

A foodie tour of Canadian farms

Toronto author criss-crosses the country to research rural producers

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She may call Toronto home, but Margaret Webb takes a personal interest in 11 Canadian farm families.

In fact, after spending a week at each farm while researching the state of growing and eating in Canada, the writer and author calls them "my farmers."

Her resulting book, *Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms* (Viking Canada, 2008, \$34) is an intimate and up-close look at what it means to be a farmer or grower in contemporary Canada. Woven throughout is a loving memoir of Webb's own family and the farm she was raised on.

Faced with thousands of Canadian growers and farmers as potential book content, Webb chose one food to represent each province, then relied on word of mouth to find a family involved in high-calibre and sustainable production.

In B.C., she spoke with an orchardist who grafted the Ambrosia apple in the Similkameen Valley. In Saskatchewan, it was a flax-farming family; Ontario served up Niagara's Henry of Pelham ice wine; in New Brunswick, she chose seaweed from Grand Manan. In Prince Edward Island, it was Johnny Flynn's oysters. In Manitoba, it was pork, potatoes in the Yukon, scallops from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador cod, and Riopelle cheese from Quebec.

To complete the national menu, Webb chose Alberta beef. Not just any mass-market beef, though. After eating her way through Calgary's beef palaces during Stampede, Webb wound up sampling organic beef tenderloin at River Cafe. There, chef Scott Pohorelic buys his beef from Diamond Willow, a consortium of seven ranch families, located between Priddis and Pincher Creek, south of Calgary. So Webb bought boots and hit the high country.

This past month, she embarked on a cross-country train tour to launch her book. Her whistle-stop in Alberta included hosting a celebratory lunch at Mount Sentinel Ranch near Priddis, owned and operated by Francis and Bonnie Gardiner.

Gathered to greet Webb were many of the Diamond Willow ranchers, and Pohorelic, who cooked lunch in the ranch kitchen -- a feast that featured local ingredients and included beef short ribs (see recipe), beef tenderloin, baked beans with rutabaga and tomato, stinging nettle chimichurri, green beans, potato salad, biscuits and Saskatoon crisp with ice cream.

The ranchers greeted Webb like a relative, sitting at the acre-long kitchen table and filling her in on family happenings since their last conversation. Rancher Keith Everts of Stillridge Ranch discussed biofuel with his colleagues, while Francis Gardiner raised the subject of wolves. It neatly illuminated the diversity and complexity of issues facing ranchers.

Webb, 46 and attired in the denim and cowboy boots she bought before her first visit to the ranches of Diamond Willow, says she is "exalted to be here in the foothills."

The challenges of foothills country ranching were easier to endure than learning that one of

the farm families she profiled -- potato farmers in the Yukon chapter -- had since lost their farm. Not every story in Webb's book has a happy ending.

Apples to Oysters is not arranged chronologically, geographically or alphabetically.

Instead, each chapter corresponds with a menu, starting with Johnny Flynn's P.E.I. oysters and concluding with Ontario ice wine. The layout arose from the limitations of Canadian weather -- Webb tried to visit each farmer during harvest or peak season.

The end result is an engaging, engrossing and personal account, a lyrical song for sustainable agriculture and the hard-working farmers who persevere in feeding Canadians.

Always intensely interested in food, Webb admits she never had any hope of inheriting the family farm, located near Barrie, Ont. She wasn't the eldest son, she says.

But she does harbour hopes of finding a little patch of land, and of learning how to feed herself. She wants to learn how to smoke bacon, make prosciutto and ham, and otherwise transmute a grown heritage-breed Tamworth pig into dinner, even though she calls herself an inept farmer.

In the final chapter of Apples to Oysters, Webb plays "what if," creating a vision of her family's farm as an idyllic and thriving direct-sale business with loyal supporters.

In her ideal scenario, the business would operate a farmgate market, adding on a cheese shop and restaurant, a business dedicated to best practices, multiple-generation family involvement and forging direct connections between producer and consumer.

Surely that is no dream, but a possibility for Canadians, so we can all say proudly, like Webb, "These are my farmers."

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This recipe from River Cafe's executive chef Scott Pohorelic is excerpted from the Alberta chapter of Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms (Viking Canada) by Margaret Webb. The ribs are finished with a blueberry sauce and blueberry gremolata, but the garnish can be altered to fit your preferences. Make lots as it reheats well, and tastes even better after a day or two.

Meat

3 lb (1.5 kg) good-quality beef or bison short ribs, cut into 3-in. (8 cm) pieces

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Oil for the pan

12 cups (3 L) beef stock

1/2 cup (125 mL) dry red wine

2 tbsp (25 mL) balsamic vinegar

1 stalk celery, chopped

1 carrot, chopped

1/2 yellow onion, chopped

1 bay leaf

1 star anise

10 juniper berries

1 sprig fresh rosemary

1 sprig fresh thyme

1 tsp (5 mL) whole black peppercorns

Coarse sea salt

Blueberry Sauce

8 cups (2 L) braising stock (left over from braising short ribs)

1 cup (250 mL) fresh blueberries

2 tbsp (25 mL) cassis, optional

1-2 tbsp (15-25 mL) unsalted butter, optional

2 spoonfuls blueberry jelly, optional

Blueberry Gremolata

2 tbsp (25 mL) chopped dried blueberries

2 tbsp (25 mL) chopped flat-leaf parsley

2 tsp (10 mL) finely grated lemon zest

1 tsp (5 mL) minced fresh mint

1/2 tsp (2 mL) grated fresh horseradish

To cook the meat, preheat oven to 300°F (150°C). Season the short ribs with salt and pepper. Sear on all sides in a preheated lightly oiled pan on top of the stove or on the barbecue on high heat.

Transfer the ribs to a roasting pan large enough to submerge the meat in the liquid, preferably in a single layer. Pour in the stock, wine and vinegar. Add the celery, carrot, onion, garlic, bay leaf, star anise, juniper berries, rosemary, thyme and peppercorns. Bring to a simmer over medium heat on the stove.

Cover the pan and place it in the oven. Cook for 4 hours, or until the ribs are fork-tender. Let the ribs sit in the cooking liquid until they are cool, or drain, reserving the stock. Tightly wrap ribs in plastic wrap and set aside until ready to use.

To make the sauce, cool the braising stock, then remove the fat that has congealed on the top. Reserve 1/2 cup (125 mL) of the stock, and bring the remainder to a boil, skimming and discarding any film or fat from the top surface. Boil and reduce the liquid to one-quarter its original volume, to sauce consistency. Strain through a fine mesh sieve, add the blueberries and optional cassis, and keep warm. Just before serving, stir in the optional

butter and/or jelly.

To make the gremolata, combine the blueberries, parsley, lemon zest, mint and horseradish in a small bowl.

To serve, warm the ribs in a hot shallow pan with the reserved stock. Reduce the stock in the hot pan until the sauce is thick and the ribs are sticky. Season with salt. Transfer the ribs to a serving dish, spoon the sauce over top and sprinkle with the gremolata.

Serves 4 to 6.

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