Prairie Feast: A Writer’s Journey Home for Dinner
by Amy Jo Ehman

Reviewed by Andrea Belcham

It took a plate of pork chops to convert Saskatoon-based writer Amy Jo Ehman to the local foods movement. Not that five years ago, when she committed to a year of eating primarily Saskatchewan-grown foods, the “movement” was anywhere near as popularized as it is today. While she lives in one of the most fertile lands in the country, the bulk of her province’s agricultural products – in 2005 and now – is exported. And though she grew up on a farm, no stranger to plucking a chicken or digging potatoes, she admits that her family, like many other farm families, depended on the supermarket for their daily meals. Then one day Ehman and her partner, John, buy a pig from friends who have taken up animal husbandry, and the resultant meat makes them crave a real-foods diet:

    I was well aware that fresh-picked fruits and vegetables taste better than imported fruits and vegetables, but I was completely unaware that the same principle could apply to meat… From that day forward, I vowed to stock my freezer with meat from farmers who raise their animals on a smaller scale, where sunshine and grass are part of the program. (15)

    Not long after, Ehman and John embark on a local foods project that incorporates all the food groups. One is tempted to compare Prairie Feast with 100-Mile Diet by BC’s J.B. MacKinnon and Alisa Smith, but Ehman’s initiative is unique in ways that extend beyond differences in regional agriculture. Her “ground rules,” for instance – not forcing her diet upon her dinner hosts; not adhering to local foods when dining out; and retaining certain luxury or essential food stuffs like wine, coffee, and spices – reflect a project bent on discovery, not privation. And discover they do: both new foods, and new ways of looking at old foods.
Ehman forsakes a chronological, blow-by-blow account of her year, instead presenting a series of essays, each centred on a particular food. In “The Merry Cherry,” we travel with her to the Bruno Cherry Festival, where she enters a pit-spitting competition (achieving five feet – no record-breaker, alas) and hankers after an elusive cherry cocktail. “Hot Stuff” is an homage to her friend Penny’s mustard, a condiment more treasured than gold in Ehman’s home. With “Half-Baked,” Ehman tastes hubris when she submits her bread – long voted by John to be the “second best baguette in the city” (87) – for judgment in the Weyburn Wheat Festival’s bread-baking challenge. Saskatoon berries, pickled cucumbers, kitchen garden potatoes, and wild mushrooms are all honoured through stories that blend the author’s present-day locavore quest with her reminiscences of family culinary traditions.

The Wisconsin-born John is often the reader’s fellow initiate in Saskatchewan food culture. “Fall Versus Fowl” recalls Ehman’s attempt to acquaint her then husband-to-be with a classic Prairie Fowl Supper at a rural church. It’s an anecdote in which food is highly anticipated but never to be had: thanks to Ehman’s mix-up in dates, the evening ends with curling rather than communal pies and coffee. In “Tough Love,” Ehman wonders whether a man who puts a cap on the number of zucchini plants growing in her garden is right for her, after all. Prairie Feast is kept light by many such moments of mislaid good intentions along the path towards local eating. Sometimes the humour gets downright quirky, as when the author remembers her dad’s habit of sticking the tail of a freshly slaughtered pig on unsuspecting children:

After Dad cut off the pig’s tail, he attached the fat end to a big yellow diaper pin. . . Dad put the pig tail in his pocket and waited for his moment to strike. From that time on, I watched him like a hawk, because if you lost vigilance and became distracted over a game of rummy or Lego or race cars, you might find that pig tail pinned to the back of your shirt. (13)

Yet the levity is balanced by moments of introspection regarding the personal and political implications of the author’s food choices. “The Morel of the Story” describes a pivotal shift in Ehman’s awareness when she is foraging for mushrooms in the forest:
I looked around and there wasn’t a mushroom to be seen – just endless trees . . .

My eye followed a butterfly as it skipped through the woods and landed on a stump. Then a magical thing happened. Not only were my eyes adjusting to the shadows, they were adjusting to the scale . . . and suddenly I saw that the forest floor was teeming with mushrooms. (117)

Ehman’s immersion in her local foods project yields many small discoveries of people defying large-scale commercial agricultural methods or rejecting the convenience of processed foods to retain or develop alternative food traditions. People like Jerome Pulvermacher, the third-generation sausage purveyor and owner of a small-town dry goods store. Or her wild mushroom consultant, Gerry Ivanochko, who helps her distinguish between the edible chanterelle and the poisonous false chanterelle. Or even Ehman’s own mother, a prolific pickler whose cucumber concoctions have captured John’s heart. Through Ehman’s encounters, rather than through bombardment by agricultural statistics, we can begin to build a portrait of a community.

This is very much Ehman’s menu, however. Concluding each chapter is a handful of recipes illustrating the author’s favourite ways of preparing the food she gathers – a useful feature for those readers inspired by her journey to try some local foods of their own. Wild Rice and Dried Cherry Salad, Blue Potato Pakoras, Berry Muesli Martini, Deep-Fried Zucchini Flowers, and the other collected recipes emphasize freshness and simplicity. The book itself is beautiful to behold, with french flaps and glossy pages that offer tempting photographs of the foods being profiled.

As the year wraps up, Ehman discovers that her tastes have changed. What begins as an experiment has irrevocably changed her tastes and her expectations in quality. She has become a food activist:

When I came to that fork in the road, staring to my left down the well-worn byway of modern industrial food systems and, to my right, down the prairie trail of local food ways, I chose the path less travelled. To be sure, it’s a slower route, with more twists and turns and fewer billboards vying for my attention, but it’s a scenic road and I like the folks I meet along the way. (232)

*Prairie Feast* is a dish well prepared.
Andrea Belcham is the Montreal-based author of the forthcoming *Food and Fellowship: Projects and Recipes to Feed a Community* (The Alternate Press).

Buy *Prairie Feast* at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):