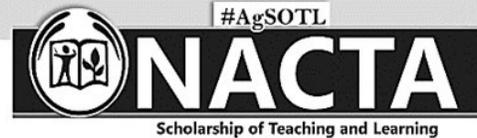


Book Reviews



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

Liz Carlisle. 2015. Penguin Random House, New York. (298 pp)

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To meet our shared concerns of solving global food challenges, keeping farming profitable, and maintaining a healthy environment it is useful to look 'outside the box' that is conventional agriculture. Few recent books offer such a unique perspective and viable example as that provided by Liz Carlisle in *Lentil Underground*. This is a contemporary story of innovative farmers in Montana who are going against the conventional agricultural tide in multiple ways.

The drama unfolds in truly narrative style, and one cannot help but be amazed by the excitement generated in the recent growth of the lentil industry as told by a consummate story teller. As a critic of Big Food and Big Agriculture, Carlisle for some years had woven the challenges facing farmers into her country music. When she went to work as a legislative aide for a Montana senator, little did she know that he was himself an organic farmer and active partner in this 'underground conspiracy' to develop entirely new crops and markets that would help small farmers compete with their corporate, industrialized and conventional neighbors. This job provided both the contacts and the context for what would become her later adventure in exploring the initiatives of a few innovative farmers who were definitely far from mainstream in the state.

This is a story about farming, about looking for new options in a conservative industry, and about farmers developing their own information when none was available. It is a story about underground biology, testing new crops and evaluating their performance, building soil fertility, and confirming food quality of new products for the consumer. It is also about creative farming practices such as multiple species systems, finding the right plant densities and planting dates, and minimal tillage to conserve water in this challenging part of the world. To be sure, they found a few willing allies in the university, in the NRCS, and in the local communities who were able to see and share at least a part of their vision.

Lentil Underground is an apt title for a book that is concerned as much about the economic and social interactions of key farmers who were operating 'under the radar' of the conventional agricultural industry. They carved out a niche through creative approaches to farming and to marketing, to convincing some in the establishment that they were worthy of production loans and money to finance processing plants, and to seeking public support in research and acceptance of a new product. Yet much of the success is due to their own on-farm research, abilities to network and support each other, and to weather some really difficult economic setback situations and take them in stride. Above all, the book chronicles the dogged determination of committed people who were willing to take great risks to realize their vision. In the process, they provided a model to many others for what is possible with hard work and

support of community, with lessons that surpass those learned in the field about how to grow and process alternative crops.

Ultimately, *Lentil Underground* is a story about people working together, outside the mainstream, and willing to take challenges and endure the ridicule of curious neighbors and those in a conservative industry. It is a story about hope, about how we can use natural resources efficiently, and about how sustainable systems are more likely to be developed around the fringes than in conventional agriculture.

Author Liz Carlisle is a native of 'Big Sky Country', former country music composer and singer, professional geographer, and now a Fellow at the Center for Diversified Farming Systems at U.C. Berkeley. A prolific writer on farming and food related issues, Dr. Carlisle has crafted a well-documented narrative on the recent challenges and successes of a small group of determined farmers to break away from standard crops and practices to explore the potentials of a new crop and a growing market for unique products. Their story reveals the intriguing possibilities of alternative crops that can do well with limited moisture in a tough environment. This model shows options for agriculture to weather the vagaries of a water-limited and unpredictable future climate situation, if those of us in agriculture are willing to dream big and not be constrained by conventional wisdom about the future of farming. It provides a valuable supplementary reading for courses in agriculture, natural resources, and development studies.

Submitted by –
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