



**DAVID BARBER '88 tills
macroeconomics lessons
into the new food movement**

BACK IN THE LATE 1980s, DAVID BARBER '88 was sitting in a classroom listening to economics Professor Spencer Pack. Arguing situations from completely different points of view, the professor would don a variety of paper hats, supplied by students, and often labeled “liberal,” “conservative” or some other term. It made a lasting impression.

Today, as president and co-owner of Blue Hill, one of Manhattan’s most celebrated restaurants, and a founder and financial director of the nonprofit Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, Barber is looking at problems every day from different perspectives.

Story by Crai Bower '84
Photos by Jen Munkvold

From farm to table



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WHILE BARBER'S COLLEGE

classmates took off to New York City and Boston for weekend getaways, he'd invite some friends to his late grandmother's Blue Hill Farm in the Berkshire Mountains. Barber and his brother, Dan, had spent summers on the farm, working with a neighboring farmer who leased their pastures to raise Black Angus cattle.

Barber became so enamored of the agrarian lifestyle he moved there upon graduation, though a lack of peers in the rural community led him back to his native New York. When he and Dan decided to open a restaurant in lower Manhattan, choosing the name was obvious. Today, Blue Hill, a beacon in the farm-to-table culinary movement, has carried the Barbers back to the gentlewoman's farm at the top of Blue Hill Road — and beyond.

“Our memories of working (with the neighboring farmers) gave my brother and me a level of comfort in going into business with one another,” Barber says. “Watching how all these small farmers had to change their livelihoods as they went out of business also influenced us greatly.”

The brothers first collaborated when Dan decided to move his catering business from their father's Manhattan apartment (“The co-op board had tired of food trays flying through the lobby,” David laughs) to a downtown restaurant where Dan could cook and showcase his food by serving dinner to potential clients. Blue Hill was born.

“I'd moved back to New York to work for a corporate production business but left when it became clear the catering business and restaurant would require a business manager,” says David, who majored in economics.

Founded in 2000, the Greenwich Village restaurant generated a buzz that escalated quickly. Diners praised Dan's culinary innovations like This Morning's Farm Egg and farm-to-table celebrations such as Hudson Valley

Duck. The brothers also assumed greater roles within the growing locavore movement. Pioneered by Alice Waters, the philosophy places emphasis on organic ingredients cultivated by local, family farms.

One frequent Blue Hill diner was David Rockefeller, whose wife, Peggy, advocated for small farms until her death in 1996. Like the Barbers, the Rockefeller patriarch relished his respites outside the city, at his family's Westchester County estate, which included the Stone Barns, a small dairy farm built to provide milk to the main house. Peggy Rockefeller cherished the Norman-styled barns, but they were in limbo when her widower approached the brothers.

“Mr. Rockefeller worried the barns would be torn down if he decided them to the adjacent Rockefeller State Park Preserve,” David Barber recalls. “But the cost to renovate for the sole sake of saving pretty buildings proved prohibitive. He was looking for a worthy reason to justify the investment. He also knew he wanted to include a restaurant if he saved the buildings, so he approached us. We were given a shot to spell out our vision of the working farm-to-table education center, and he liked what he heard.”

Though working with Rockefeller held obvious appeal, Barber remained concerned about the business model.

“We were definitely worried we'd get lost in this project,” he says. “But to create an agricultural education center upon a sacred piece of land within 30 minutes of 30 million people was too amazing an opportunity to pass up.”

AT LEAST 50 PERCENT

of restaurants fail, often due to poor business practices, and competition in New York City may be the fiercest on Earth. Yet in just five years, Barber transformed his brother's catering business into a preeminent Manhattan restaurant (the Obamas chose Blue Hill for their New York “date night” last

spring) and opened another restaurant, Blue Hill at Stone Barns. He also became a founding board member of the nonprofit Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture.

Transitioning from competitive restaurateur to nonprofit adviser appears overwhelming at first glance, but this new hat fits Barber well. He credits Spencer Pack with teaching him to study every business situation from several perspectives.

“The Stone Barns was a very challenging proposition, as I wasn't ready to head a nonprofit,” Barber says. “I wanted to develop the Blue Hill Farm national brand, but I trace my greater understanding of the situation back to Professor Pack's lessons.”

“Pack would teach the same subject matter or policy problem from several angles,” Barber adds. “He would literally put on different hats to teach from a supply-side view or a demand-side view. He would then convincingly argue that one view was the path to take until both sides sounded right. Because of his methodology, I developed the ability to look at a problem and understand the different angles.”

Today, Stone Barns' farmers sell their harvest directly to Blue Hill, which commits to buying any produce that goes unsold at local farmer's markets. Children arrive at the center by the busload, where they pick their food and prepare it in the Blue Hill kitchen. Adult classes are growing like zucchini as well.

“On a personal level, we are going back to Blue Hill Farm with tons of ideas about how to renew our family farm, where we now have an active dairy farm, and also how to engage the Great Barrington community,” Barber says. “We still have national ambitions as a brand, but the heart and soul of our company resides on 140 acres off Blue Hill Road.” ■

www.bluehillfarm.com
www.stonebarnscenter.org