

FASHION & STYLE

My Dinner With Longevity Expert Dan Buettner (No Kale Required)

By JEFF GORDINIER AUG. 1, 2015



Dan Buettner and I were off to a good start. He approved of coffee.

“It’s one of the biggest sources of antioxidants in the American diet,” he said with chipper confidence, folding up his black Brompton bike.

As we walked through Greenwich Village, looking for a decent shot of joe to fuel an afternoon of shopping and cooking and talking about the enigma of longevity, he pointed out that the men and women of Icaria, a Greek island in the middle of the Aegean Sea, regularly slurp down two or three muddy cups a day.

This came as delightful news to me. Icaria has a key role in Mr. Buettner's latest bochance of living to see 100. Without coffee, I don't see much point in making it to 50.

The purpose of our rendezvous was to see whether the insights of a longevity specialist like Mr. Buettner could be applied to the life of a food-obsessed writer in New York, a man whose occupational hazards happen to include chicken wings, cheeseburgers, martinis and marathon tasting menus.



Covering the world of gastronomy and mixology during the era of David Chang (career-defining dish: those Momofuku pork-belly buns) and April Bloomfield (career-defining dish: the lamb burger at the Breslin Bar and Dining Room) does not exactly feel like an enterprise that's adding extra years to my life — or to my liver.

And the recent deaths (even if accidental) of men in my exact demographic — the food writer Joshua Ozersky, the tech entrepreneur Dave Goldberg — had put me in a mortality-anxious frame of mind.

With my own half-century mark eerily visible on the horizon, could Mr. Buettner, who has spent the last 10 years unlocking the mysteries of longevity, offer me a midcourse correction?

To that end, he had decided to cook me something of a longevity feast. Visiting from his home in Minnesota and camped out at the townhouse of his friends Andrew Solomon and John Habich in the Village, this trim, tanned, 55-year-old guru of the golden years was geared up to show me that living a long time was not about subsisting on a thin gruel of, well, gruel.

After that blast of coffee, which I dutifully diluted with soy milk (as instructed) at O Cafe on Avenue of the Americas, Mr. Buettner and I set forth on our quest at the aptly named LifeThyme market, where signs in the window trumpeted the wonders of wheatgrass. He reassured me, again, by letting me know that penitent hedge clippings had no place in our Blue Zones repast.

“People think, ‘If I eat more of this, then it’s O.K. to eat more burgers or candy,’ ” he said. Instead, as he ambled through the market dropping herbs and vegetables into his basket, he insisted that our life-extending banquet would hinge on normal affordable items that almost anyone can pick up at the grocery store. He grabbed fennel and broccoli, celery and carrots, tofu and coconut milk, a bag of frozen berries and a can of chickpeas and a jar of local honey.

The five communities spotlighted in “The Blue Zones Solution” (published by National Geographic) depend on simple methods of cooking that have evolved over centuries, and Mr. Buettner has developed a matter-of-fact disregard for gastro-trends of all stripes. At LifeThyme, he passed by refrigerated shelves full of vogue-ish juices in hues of green, orange and purple. He shook his head and said, “Bad!”

“The glycemic index on that is as bad as Coke,” he went on, snatching a bottle of carrot juice to scan the label. “For eight ounces, there’s 14 grams of sugar. People get suckered into thinking, ‘Oh, I’m drinking this juice.’ Skip the juicing. Eat the fruit. Or eat the vegetable.” (How about a protein shake? “No,” he said.)

So far, I was feeling pretty good about my chances of making it to 100. I love coffee, I’m not much of a juicer and I’ve never had a protein shake in my life. Bingo. I figured that pretty soon Mr. Buettner would throw me a dietary

curveball (I noticed with vague concern that he was not putting any meat or cheese into his basket), but by this point I was already thinking about how fun it would be to meet my great-grandchildren.

I felt even better when he and I started talking about strenuous exercise, which for me falls somewhere between “root canal” and “Justin Bieber concert” on the personal aversion scale.

I like to go for long walks, and ... well, that’s about it.

“That’s when I knew you’d be O.K.,” Mr. Buettner told me.

It turns out that walking is a popular mode of transport in the Blue Zones, too — particularly on the sun-splattered slopes of Sardinia, Italy, where many of those who make it to 100 are shepherds who devote the bulk of each day to wandering the hills and treating themselves to sips of red wine.



“A glass of wine is better than a glass of water with a Mediterranean meal,” Mr. Buettner told me.

Red wine and long walks? If that’s all it takes, people, you’re looking at Methuselah.

O.K., yes, Mr. Buettner moves his muscles a lot more than I do. He likes to go everywhere on that fold-up bike, which he hauls along with him on trips, and sometimes he does yoga and goes in-line skating. But he generally believes that the high-impact exercise mania as practiced in the major cities of the United States winds up doing as much harm as good.

“You can’t be pounding your joints with marathons and pumping iron,” he said. “You’ll never see me doing CrossFit.”

For that evening’s meal, Mr. Buettner planned to cook dishes that would make reference to the quintet of places that he focuses on in “The Blue Zones Solution”: along with Icaria and Sardinia, they are Okinawa, Japan □ the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica □ and Loma Linda, Calif., where Seventh-day Adventists have a tendency to outlive their fellow Americans, thanks to a mostly vegetarian diet that is heavy on nuts, beans, oatmeal, 100 percent whole-grain bread and avocados.

