

## Down on the farm

### 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 author refers to them as "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 grower in contemporary Canada. Woven throughout is a loving memoir of Webb's own family 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 production.

In B.C., she met an orchardist who grafted the Ambrosia apple in the Similkameen Valley. In Saskatchewan, it was a flax-farming family; in New Brunswick, she chose seaweed from Grand Manan. In Manitoba, it was pork, potatoes in the Yukon, scallops from Nova Scotia; from Quebec, Riopelle cheese.

*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 harbours hopes of finding a little patch of land, and of learning how to feed herself. She wants to learn how to 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.

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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