
APPLES TO OYSTERS

From Bonavista to Vancouver Island

Listeners of Matt Galloway's *Here & Now* show on CBC radio may have recently heard a guest declare that "we have lawyers, accountants and doctors. We really should all have our own farmer." That guest was Margaret Webb, whose new book, *Apples to Oysters: A Food Lover's Tour of Canadian Farms*, is about the two years she spent visiting farmers across the country. And if it's not absolutely clear from her CBC interview, Webb is passionate about our farmers.

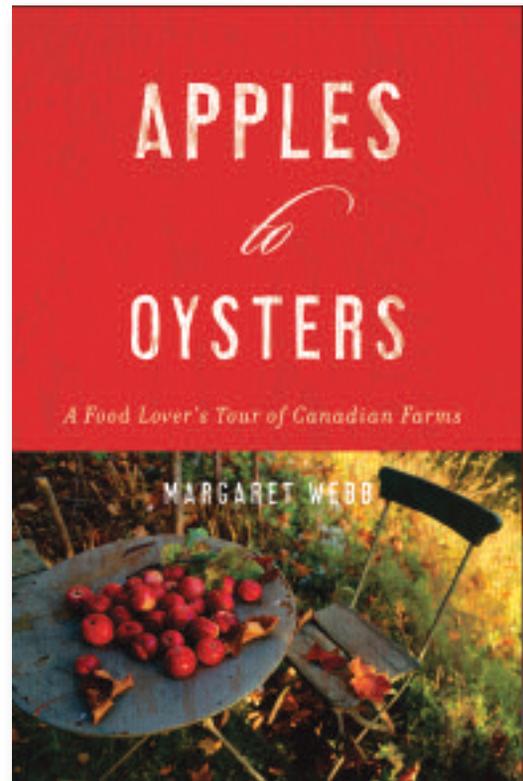
It wasn't clear at first to the farmers. Webb recalls one farmer greeting her at his gate and shaking his head. "I still can't believe that a writer from Toronto would want to come help me do my chores," he told her. Webb is not your typical city-born-and-bred writer. Although she has lived in Toronto and Montreal while pursuing a career that has included senior editorial positions and freelance poetry and fiction writing, as well as in Los Angeles where she penned a couple of screenplays for Walt Disney Studios, she grew up on a cattle farm near Barrie, Ontario. *Apples to Oysters* brings her full circle. "It's very natural that I ended up listening to farmers' stories. I was used to listening to my dad's stories."

Those stories form *Apples to Oysters*, which takes readers on a detailed journey to independent farms across the country, visiting what Webb describes to me as a new wave – artisanal farmers who are concerned about quality and taste before quantity. "It's very exciting to hear farmers caring about food. When I was growing up, farmers thought of food as crop, something to produce."

The book is divided into three sections: Appetizers, Mains and To Finish. Chapters (one per province) focus on a single food, delving into the life of a farmer who raises or grows that item. From Prince Edward Island come oysters, from British Columbia it's apples, and in the Yukon it's vegetables from the region's largest organic farm. "I believe in the guys that I wrote about," Webb says. "I stand by my farmers."

Webb is thorough in her research, detailing the agricultural history of each food/province pairing, and the workings of each farm she visits. By reliving conversations and experiences – downing a glass of raw milk fresh from the cow in Quebec, rounding up cattle in Alberta – she gives us the sense that we're all right there with her on the farm. More than just the ins and outs of farming, it's the people living on the farms who come into clear focus. We learn that Ian Smith's family eats at five o'clock every day, that Alberta rancher Keith Everts is a former vegetarian hippie whose nickname is Holly (short for Hollywood), and that Quebec cheesemaker Frédéric Poulin and his wife Karina, a civil engineer, have been trying for a baby for five years.

Which is precisely what Webb wants us to know about our farmers. So many of our local food concepts, she thinks, are intellectually based. "By writing the stories of farmers, I want these concepts to move down into people's hearts," she explains. In other words, get to know the peo-



ple who feed us. To this end, Webb has asked her profiled farmers to join her at each of her book launches as she moves across the country.

Along with introducing readers to Canada's farmers, Webb clearly explains the state of the industry, particularly how agricultural policies and regulations have changed the face of farming – from one of small family farms to the proliferation of mass industrial farming. Case in point: In the mid-'90s, the Manitoba government rolled out a series of initiatives to attract larger producers, which included ending existing controls over how pork processors bought pigs. The result was that, five years later, a mere 11 percent of pig farmers were selling 82 percent of the province's hogs.

Webb is hopeful that this can change, that with more consumer education and better organization on the part of farmers ("farmers need to develop an image that consumers can trust," she says) and improved government-supported agricultural programs, we can move forward.

Webb is planning to hold numerous speaking engagements during the summer. Visit her website, www.margaretwebb.com, for more information. □

***Apples to Oysters*, by Margaret Webb.
Penguin Group (Canada), © 2008.**

Lea Zeltserman is a freelance writer in Toronto who lives for books and food. Her work has previously appeared in The Walrus, Eye Weekly, Shameless and Edible Toronto.