We walked from the market to the townhouse. And it was here, as Mr. Buettner laid out his cooking ingredients on a table in Mr. Solomon’s and Mr. Habich’s commodious, state-of-the-art kitchen, that I noticed the first real disconnect between the lives of the Blue Zones sages and the life of a food writer who has enjoyed many a lunch hour scarfing down charcuterie, tapas and pork-belly-topped ramen at the Gotham West Market food court.

Where was the butter? Hadn’t some nice scientists determined that butter’s not so lethal for us, after all? (“My view is that butter, lard and other animal fats are a bit like radiation: a dollop a couple of times a week probably isn’t going to hurt you, but we don’t know the safe level,” Mr. Buettner later wrote in an email. “At any rate, I can send along a paper that largely refutes the whole ‘Butter is Back’ craze.” No, thanks, I’m good.)

Where was the meat? Where was the cheese? (No cheese? And here I thought we'd be friends for another 50 years, Mr. Buettner.)

“If you're eating this meal, you're getting all the protein you need,” he promised me, although it wasn't my protein intake I was worried about.

Although it is by no means a stealth vegan manifesto, “The Blue Zones Solution” frequently mentions that men and women in these longevity-friendly regions tend to eat meat and fish only sparingly, and they almost never tangle with cow's milk. Mr. Buettner had leapt to the conclusion that I had probably had enough meat and cheese for the week already. He was correct.

“We're making up for all your sins tonight,” he told me. “What you learn tonight is going to set you on a new path.”

The centerpiece of Mr. Buettner's dinner was a dish he had named “Icarian stew,” which involved a big pot of black-eyed peas, fennel, onions, garlic, carrots, canned tomatoes and other plant-based delights simmered for hours and then topped with a few glugs of extra-virgin olive oil.

“I eat this all the time,” he said. “This is how I seduced Kathy Freston, by the way. You ask her. Ask her if Icarian stew has any role in her love for me.” (Mr. Buettner is dating Ms. Freston, the author and advocate of veganism who used to be married to Tom Freston, the former MTV executive.)

Raised in Minnesota, Mr. Buettner (pronounced BYOOT-ner) grew up eating “hotdish and Hamburger Helper — the usual Midwest crap,” he said.

But in 2005 he wrote an article about the secrets of longevity for National Geographic, and the lightning-striking success of it bestowed upon him both a career mission (starting with his first book, “The Blue Zones: 9 Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest,” in 2008) and a new mode of looking at food.

He's now a fierce believer in Japanese yams, wild greens and milk thistle. (Throughout "The Blue Zones Solution," he stresses that people in these parts of the world don't just happen to live a long time, they do so with lower rates of the diabetes, heart disease and dementia that seem to afflict much of the junk-food-gobbling globe.)

Not long ago he dropped by the Mayo Clinic to meet a doctor for an executive physical. "I wanted to see if it really paid off," Mr. Buettner said. "And apparently it has. I had the clearest arteries he'd ever seen in a 54-year-old man."

Nevertheless, his findings over the last decade do put him at odds with a controversial range of culinary belief systems.

During our afternoon and evening together, he joked that the paleo diet is fine if all you want is the life expectancy of a cave man. The raw food movement? Mr. Buettner brushed it aside and pointed out that in all of the Blue Zones, people cook their meals, sometimes for hours.

Fear of a wheat planet? "Bogus," he said. After a couple of hours in the kitchen, Mr. Buettner defied the carb-avoiders and gluten-dodgers of America by dashing over to Union Square on foot to score several loaves of long-fermented, freshly baked sourdough at Breads Bakery.

"A true sourdough bread will actually lower the glycemic load of a meal," he said. "But it has to be a real sourdough bread." (Whew. We were back to the good news.)

After a bunch of his friends had gathered in the kitchen (Mr. Buettner referred to them as his New York "moai," which is an Okinawan term for a circle of people who purposefully meet up and look out for one another), he opened a bottle of hard-to-find Sardinian wine and asked them to take their seats. Among them were Mr. Solomon, the author of books like "Far From the Tree" and "The Noonday Demon," and Samantha Boardman, a psychiatrist

and the wife of the real-estate tycoon Aby J. Rosen.

There came a broccoli soup thickened with cashew cream □ a simple Japanese paste made from mixing sweet potato and coconut milk □ a honey-touched tofu parfait crowned with a berry compote, which Mr. Buettner called “a little naughty” because it was sweeter than what you would normally find in a sugar-averse Blue Zone. (Naughty? I guess Mr. Buettner has never had the gochujang Buffalo wings at Seoul Chicken.)

Mr. Solomon, although enthusiastic about the longevity feast, appeared to be reading my mind. “No cheese in Sardinia?” he asked, a trace of longing in his voice.

The meal itself was delicious and nourishing, even if there were moments when my restaurant-conditioned palate was crying out for salt. In a sense, though, the meal was almost beside the point, blurring as it went on into waves of wine and conviviality.

Along the way, Mr. Buettner stage-whispered into Mr. Solomon’s ear, asking whether our host might be willing to dip into the wine cellar for a special bottle or two. Icaria is known for the longevity of its residents □ it’s also known for Dionysian all-night parties. I can’t say for sure whether I felt longevity coursing through my veins, but there was a fair amount of alcohol.

“The secret sauce is the right mix of friends,” Mr. Buettner said.

And as each course arrived (the Icarian stew claiming its rich, flavor-deep place as an obvious showstopper), Mr. Buettner called attention to a last point about the Blue Zones: that in longevity idylls like Icaria, it’s not just about what you eat, but how you eat, and how much you and your friends enjoy a meal together.

“Dan, do any of the Blue Zones people eat kale salad?” Mr. Solomon asked.

“No,” Mr. Buettner replied. “They eat food that they enjoy.”

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