

books

Food lover's tour broader than a simple guide

:Reviewed by Lindsey Wiebe

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Apples to Oysters

A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms

By Margaret Webb

Viking Canada, 272 pages, \$34

Margaret Webb may be a food writer by profession, but this enjoyable book is much broader.

It is equal parts travelogue of rural Canada, guide to sustainable farming practices and sometimes wistful autobiography of Webb's own lost farming life.

She writes in the solidly holistic vein of such authors as American Michael Pollan and J.B. MacKinnon, the Canadian co-author of *The 100 Mile Diet*, who also lends a note of praise for *Apples to Oysters*.

It's not just the preparation and taste of her Alberta beef or Quebec cheeses that's important to her. The Toronto author and Ryerson University writing professor is as concerned about *and interested in* the people and practices responsible for *the dishes* that end up on her plate.

This seemingly boundless curiosity takes Webb over most of the country, her patient partner often in tow, seeking out flavourful highlights from every province and one territory.

The book is cleverly broken down by meal courses, with scallop appetizers in the Maritimes, pork as a Manitoba main course and apple-based desserts from British Columbia.

In her research, some of which has been previously published in the *Globe and Mail* and *Canadian Geographic*, among other publications, the former farm girl gets up close with the faces of rural Canada.

The majority of her subjects are the sort of small, often family-owned farms that had been reduced to an anomaly, but are now *seeing something of a small resurgence* thanks to a renewed interest in regional cuisine.

There are elements of the book that will be familiar to those who've read on the subject of sustainable eating, with plenty of praise for environmentally friendly local practices, and clear skepticism towards the approaches of the large-scale operations and factory farms that dominate agriculture in Canada.

To those farms she profiles, Webb brings colour and life. Her subjects are hard-working but undeniably romantic and independent characters, many of whom have carved out their livelihoods in jaw-droppingly beautiful and often remote enclaves.

There's Johnny Flynn, the seductive oysterman of P.E.I., Manitoba's own Ian Smith, the quiet and thoughtful Humane Society-certified hog farmer, and Jennifer Caynes, the energetic manager of an experimental cod farm on the rocky coast of Newfoundland.

Apples to Oysters is noteworthy in its attention to the kind of undersea farms that rarely cross the minds of many prairie dwellers, with accounts of harvesting dulse in New Brunswick and scallops in Nova Scotia.

Even the food that feels the most familiar, *the humble potato*, makes a fascinating subject.

She concludes each chapter with a few recipes highlighting the section's main ingredients. It's a fun touch, but slightly odd to see a book celebrating local fare featuring recipes whose primary ingredients are only local to small sections of Canadian ocean and prairies.

Webb's reflections on her family's farming history in Ontario form one of the strongest aspects of the book.

Her background has some similarities to but many differences from those farms she encounters on her cross-country journey. But the experience does lend her a special insight into the lives of her subjects and gives her observations added personal appeal.

Webb's recipe descriptions are rich and colourful, and Apples to Oysters will undoubtedly appeal to foodies, armchair travellers and those interested in sustainable agriculture, among others. And for those inclined to mimic Webb and eat their way across Canada, it might also make the ideal guide from fork to farm.

Lindsey Wiebe is a farm girl and Free Press reporter.

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Margaret Webb's reflections on her family's farming history is a strong point.

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