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For Amber Waves of Grain

I boarded the plane from L.A. to Chicago. We were going to depart on time. 22A. I had a window seat, the center seat was empty, and the girl in the aisle seat had her earphones on, already watching a movie. Things were looking good. Then came the announcement. There would be a flight delay of several hours, and a group of passengers who had missed a connecting flight would be boarding.

They straggled in: three teenagers, a harried mom with a small child, and a square man. By this I mean he was six feet tall, and six feet wide. The teenagers, angry that they couldn't sit together, went towards the back of the plane, complaining all the way. The mom, her child on her lap, sat directly behind me, and sponge Bob squeezed into the center seat in my row. The arm rest between us was no deterrent. He and I shared my seat, not equally, I must add.

Flattened against the window, I figured I might as well read and make the most of this deteriorated

situation. We flew out of Los Angeles with the sun setting on the sparkling Pacific Ocean. The smog had lifted and the mountains, purple and majestic, stood in stark relief against the darkening sky. I turned on the overhead light and opened my book.

The young child, unhappy to be restrained on his mother's lap, and probably exhausted from traveling, began to cry. Then howl. Then kick... me. The man next to me, wearing enormous earphones, which evidently made him impervious to the now screaming child, fell asleep, his head lolling on my shoulder. I tried to move it or him, but to no avail. His head kept coming back like a well-trained homing pigeon.

The mom sitting behind me reached over and tapped me. She said that if I turned off my overhead light, her child might fall asleep. I did. He didn't. Now I was sitting in the dark with a steady beat of shoes rat-a-tat-tating on my seat. Four hours to go, or four hundred, so it seemed.

I lifted the shade at my window, expecting another suggestion from the woman in 23A. Luckily, it didn't come. The jagged mountains gave way to open land as we traveled from west to east. The color changed from purple to deep green, lush and inviting from this height. Imperceptibly, the color switched to a deep, burnished gold. With the last flecks of light, the amber hue glowed as if lit from within. I gasped. It suddenly occurred to me that I was living the song we sang every year at my Fourth of July party. We'd been singing "America the Beautiful" for years, and only now did the words have such meaning. I saw the majesty of the purple mountains and was now gazing down at amber waves of grain. I wanted to tell someone, but it seemed only the human woodpecker, tapping away on the back of my seat, was awake.

Sitting there in the dark, I realized that this golden wheat was not waving for my own technicolor enjoyment. It was being tended, harvested, and shipped around the world. This golden grain was food! I was embarrassed to admit that I had never thought about this process while slathering butter on whole wheat toast, or diving into a bowl of pasta, its grooves filled with tangy sauce.

Farro Salad

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup farro or semi-pearled farro
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 bay leaf
- 8 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons white wine or apple cider vinegar
- 2 Persian cucumbers, thinly sliced or 1 seedless cucumber, thinly sliced
- ¾ cup grape or cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 cup baby arugula leaves
- ½ cup chopped flat leaf parsley
- ½ cup chopped fresh mint leaves
- 2-3 radishes, thinly sliced (optional)
- 2 ounces feta or goat cheese
- Flaky sea salt for finishing

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cook the farro in a medium pot of boiling salted water with the salt and bay leaf. Reduce heat to a simmer, cover the pot, and cook until the farro is tender, stirring occasionally from 20-35 minutes (Semi-pearled farro cooks faster). Drain and discard the bay leaf.
2. In a salad bowl, whisk together the olive oil and vinegar with a pinch of kosher salt. Adjust to taste, adding more vinegar if necessary. Add the farro and toss to combine. Just before serving, fold in the sliced cucumbers, tomatoes, parsley, mint leaves, and radishes, if using. Toss gently, then top with crumbled cheese and flaky sea salt. Serves 6-8

I thought about the farro salad I recently ate, plump and chewy all at the same time. There were so many varieties of grain readily available: bulgar, winter wheat berries, and barley, just to name a few.

The flight attendant announced over the loud speaker that we were approaching our destination. The sun was just coming up, and down below, our sea—Lake Michigan—glinted a gorgeous deep, deep blue. This was it! The last feather in the cap. From sea to shining sea. I wanted to dash to the cockpit and high-five the pilot. Thoughts of being led off the plane in handcuffs, as well as the sleeping giant next to me, kept me in my seat. Instead, I'd show my appreciation through a wonderful grain salad. 🍴



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