

# Dining Table Tales with...Dan Saladino



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AUTHOR: STEF BOTTINELLI



We might think that we live in a world of food diversity with the large variety of cuisines from all the corners of the globe available to us in restaurants, supermarkets and at the tap of an app. But this couldn't be further from the truth as author Dan Saladino explores in his recently published book, *Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them*, winner of The Jane Grigson Trust prize for a debut food book.

The recipient of a James Beard Award and several awards for his work in radio, listed in the Progress 1000: *The Evening Standard's* Most Influential People in Food and Drink and *The Telegraph's* Food Power List, Dan Saladino has been a food journalist for 20 years and is the presenter of BBC Radio 4's [\*\*The Food Programme\*\*](#).

Dan's passion for food has taken him all over the world, to research and shed light on

I have loved your book *Eating to Extinction* and I went through a roller-coaster of emotions reading it. Some chapters filled me with hope about the future of our food system, others were hard to read, because of what humans have done to nature and our kind. How did it impact you emotionally, researching and writing it?

I've been on a similar roller-coaster of emotions. I started collecting stories of endangered foods more than a decade ago and when the project began, I was expecting it to be a celebratory one. I had stumbled across [Slow Food's Ark of Taste](#), an online catalogue of more than 5,000 foods close to extinction, covering around 130 countries. Each of these foods filled me full of wonder; they showed me how humans had, for thousands of years, worked in harmony with nature to feed themselves. The catalogue introduced me to the incredible diversity of how people in different parts of the world had sustained themselves. It led me to conversations with Ethiopians making camel dairy products, with seed savers who told me stories of how tiny peas had crossed the Atlantic from west Africa to the New World and shaped diverse food cultures, I learnt about fermented foods which had helped people to settle and survive in some of the world's harshest environments. These stories left me awestruck, because of the ingenuity of our ancestors, the beauty of nature and the interconnectedness between the two.

It was only in writing the book that I joined the dots and fully understood why so many foods and food cultures were becoming endangered, along with knowledge, skills and huge amounts of biodiversity. During the 20th century we developed unprecedented powers to dominate nature and generate an abundance of calories and with that the global population boomed. However, we can now see the damage these 'successes' have caused, to the planet and to our health. Researching each endangered food started to leave me feeling deeply moved at what was being lost as I realised a wave of homogeneity was sweeping across the world. But I also felt optimism. I have met so many inspiring people who are working to save their food and the culture that surrounds it. They are my favourite characters in the book. They give me great hope for the future, but yes, it has felt like a roller-coaster and I think that comes across in the book.

**What impact has writing *Eating to Extinction* had on you as a consumer? Are there foods you no longer eat or others you never consumed before but now you do?**

Nearly 20 years of food journalism and researching the book has resulted in me eating foods I could never have imagined eating – and will probably never eat again: porcupine liver cut fresh from a carcass after the animal had been tracked and killed by a Hadza hunter-gatherer in east Africa; *Skerpikjot*, which is sheep meat hung up and left for months to ferment in cliff-top huts on the Faroe Islands bathed by the salty sea air of the North Atlantic (a taste that's been described as somewhere between Parmesan and death); and cheese produced in remote villages tucked away high up in the Albanian Alps, made from the milk of sheep and goats that feed on what's thought to be among the world's most pristine pastures. Each of these foods is the result of unique interactions between people, plants, animals, microbes, and a wider ecosystem. Writing *Eating to Extinction* has given me a deeper understanding of the importance of these factors in the history of our food, of different cultures and the evolution of

I am an omnivore and I eat all kinds of meat, but I feel strongly that meat eating should be approached with a degree of reverence; that it's important to eat less meat but better meat. For me that means animals that are part of the more complex rhythms of a mixed farming system and not ones in which they've isolated in highly intensive production systems. That is why the stories of Skerpikjot and sheep on the Faroes, the Middle-White pig in Britain and the black Ogye chicken from Korea were important to include in the book. They were all sources of food produced from a more respectful and caring relationship with animals. Our ancestors understood how much they depended on livestock, much of the world seems to have lost that sense of reverence.



