

Luscious road trip

Margaret Webb's farm tour, in lip-smacking prose

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APPLES TO OYSTERS: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms

BY MARGARET WEBB

Viking Canada, 288 pages (\$34)

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The inspiration for Margaret Webb's book, *Apples to Oysters*, was a carrot -- an "electric" one. While researching an article about the best places to enjoy fresh seafood on the East Coast, a chef introduced her to David Greenberg, an Annapolis Valley farmer who supplied the restaurants' fresh ingredients and whose hands were stained "a bronzy hue from his life's work in the soil."

She toured his farm and listened to him rant about the problems with so-called modern farming techniques and rave about the solutions. The fanatical farmer even scooped up a handful of manure and made her smell it.

Her epiphany came when he yanked one of his carrots out of the soil and offered it to her to taste:

Only in colour and name did it compare to the bland, dry, woody carrots found in most supermarkets. Yes, as David promised, the taste was electric indeed. And that carrot also zapped my brain with a similarly obsessive desire, not to farm, mind you, but to travel across the country discovering passionate zealots like David, a new generation of Canadian farmers who are putting nutrition and taste back into the foods we eat.

Apples to Oysters is the result, and it couldn't have come at a better time. The world is mired in a food crisis, with the cost of grains, fuels and fertilizers rising exponentially.

Haven't we been hearing for years about the impending demise of the Canadian farmer and how they're one bad harvest away from bankruptcy?

Having grown up on a farm herself, Webb has personal experience to call on. Or, rather, as she puts it, it was two farms: a commercial beef feedlot that "fed people in the city and generated income" and the "home farm," which produced food for her family's consumption.

Her memories of childhood and adolescence on the farm make for some of the best writing in this book, effectively drawing the reader into her crusade. "I remember meals tasting like the season," she writes. "Spring is green, tender and tart. Summer is red, seductive and juicy. Fall is golden, sweet and thick. Winter is a hearty stew made from frozen vegetables - a rainbow of colours, spicy, smouldering."

Although all the evocative descriptions quoted so far come from the introduction, the rest of the book is equally compelling. Webb covers the country regionally, with the chapters divided up into a menu of sorts.

She begins with Appetizers, sampling oysters, dulse (an edible seaweed) and scallops in the Maritimes. She continues with Mains, seeking out cod in Newfoundland, pork in Manitoba, flax in Saskatchewan and beef (what else?) in Alberta. She even visits an organic farm up in the Yukon and finishes the literary feast with B.C. apples, Quebec cheese and Ontario icewine.

Each chapter is a self-contained story in which she visits a specific farm and then often explores other farms or related industries in the region. She tries to get her hands dirty every time, doing the work the producers do, such as rising at 1:30 a.m. to sort and shuck scallops for the next 18 hours.

Recipes using the featured ingredients close each chapter.

Chapter One, "Johnny Flynn's Oysters," which focuses on oyster farming in Colville Bay, P.E.I., is the best in the book, with its spicy undercurrent of sex and seduction.

The three closing chapters are also strong, especially the one set in B.C., which describes the genesis of the Ambrosia apple variety.

The middle section, spent mostly on the Prairies, is the flattest, although its subjects are important. Interestingly, the most compelling chapter there is the one describing Webb's visit to the Yukon, where the farm she profiles is failing, defeated by financial hardship.

Margaret Webb is very much a part of this book. During her cross-country voyage of discovery, she explores her personal beliefs about food, farming and her family's farming experiences -- including her theory that her father's early death from Parkinson's disease might have been caused by the fertilizers and pesticides he used.

At its heart, this is a book about food and all the sensual pleasures it offers. In this department, Webb delivers with mouth-watering, lip-smacking descriptions.

And she doesn't hold back when it comes to saying exactly where her quest took her. Describing a memorable visit to a Manitoba "boar station," she explains how an employee collects semen for artificial insemination. It's an unforgettable scene, which she describes deftly, with just the right amount of humour.

The recipe for Apples to Oysters is equal parts compelling and informative, with a dash of humorous and a smidgen of moving, along with side notes of satisfying and fresh. Enjoy it with a glass of your favourite vintage or brew and be prepared to be left feeling both sated and hungry for more, just as with any good meal.

Joe Wiebe is a Vancouver writer who loves eating fresh, local food. Read more of his writing at Joewiebe.com.

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