

## All in good taste

Author's cross-Canada adventures savour farmers' dedication and serve up tasty feast for foodies

By BILL SPURR Features Writer

SINCE MARGARET WEBB's partner is from Nova Scotia, Webb knows more about this part of the country than most Upper Canadians. Maybe because of that, she chose scallops as the "signature product" from here to explore in her book *Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms*.

Webb said she doesn't have the stereotypical view from Ontario that Atlantic Canada is really just one big fishing village, having been here many times. Nonetheless, her chapters on the East Coast are about scallops, cod, oysters and dulse.

"Dulse could be a bit of a stereotype and I could've chosen something else for New Brunswick, but I was very intrigued with the dulse and the fact that it's considered the best in the world," she said during a stop in Halifax. "That's one thing I wanted to do in the book, instil some pride in what we do well. People say the scallops from Nova Scotia are the best in the world; dulse from New Brunswick is the best in the world; oysters from P.E.I. are the best in the world. How many areas of the country can say one of their foods is the best in the world? I wanted to celebrate that."

Webb grew up on an Ontario farm, but after she left home and moved to Toronto she found that food no longer tasted as good. Her tour of Canadian farms was an effort to find food that was produced with care and that tasted like that of her youth.

Limiting herself to one farm per province proved a challenge.

"It was hard, because Canada's an agricultural superpower," Webb said. "That's really what founded the country, so there were tons of farmers to choose from and a number of really great farmers that are doing the sort of thing I believe in. What I did was take a signature food from each province so people could learn about the history of that food, and it becomes sort of a foodie tour of Canada. For instance, Alberta, everybody thinks of beef so the next process was to find that farmer who grew that product with integrity and passion, and in an environmentally responsible way. I don't think people really realize how environmentally destructive industrial farming is to our countryside."

The mixed family farm Webb grew up on became more mechanized and "monolithic" as its ownership changed from one generation to the next. She said farmers have told her our soil is only half as fertile as it was when the country was founded. As a result, farming done responsibly was hugely important to her.

"The type of farming that's putting the taste and quality back into the food we eat" is important to her. "Almost everybody is telling me food just doesn't taste good any more, it's like cardboard, so I wanted farmers who are really focusing on taste and quality as opposed to producing cheap food in vast quantities."

It was during a meal at the Tempest restaurant in Wolfville that chef Michael Howell

lamented to Webb that he hated how destructive scalloping is to the ocean floor. She'd heard that farmed scallops might present an alternative.

"I'd been reading on the Internet about farmed scallops and when I tried to follow up on those leads, I was told they'd gone out of business, it doesn't happen, it's not economically feasible," Webb said. "So I called the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and they said there's no scallop farming going on."

Eventually, she tracked down Duncan Bates, who has a two-hectare scallop farm in Mahone Bay. Webb found the comparative serenity of an aquaculture operation in marked contrast to her long day on a scallop dragger in the Bay of Fundy.

"Fishing scallops in the Bay of Fundy, that boat was just about the most horrible experience. Those guys work so hard and I'm a pretty hard worker, I'm a farm girl, but that kind of work, I was never so happy for a day to be over. We went out in the boat in 2 in the morning, we started fishing at 5 in the morning and we worked solid until 11 at night, with three 20-minute breaks during that time," she recalled. "Every time they brought a chunk of the ocean bottom up, I didn't know whether to feel sorry for the ocean or for myself."

Webb said the farmers she discovered were proud of the work they were doing, and made her proud to be Canadian. Along the way, she compared everything she ate that was grown the old-fashioned way to food produced by the industrial agricultural sector.

"The taste is remarkably different," she said. "If (beef) is butchered at a small abattoir, you get it dry-aged and it's delicious, it has structure, versus the wet, vapid beef that comes out of the industrialized system. I'm just encouraging people to do the taste test."

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