



## Lentil Underground

RENEGADE FARMERS AND THE FUTURE OF FOOD IN AMERICA

LIZ CARLISLE

PENGUIN GROUP, NEW YORK - 2015

It's amazing what can come from the bottom drawer of a metal desk on Cruse Avenue in Helena. You see, that's where I pick up advance reader copies of books sent to *Montana Magazine* for consideration as a potential book review.

In early November, I swung by the office, left my truck running outside and was given a pile of books that had accumulated in the drawer. I always read the publisher information and at least the first chapter of each book to see if it might be a good fit.

From nearly the moment I began reading *Lentil Underground* I knew this book was a hit in the making. I remember literally, stopping reading - still in the prologue - putting the book down and breathing. This was going to be an important story that would spark a significant discussion about farming and food in Montana and across America.

I devoured the book and went on a search for the author, Liz Carlisle, a native Montanan who I found in Berkeley, California, (now Dr. Carlisle, PhD) where she is a fellow at the University of California. I wanted to know more about the genesis of her research and the roots, if you will, of this landmark book about a group of farmers in Montana who have been at the forefront of the organic farming and emerging pulse crop movement. Carlisle was kind enough to do a lengthy and far reaching interview with me that you can find at [www.MontanaMagazine.com](http://www.MontanaMagazine.com). Our interaction confirmed that in Carlisle and her book we have on our hands something very special.

*Lentil Underground* is a very well researched, expertly written book about how, through the courage and conviction of a few farmers, Montana went from growing virtually no pulse crops two decades ago to being one of the top five largest producers of peas and lentils in the country. It is the story of Dave Oein and his company, Timeless Seeds, and a dedicated group of agricultural innovators who, acre by acre, are changing the very landscape of Montana.

In many ways, this shift in approach is tantamount to a social revolution. The farm economy has an organizational inertia that is at the core of the very social structure of Montana's small towns. Challenging that view

equates to challenging the status quo - the very idea of how things should be and how they should look.

This kind of book could easily fall into what I call the "soapbox" category where the author uses the nonfiction moniker to prove a point or take a position. Carlisle rises above that trap and presents a clear-eyed, warts-and-all book that examines the case of the "renegade farmers" complete with the problems they face and the promise the future could hold.

Equally impressive is that, as we would expect from a Montana native, Carlisle does all of this not from the safety of her office. No, she gets her hands dirty and sees for herself first-hand what's "on the ground" in her home state.

This combination of serious academic research and authentic human interaction is perhaps what makes *Lentil Underground* not only an important book but a great read. Carlisle introduces us to Oein and a plethora of other members of the *Lentil Underground* in a way that is accessible, personal and compelling. The writing is top notch and the reader is allowed to make his or her own conclusions about the information presented.

I learned a ton from reading *Lentil Underground* including the fact that the delicious garnish on my favorite dish at Blu Funk's Bigfork restaurant Showthyme is, in fact, a specialty lentil called Black Beluga. Who knew?

The publisher materials and book cover evoke the name of *Omnivore's Dilemma* author Michael Pollan, and while that might help sell a few books, I'm not sure it is a very good comparison. Don't get me wrong, I liked *Omnivore's Dilemma*, but in my view *Lentil Underground* is the better book. Perhaps that's because it is about Montana, includes some people I know and others about whom I have heard. But I think it's more than that. I think it is about the purity of Carlisle's approach to the subject and the care she takes to be honest and fair.

My guess is you are going to hear a lot in the coming months and years about Liz Carlisle, her book and her work. As for me, I'm heading back downtown to see what else is in the bottom of that desk drawer.



Carlisle



**ONLINE EXTRA:** To read extended interviews with *Sweet Thunder* author Ivan Doig and *Lentil Underground - Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America* author Liz Carlisle, visit this story online at [MontanaMagazine.com](http://MontanaMagazine.com). Read all of

Doug Mitchell's reviews at [MontanaMagazine.com/Montana-books](http://MontanaMagazine.com/Montana-books).