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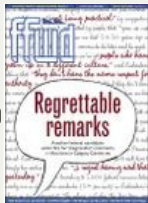
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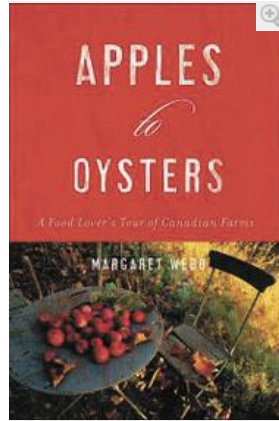
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BOOKS

Apples to Oysters, and of course, Alberta beef

Margaret Webb serves up delicious stories of Canadian farms  
Published September 18, 2008 by Anthea Black in Books

Margaret Webb would make an amazing lunch date. Her book, *Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms* is a delicious account of eating her way across the country. She visits farms and samples food in every province, from Prince Edward Island oysters to British Columbia Ambrosia apples and, yes, she even stops in at Calgary's River Café for a locally raised Diamond Willow steak.



Webb is the Stuart McLean of Canadian food writing, searching out stories of Canadian farmers that are at once hilarious and heartening. She gives voice to farmers and praises the foods that they produce with an enthusiasm that lifts their tales of hard work, innovation, humour and the occasional spot of good luck from ordinary, to absolutely extraordinary. There is a delicious tale waiting to be discovered in every field, body of water and valley. She chases them down with so much enthusiasm and grit, you'd think that she was a gold prospector.

In a certain way, she is. Canadian foods produced by real farmers are one of our most valuable yet overlooked natural resources. Part of what her book endeavours to do is change the way we think about this bounty that's right under our feet. Initially, the thought of reading about a tour of Canadian farms sounds like being dragged along on a school field trip: educational yet compulsory. A good, wholesome opportunity to learn about where our food comes from and, indeed, what many generations of Canadian families spend their lives doing. Instead, Webb's account of her travels to Canadian farms in every province and territory offers up all the delights of an adventure to an exotic foreign land. But, have we become that out of touch with our food?

Gardening is demanding work, but multiply raising a modest hobby garden by 10 hours a day, 365 days a year and you'll get an idea of how much most of the farmers Webb meets work to bring these amazing foods to market. She often treks alone to rural farms, rolls up her sleeves and experiences farming first-hand. This is where many of the book's best anecdotes are found — in her casual one-on-one chats with farmers and in the many interesting tasks she's asked to perform. Try visiting a genetically modified Manitoba boar that's being jerked off so his little piggy semen can be frozen and used to artificially inseminate the lady pigs.

Among the more back-breaking tasks Webb documents are pulling out invasive blueweed in Pincher Creek's cattle ranching country, shucking scallops all night long on a tiny boat in the Bay of Fundy and finding her balance on a high ladder while picking Spartan apples in B.C.'s heavenly Similkameen valley. Her reward is a sample of the freshest foods that are as local as it gets: organic Alberta beef that she calls "a revelation," a quick lunch of pan-fried scallops aboard that tiny boat and the first apple from a prized harvest. She joins the farmers as they head home from the fields for dinner and conversation. Occasionally Webb is joined on her adventures by partner and fellow-foodie Nancy.

In the lonely business of farming, people are often just grateful to have an extra pair of hands around, a little companionship and a sympathetic ear. The tale of woe for many farmers, and indeed all Canadians, is that thousands of small farms all over our country have gone bankrupt. Even worse, is that many Canadian farmers actually lose about \$16,000 per year. They face precarious weather conditions, a steep learning curve, huge start-up costs and economic competition from massive corporate farms and multinational corporations. Rural depopulation is high, and farming communities suffer greatly when there's no one left to continue the gruelling work, but the folks in Webb's book are really working to make a difference. Webb claims she can taste their determination and care. In her many "taste tests" she pits their foods against those from conventional producers and grocery stores. The little guys win absolutely every time.

BOOKS IN SEPTEMBER 18, 2008 ISSUE

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