

Travelling foodie/author Margaret Webb raises the steaks

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Calgary Herald

Friday, May 02, 2008

The premise of Ontario journalist Margaret Webb's new book *Apples and Oysters* (Penguin) is so simple, you'll wonder why you didn't think of it first: a cross-country adventure in 11 chapters, detailing the best regional wares each province can offer. The deliciously dogmatic author dishes to *Swerve's* Jacquie Moore on a journey that took her from dulce salad in New Brunswick to grass-fed beef in southern Alberta.

J.M. In which province could you most happily live off the land like a hedonist?

M.W. The place I felt ecstatic to be alive every morning was the foothills of Alberta. I read a rancher's manual from the 1890s that asked, "How do you know this is the life for you?" It said:

"If you wake up feeling exalted every morning, it's for you."

I did--the air, the horses. I felt kind of giddy every morning.

J.M. From a foodie perspective, what surprised you most when you were doing research for the Alberta chapter of your book?

M.W. This won't be a popular answer, but I was surprised by the lack of interest in local food, local farmers, local ranchers. People here love their

Alberta beef but when you ask about it, nobody knows who the local ranchers are or how they grow the beef. Some restaurants couldn't tell me where the beef came from--they'd say "Cargill," which is a distributor. On the other hand, if you bought a \$45 bottle of wine, the sommelier could tell you all about how and where it was produced, even the name of the winemaker. But when it comes to a \$45 steak? Nobody knows or seems to care.

J.M. What's the single most significant change the average Albertan meat-eater could make when it comes to their shopping choices?

M.W. Give your food dollars to local farmers who are raising food in a sustainable way, to someone who is a good environmental steward of the land. Every time you buy meat from an animal you know nothing about in terms of how it was raised, chances are you're supporting a factory farm that is quite polluting. People complain about the high cost of organic food, but you can buy direct from the farmer if money is a concern. As it is, 90 percent of our food costs go to everyone but the farmer. Know your farmer.

J.M. You spent a lot of time at Diamond Willow ranch (an organic ranch near Longview). What struck you most about their operation?

M.W. They're not just raising beef, they're taking care of the land. And we have a choice to support that. There are so many problems in the world--polluted waterways, climate change--that we feel helpless about what we can do. Making sure we have a good food system is an easy thing to achieve: you just put money in the pockets of good farmers and we can turn this around.

J.M. Are Canadians craving a stronger connection to their food?

M.W. I'm optimistic that we're starting to care more about our food and how it's being raised. You get regions of the country who are starting to define themselves by their agriculture and what they do well. The culture of a country isn't just the arts, it's the food we produce. It's chefs connecting with farmers and growing regional produce. People need to start asking questions.

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