: who and what we become as adults can be largely determined by the paths we roamed as kids. It's not difficult, then, to picture how Dan and David Barber, small boys racing along the rutted dirt roads of their maternal grandmother's Blue Hill Farm, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, ended up as the proprietors first of the celebrated Blue Hill restaurant, which opened in New York City's Greenwich Village in 2000, and later of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, twenty miles up the Hudson River in Pocantico Hills.

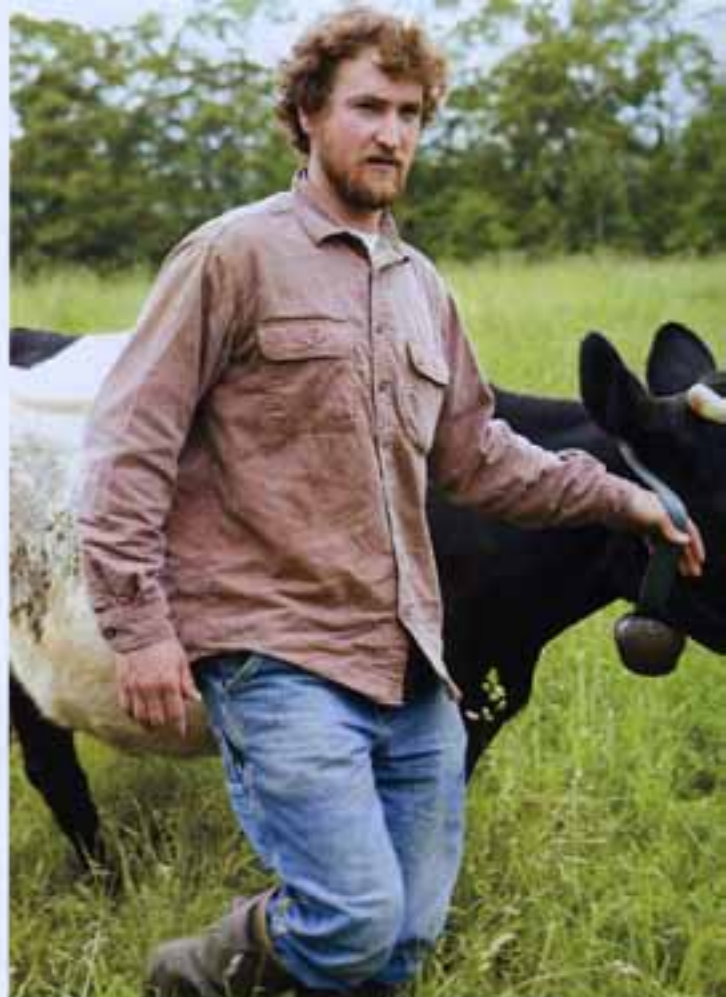
Dan, forty, is the mastermind in Blue Hill's kitchens, where he prepares such deceptively simple seasonal fare as tomato soup,

pitch-perfect aesthetic move, from the elegant interiors, which make the most of natural materials, to the graphics on the menus and Blue Hill's ambitious Web site. The three Barbers work in tandem to reinforce the Blue Hill brand, which has come to represent authenticity at the most refined level.

Their professional closeness is strengthened by the time they spend together away from the "office," at Blue Hill Farm, 138 acres—replete with grazing fields, a picture-book red barn and a tidy gray farmhouse trimmed in white and shaded by century-old maples—that range across the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts. It's a sanctuary for the family on many weekends throughout the year, when it seems that every one of the farmhouse's ten beds is filled and the landscape is dotted with Barber



Meals on wheels: Mobile chicken coops carry the flock to fresh grass. Clockwise from right: Farmer Sean Stanton; eggs from the mixed-breed hens; Aidan has another to add.



