

TED Talk Script

Dan Barber: How I Fell in Love with a Fish

Happiness 0:12 So, I've known a lot of fish in my life. I've loved only two. That first one, it was more like a passionate affair. It was a beautiful fish: flavorful, textured, meaty, a bestseller on the menu. What a fish. (Laughter) Even better, it was farm-raised to the supposed highest standards of sustainability. So you could feel good about selling it.

0:48 I was in a relationship with this beauty for several months. One day, the head of the company called and asked if I'd speak at an event about the farm's sustainability. "Absolutely," I said. Here was a company trying to solve what's become this unimaginable problem for us chefs: How do we keep fish on our menus?

1:13 For the past 50 years, we've been fishing the seas like we clear-cut forests. It's hard to overstate the destruction. Ninety percent of large fish, the ones we love -- the tunas, the halibuts, the salmons, swordfish -- they've collapsed. There's almost nothing left. So, for better or for worse, aquaculture, fish farming, is going to be a part of our future. A lot of arguments against it: Fish farms pollute -- most of them do anyway -- and they're inefficient. Take tuna, a major drawback. It's got a feed conversion ratio of 15 to one. That means it takes fifteen pounds of wild fish to get you one pound of farm tuna. Not very sustainable. It doesn't taste very good either.

2:07 So here, finally, was a company trying to do it right. I wanted to support them. The day before the event, I called the head of P.R. for the company. Let's call him Don.

2:23 "Don," I said, "just to get the facts straight, you guys are famous for farming so far out to sea, you don't pollute."

2:29 "That's right," he said. "We're so far out, the waste from our fish gets distributed, not concentrated." And then he added, "We're basically a world unto ourselves. That feed conversion ratio? 2.5 to one," he said. "Best in the business."

2:48 2.5 to one, great. "2.5 what? What are you feeding?"

2:52 "Sustainable proteins," he said.

2:55 "Great," I said. Got off the phone. And that night, I was lying in bed, and I thought: What the hell is a sustainable protein? (Laughter)

3:08 So the next day, just before the event, I called Don. I said, "Don, what are some examples of sustainable proteins?"

3:14 He said he didn't know. He would ask around. Well, I got on the phone with a few people in the company; no one could give me a straight answer until finally, I got on the phone with the head biologist. Let's call him Don too. (Laughter)

3:33 "Don," I said, "what are some examples of sustainable proteins?"

3:38 Well, he mentioned some algae and some fish meals, and then he said chicken pellets. I said, "Chicken pellets?"

3:46 He said, "Yeah, feathers, skin, bone meal, scraps, dried and processed into feed."

3:53 I said, "What percentage of your feed is chicken?" Thinking, you know, two percent.

4:01 "Well, it's about 30 percent," he said.

4:04 I said, "Don, what's sustainable about feeding chicken to fish?" (Laughter)

4:14 There was a long pause on the line, and he said, "There's just too much chicken in the world." (Laughter)

4:26 I fell out of love with this fish. (Laughter) No, not because I'm some self-righteous, goody-two shoes foodie. I actually am. (Laughter) No, I actually fell out of love with this fish because, I swear to God, after that conversation, the fish tasted like chicken. (Laughter)