A Hadza hunter with his prey



Cliff-top huts on the Faroe Islands. All pictures courtesy of Dan Saladino

**You're British with Sicilian roots. How did these two rather different culinary cultures coexist when you were growing up, and now for that matter?**

The combination of the two different food cultures had a big impact on me, perhaps one I only fully appreciated when I started writing the book. I used to spend every summer with my Sicilian nonna in a small town in the south-west of Sicily. As I describe in the book, arriving in Sicily from 1970s Britain was like stepping from a black and white film into a world of MGM Technicolor. It was such a sensory shift. That period was one in which processed foods and supermarkets were in the ascendency in Britain and yet in Sicily food was (and still is) treated with a greater sense of appreciation. In Sicily, people still had an intimate relationship with the land and so they were very passionate about food. My Italian was poor (as was my Sicilian dialect), but I slowly realised that the loud shouting around the table was mostly all about food; e.g. which maker of *cannoli* (the crisp pastry tubes filled with sweet ricotta) was the best, which village had the best arancini. Sicilians believe that their food is the best food – and not just the food of the island, but more specifically, the food from their town or village. I'm sure this is where I first realised how important the stories attached to food were. Years later, Sicily was also where the idea for *Eating to Extinction* took shape. My first edition of BBC Radio 4's *The Food Programme* was recorded in Sicily. I had travelled to see the citrus harvest that takes place around Etna. Some of the farmers were telling me it would be their last harvest because they could no longer compete with cheaper oranges being exported from Spain and North Africa. They wanted to add their Etna blood oranges to Slow Food's Ark of Taste. I had heard of endangered animals, but endangered foods and a catalogue dedicated to them was new to me. Following that discovery in Sicily, I've spent years tracking down as many stories as I can from the [Ark of Taste](#).

**What changes do you think consumers can make to have a more positive impact on our food system and eat more sustainably?**

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to save. Then we need to act. We all need to become explorers of diversity, ideally in the places we live. Are there farmers, food producers and drink makers we can support? Then we should also experiment with diversity and take pleasure in exploring diversity. For example, take your favourite food, which could be chocolate, cheese, beer or wine and explore how diverse they can all be – the difference between one type of cacao and another, or a less familiar grape variety. Then delve deeper into that diversity and know the people and the stories behind them. We can only save endangered foods if we know they exist.

There are also businesses that need our support in saving endangered foods and farming practices. **Hodmedod** is one such business featured in the book, because it is bringing back lost legumes, including peas and beans last grown in Britain during the Iron Age. If we all ate more seasonally and regionally that could make a big impact on our health and local economies. Becoming active in community projects can also help. For example, there are community orchards in which people are helping to save fruit diversity.

There are other factors shaping the food system that are more difficult for us to influence, such as the way subsidies determine how much of the world farms, fishes, processes, and eats food. Even so, politics can make a difference, take public procurement as an important instrument of change. In Copenhagen apple growers contracted by the city to supply schools have been rewarded not only for price and quality, but also for how much diversity they offer.

Kavilca wheat field in eastern Turkey

### Can you share one of your most cherished memories linked to food?

There have been moments in which several important things come together, food, landscape, stories, skills, conviviality, and pleasure. One such moment was in eastern Turkey where I was travelling in search of an ancient type of emmer wheat that was still being grown by a small number of farmers. I was invited to share a meal with one of the families helping to save this endangered grain called kavilca. I had spent the day in the wheat fields, then we visited the last remaining miller who had the skills to process the grains, and then I was invited back to a family's home and the kitchen of an amazing cook. The kavilca wheat was served with goose (the grains had been cooked in the fat from the bird). It was delicious and I'm sure I will never experience those flavours again, but more important was a sense from around the table of how precious this food was and how determined everyone was that this endangered food had to be saved. It was part of their inheritance, they told me.

