

Triumphs & Tribulations in the Heartland

REVIEW

Lentil Underground: Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America

by Liz Carlisle

Liz Carlisle was four years into a good career as a country singer when the cognitive dissonance got to be too much. Better to let her tell it:

“... Born and raised in Montana, I’d grown up on country radio, and I loved weaving romantic agrarian lyrics into pretty melodies. When I’d graduated from college, with a new record to sell and a full schedule of shows for the summer, it had seemed like the greatest thing in the world to travel through rural America and tell its story. But now that I’d crisscrossed the country several times in my station wagon, I knew the sobering truth. I’d been lying.

As I listened to people who came up to chat after my shows, it dawned on me that life in the heartland was not what I’d thought. Farming had become a grueling industrial occupation, squeezed between the corporations that sold farmers their chemicals and the corporations that bought their grain.”

Right away it’s clear she can write, and what a joy her story of a short-lived music career might have been had she chosen to write that kind of book. Carlisle had other horizons on her mind, though, and it is to Montana she returns after a spell working in the office of that state’s then-freshly minted U.S. Senator, Jon Tester. He supplied the link to the story she took up after studying journalism with Michael Pollan at UC-Berkeley, the lentil farmers behind a company called Timeless Natural Food, originally known as Timeless Seeds. These hardy souls were staking out a future for post-industrial farming in Montana, a semi-arid state known for short growing seasons, long distances and lack of major cities. Industrial wheat was a king whose rule was close to absolute.

Specifically she tells the story of Dave Oien, who returned to his family’s Montana farm as a young longhair in 1976, determined to build some solar heat collectors and generally reorient the farm in a new direction. Oien was tagged as a kindred spirit by Dr. James Sims, a university professor with unconventional notions about the utility of nitrogen-fixing crops, and a nonprofit called Alternative Energy Resource Organization offered ideas about reducing reliance on dirty energy and synthetic fertilizers. AERO suggested black medic, a nitrogen-fixing plant already known and despised by Montana farmers as a common weed, as a substitute for expensive soil inputs.

Eventually Oien’s search for a good nitrogen-fixing crop led him to lentils, and over the years Timeless weathered droughts, the indifference of the state’s agricultural status quo, and a big contract with Trader Joe’s that vanished overnight at the very moment it was bringing in enough income to promise salvation. Carlisle’s narrative carries her into the lives of a host of like-minded independents. It’s a branching group biography of sorts as she tells the stories of Bud Barta, Ann Sinclair, Jerry Habets, Casey Bailey, Jody and Crystal Manuel, Doug and Anna Crabtree, and Tuna McAlpine, the pro-gun libertarian who turns into a vocal advocate of organic farming. And there are many others, all memorable and sympathetically sketched. Only briefly featured yet always offering critical support is the man who ascended to the highest ranks of American politics, Jon Tester.

Carlisle captures the early excitement of finding different ways of doing things – “Bud’s place was darn near farming itself” – and her knack for clear, vivid storytelling lets her work in everything from techniques

such as undersowing to the prosaic realities of crop insurance, cash flow and obtuse bureaucracy without once sinking into a quotidian bog.

The real value of Carlisle’s account may well lie in the way it is alive to the ordeals and satisfactions of change as people struggle to create new facts on (as well as in) the ground. These characters have to make a new space in an economy and a farm culture that might pause to shrug if they all went away, and then again might not. She follows the story where it takes her, and ideas about the way things ought to be aren’t allowed to cloud the view. A big part of good journalism is listening:

“Casey was particularly concerned that no one was representing people like himself, whose lives and farms were ‘not black and white.’ He had vocal

friends on both sides of the so-called national food fight – zealous urban community gardeners and proud conventional grain growers – but the space in between was a veritable echo chamber. It was uncomfortable to be the organic farmer who was still using diesel-based tillage, or the conventional producer who’d cut his herbicide use to nearly – but not quite – nothing. Since these folks didn’t see their systems in progress as ideal, they tended to be very humble. And very silent. ‘The loudest voices in the organic movement are definitely not coming from the gray areas,’ Casey observed, ‘because when you get in the gray areas, you get quieter. But we need to have a voice.’”

Carlisle’s voice is especially adept and supple, and she is still young, giving us much to look forward to.

– Chris Walters



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