Lunch on the farmhouse porch is a collective effort, with Dan playing weekend chef and Laureen setting out tableware from ABC Carpet & Home, in Manhattan. Some accessories are from the Farm Store at Stone Barns Center, in Pocantico Hills, New York. Below, from left: Dessert before lunch; the tidy farmhouse.

Opposite: The boys of Blue Hill, plus one (from left)—Dan and his fiancée, Aria Sloss, with Aidan, David and Jacob.



kin and company out on a hiking expedition or a midday tractor ride. In the early mornings, the youngest among them might slip down the narrow staircase and head to the hen houses to gather their breakfast or show up in the barn to help with the 6:00 A.M. milking. Holidays are a particular high point: that's when the mismatched sofa and chairs in the farmhouse living room are likely to welcome the family patriarch, Fred Lee Barber, and the brothers' stepmother, Phyllis Barber (their mother died when they were young), who have a house nearby; their older sister, Carolyn Levine, a New York City attorney, and her family: Dan's fiancée, Aria Sloss, a fiction writer; and David and Lauren's two sons, Jacob, ten, and Aidan, eight, the youngest Barbers and the latest to be enchanted by Blue Hill.

Dan, David and Carolyn have shared ownership of the property with other family members since the death of their grandmother Ann Strauss, in 1984. More Auntie Mame than Grandma Moses, Strauss, a former radio personality and television producer, lived down the road from the farm and had long admired it before she was finally able to buy it, in the late 1960s. Although she wasn't interested in operating Blue Hill as a business venture, she invited a local family, the Mitchells, to graze their Black Angus cattle in her fields and harvest the hay at summer's end. "She liked the activity, liked that the land was being worked and understood instinctively that [keeping the farm productive] was the right thing to do," David says. "And even though she'd yell at them, 'Fix that damn fence!' whenever the cows broke loose and got into her flower garden, she loved the Mitchells."

As kids, the Barber brothers would spend every August and many weekends helping out where needed, stacking endless



bales of hay or moving the cows from pasture to pasture. "My time with the farmers was infinitely more interesting than anything else I was up to in the city or at summer camp," admits Dan, who became accustomed to the grueling work. According to Carolyn, the Mitchells represented something that would resonate with her siblings in their adult lives: "They were a family who loved what they did—and they did it together." When the Mitchells gave up farming in the early 1990s, the fields went untended.

In 2004, the Barbers opened their second restaurant and a café at Stone Barns, a not-for-profit agricultural center in Pocantico Hills founded by David Rockefeller to educate the public about the benefits of community-based farming. >164



## Organic and Awesome

When it comes to the food that David and Laureen Barber put on their family's table, they believe the way it's produced is just as important as the way it tastes. Here are some of their favorite comestibles, each made in a manner they respect.

David's big weakness: **Mast Brothers Chocolate** (from \$7 for a 2.5 oz bar; 718-388-2625; mastbrotherschocolate.com). "It has a true sense of authenticity because of the thoughtfully sourced ingredients," he says.

High praise goes to **Irving Farm Coffee** (from \$10 per pound; 518-789-FARM; irvingfarm.com), which is hand roasted in small batches in Millerton, in upstate New

York, and happens to be the bean of choice at the Barbers' Blue Hill restaurants.

Good crackers are a must-have for David, and he swears by the lavashes from **Hot**



Poppy-flavored lavash crackers.

**Bread Kitchen** (\$4 per bag; hotbreadkitchen.org for stores), in Queens, New York. "This amazing organization turns out artisanal breads, tortillas and other grain-based products while training immigrant women and preserving baking traditions from around the globe," he says.

Laureen's snack addiction? **Rancho Gordo Crimson Popping Corn** (\$2.95 per

pound; 707-259-1935; ranchofordo.com). "I make it under the guise of giving it to the kids, but it's really for me," she admits.

A cup of jasmine-pearl tea from **In Pursuit of Tea** (\$20 for 4 oz; 866-TRUE-TEA; inpursuitoftea.com) with a little bit of local honey is Laureen's daily habit. "Sebastian Beckwith, one of the cofounders of the company, spends a lot of time traveling around the world finding teas that are grown on small farms and taste amazing."