### Tell me about a meal you will never forget

In Georgia, in the Caucasus, I met winemakers working with *qvevri* (terracotta amphora placed underground in which the grape juice is fermented). I quickly realised I was stepping into an extremely special food and wine culture. The high point of which is the *supra* (a traditional Georgian feast) which I describe in the book. The table was filled with different dishes (*khinkali*, boiled dumplings filled with spiced lamb; *lobiani*, parcels of hot bread filled with beans; and *khachapuri*, warm, gooey cheese-stuffed bread and delicious fermented vegetables). The wine was orange and natural, bunches of grapes had gone into the *qvevri*, nothing else. We drank from cups and goblets which had been passed through generations. Polyphonic singers sang songs made up of intricate harmonies and deep drones. Traditional dancers performed acrobatic moves around the table. And throughout, a toastmaster, the *tomada*, brought

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wine and there's a growing number of winegrowers there who are rediscovering traditional Georgian winemaking techniques and grape varieties (of which there are more than 500). And so, the supra was a celebration of tradition, but also of rediscovery and revival after so much had been lost, forgotten, and destroyed during the Soviet era.

### **What is the ultimate meal for you? Foods you love above all?**

I'd have to go back to Sicily for my ultimate meal and draw on childhood memories: arancini, *pannelle* (Sicilian chickpea fritters), *caponata* (chopped aubergines and other vegetables in an agrodolce sauce) and *granita* (sweet semi-frozen ice shards mixed with different flavours – generally fresh fruit juices, such as lemon, and syrups). All to be eaten with family around the table in my nonna's house after a day at the beach or on the farm.

### **What's your go to comfort food?**

Cheese. From one seemingly simple ingredient it feels like there's infinite diversity to explore. To sit down with a range of different cheeses, some wine and family and friends is heaven. Particularly so if there's a piece of Stichelton involved (one of the unpasteurised milk cheeses featured in the book). As with Professor [Tim Spector](#), an expert on the gut microbiome and its influence on our health, I am a big believer in the importance of having lots of diverse good microbes in the food we eat.

### **Are there any foods you wouldn't eat again and, if so, why?**

A whole chicken that costs less than a pint of beer. I don't think that should be possible.

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The British edition of the book cover of *Eating to Extinction*

The US edition of the book cover of *Eating to Extinction*

**For *Eating to Extinction* you've travelled far and wide and met many communities and tribes. What's really stood out for you?**

Spending time with the Hadza was a real privilege – an incredible experience to be with people who still live as hunter-gatherers. It was humbling to see the way they interacted with their



...dust, a landscape occupied by humans for at least two million years. Looking out across the horizon of Hadza country, it's possible to see human history in a microcosm. Just a few miles north is Laetoli, the site where a group of our distant ancestors walked through wet volcanic ash and left behind the earliest known human footprints. Even closer is the Olduvai Gorge, the place where some of the oldest stone tools and hand axes have been discovered. That sense of being close to the birthplace of *Homo sapiens*, of us, and with a group of hunter-gatherers, is something I still reflect on.

**You've been an accomplished food journalist for several years. How has your relationship with food changed?**

When I eat (and in my job and when I'm travelling, I eat all kinds of food), I know I'm not just consuming fuel. I say in *Eating to Extinction*: food represents much more than sustenance. It's history, identity, pleasure, culture, geography, genetics, science, creativity and craft. I can't forget that when I eat food. Perhaps thinking that way is both a blessing and a curse. It's hard for me to separate food from these stories. Food is an amazing lens with which to see the world in all its amazing complexity.

***Eating to Extinction* is a great success and it's just been published in the US this month. Do you plan to write more books, and if so, what would you love to write about next?**

I have started researching my next book. As with *Eating to Extinction*, I'm expecting it will take me to some unusual parts of the world and allow me to explore some fascinating and unfamiliar food cultures. That's as much as I can say at this stage.

***Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them*** by Dan Saladino is published by Jonathan Cape in the UK and available from all good book shops. The **book is now available in the US**, published by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.

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