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# HOW A FLASK OF SPICE CAN TRANSFORM THE WORLD

BY MARINA ANDREAZI

The Brazilian chef behind one of the world's best restaurants and social entrepreneur, Chef Alex Atala, calls for an urgent reevaluation of our relationship with our environment and with the element that connects us all – food.

A son of adventurous souls, Atala was always taught to go out into the world instead of waiting for the world to come to him. At 18, he abandoned the constraints of his troubled youth and invested all he had in a ticket and a new beginning in Europe. Having found his calling and finished his studies in this six-year adventure, Atala knew that developing a truly authentic culinary style required recognition of

his ever-growing Brazilian pride. Once again following his heart and embracing uncertainty, Atala decided to move back to Brazil to find inspiration in pre-colonial, indigenous ingredients from one of the most incredible and painfully misunderstood of Brazilian treasures: the Amazon.

With boots on the ground, Atala discovered much more than the exquisite ingredients that would define his incredibly original culinary style. After seeing firsthand the silting river in the Xingú reservation, talking face-to-face with small indigenous producers being pushed out by agribusiness, and witnessing the impact that single crop plantation and pesticides have on their environment, Atala began to truly

understand just how serious the consequences of our everyday decisions are: "We are not killing animals, we are sterilizing environments. We are talking about people and about future generations as well."

Keenly aware of the extent of the environmental impact brought on by our current mode of food consumption, Atala also credits food as the only medium capable of reversing this negative cycle. "When biodiversity leaves the mouth, it sounds judgmental. There is guilt involved. When it [goes] in, it is transforming. People begin to care." Atala's belief that individual food decisions can truly transform our environment is hardly unfounded. Due to global wine consumption and the consumer's

desire for diversity in the category, today there are hundreds of grape varieties that are cultivated every year. For this very reason, the DNA of hundreds of grapes, including those tougher to produce or with smaller yields, is sustainably safeguarded and ensures incredible grape diversity.

Though Atala is critical of the insurmountable pressure us humans currently put on our environment and the lagging policies to revert it, he prefers to focus his energy on getting things done. "As a Brazilian, I need to improve my country. I believe I can have a much bigger impact [by] setting an example than being a critic." This proactive optimism brings a fresh perspective to this daunting global issue. Integrating food with his social entrepreneurship efforts, the chef's ATA Institute works tirelessly to promote the use of ingredients and brands that have a positive impact on biodiversity, indigenous communities, and the environment as a whole.

One of the institute's most exciting projects focuses on helping women from the Rio Negro Basin – a region composed of 23 indigenous ethnicities speaking 21 idioms – cultivate and maintain their most valued cultural staple: the Baniwa pepper. Each woman in the Baniwa tribe has her own garden and cultivates a unique type of Baniwa pepper. They also rotate their gardens and produce many varieties of each vegetable, showing the true value of diversity for long-term food consumption. "These women tell me, 'My *manioc* [yucca] might not be the most flavorful or the fastest-growing. But in a year of drought, it is the one that will yield the most.'" Compared to our current shortsighted mentality of producing as much as possible in the shortest span of time, Atala finds the relationship they have with their environment both inspiring and paradigm-shifting.

Initiatives such as this one help disseminate and expose the world to the deliciousness of biodiversity and its positive impact, allowing for meaning and citizenship to replace wealth accumulation on the list of human priorities. "If you just think that all of this history, meaning, and positive impact is embodied by a small flask of spice, one that is also incredibly delicious, it is truly transforming." Helping people find meaning and change their relationship with their food can shift the way they consume and the industries they support. He adds emphatically, "it is not just about buying organic at the supermarket. It also means saying no to the things that are not okay. Because if you say no, it will no longer exist. That is how powerful this is."

Thought-leading creatives like Atala

provoke us and instigate action by exposing truth, providing new possibilities, and reinventing reality. To Atala, resetting doesn't mean erasing what we know or starting from scratch. Resetting means taking the blinders off and adding more perspective to open up our behavior beyond the guidelines of our own culture and priorities, and into our individual truth and our sense of responsibility as citizens. Getting people to live outside of the bubble of their own existence is certainly one of the biggest challenges of our time – and yet, the single most impactful shift that could happen.

When asked how contact with indigenous culture and communities has changed his perspective on his own life, Atala said that they spend 90% of their productive time dedicated to eating, while the western world spends under 10%. When asked if that meant they ate better, Atala responded with a broad smile and a wise laugh: "They live better. They have been around for millions of years and the earth is still here." ////

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