Finally, the Barbers can't overlook their own **Blue Hill Farm Preserves** (\$8 for 8 oz; 914-366-9600), which are made by pastry chef Alex Grunert and sold at the Café at Stone Barns. "We loved our jams [at the restaurants] so much that we wanted to share them," Laureen says. "Since they're very low in sugar, you get a real taste of strawberries in winter and apples in spring."

MELINDA PAGE



Blue Hill preserves.



The Barbers' favorite morning brew.



Sure it's picturesque, but farming is also relentlessly hard work. On weekends, Jacob and Lauren often help with the chickens. Here they're off to a distant pasture to gather eggs. Opposite, from top: Carolyn Levine (right) and her kids, Stephanie and James Preiss; a Pinot Noir blended for Blue Hill at Stone Barns.



## The Barbers of Blue Hill

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Dan's cooking took on a whole new vitality, so inspired was he by his proximity to a rich variety of produce and livestock outside his kitchen door. Indeed, he has the privilege, rare for most chefs, of having some say in what and how things are raised, which ultimately reflects how

they taste on the plate. And just as Rockefeller transformed a dormant family property—a Norman-style barn complex built by his father in the 1930s—in tribute to his late wife, Peggy, an early protector of America's agrarian traditions, the Barbers became quietly determined to resurrect their grandmother's home as a viable farm operation. To help them realize their vision, they hired Sean Stanton, a dynamic young dairy farmer.

Now a few dozen Jersey and Normandy cows have taken up residence on the hill, producing milk, cream and ricotta that are used at the restaurants. Plans are under way to make a hard cheese for the retail market, and the Barbers' cousin, Chris Blair, a local architect, has designed an extension to the barn that will house the cheesemaking operation and a cave for aging the rounds. Chickens, pigs and goats have also moved in; along with the cows, their presence has helped bring back the fertile pastures the brothers remember from their youth. "Sean is looking at what the land provides and thinking about what we should be growing on it," Dan says. "Too many farmers are looking at what people want now as a way to maximize profit in the short term. Ours is a long-view strategy."

And that is a good thing, since the family hopes to keep Blue Hill going for many years, if not generations, to come. "David is the happiest and most relaxed when he's at the farm," says Lauren,

**"David is the happiest and most relaxed when he's at the farm," says his wife, Lauren Barber, "and he's certainly passed on that feeling to our two boys."**

"and he's certainly passed on that feeling to our two boys." It's not all that's being passed on. In the Berkshires, David and his brother were exposed to "a very balanced set of values," Lauren notes, between their time in the fields with the hardworking Mitchells and their time at home with their so-

phisticated grandmother. "It was the best of both worlds, and it's how we're trying to raise Jacob and Aidan today."

The Thanksgiving ritual is the Barber family's annual highlight. "It's more important than Christmas, and there aren't even any gifts involved," Lauren explains. "Dan cooks the meal—Jacob and Aidan call it a feast—but we all participate: cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles. We set up a long table that snakes around the living room, and everyone whom the boys love is in that one room. It's Blue Hill Farm at its best." x

### A Taste of Blue Hill

At their restaurants, Dan and David Barber are offering an increasing number of dishes that take advantage of the bounty from their Berkshires farm: milk, free-range eggs, ricotta cheese, vegetables and grass-fed meats, to name a few. A visit to either their Manhattan or their Westchester establishment is a treat indeed. For reservations, directions and more information on the menus and the Barbers' culinary philosophy, visit [bluehillfarm.com](http://bluehillfarm.com). **Blue Hill**, 75 Washington Place, NYC; 212-539-1776.

**Blue Hill at Stone Barns and Café at Stone Barns**, 630 Bedford Road, Pocantico Hills, NY; 914-366-9600.