



Lentil Underground—Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America, by Liz Carlisle

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To cite this article: Fabian Menalled (2015) Lentil Underground—Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America, by Liz Carlisle, *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 39:10, 1172-1174, DOI: [10.1080/21683565.2015.1087445](https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2015.1087445)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2015.1087445>



Accepted author version posted online: 16 Sep 2015.
Published online: 16 Sep 2015.



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Book Review

***Lentil Underground—Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America*, by Liz Carlisle, Gotham Books, Penguin Group, USA, 320 p., hardcover, ISBN 978-1-592-40920-4.**

Much has been written on the theoretical foundations, the environmental benefits, and the economic and social consequences of sustainable food systems. But do these systems actually work outside the realms of the academic ivory towers? Can a handful of “audacity rich but capital poor” farmers from a remote and sparsely populated corner of Montana defy the traditional agribusiness and, in doing so, enhance the environmental, economic, and social health of their local communities? Can their alternative cropping systems help close the loop between farms and fork?

The sustainability of food systems depends as much on the biophysical resources essential for production as it does on the stakeholders that manage them and the network that integrates production, processing, distribution, and consumption. Located hundreds of miles away from the big cities, farmers markets, and renowned restaurants, central Montana is a drought threatened region with struggling rural communities where “amber waves of grain were like a religion.” This is not the background scenario where one would expect a sustainable food revolution to occur. Yet, it happened.

Almost 30 years ago, a group of four “renegade farmers”—Bud Barta, Jim Barngrover, Tom Hastings, and David Oie—decided to radically transform the fossil-fuel dependent wheat monocultures that dominated their family’s farms. Their dream was that by including legumes into the traditional wheat and fallow rotation, they could enhance soil fertility, reduce erosion, decrease pest pressure, and save soil moisture. Early on they partnered with Dr. Jim Sims, a nontraditional researcher from Montana State University, to grow black medic, a self-reseeding leguminous cover. Unfortunately, black medic turned out not to be the viable idea they

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expected. Yet, rather than abandoning their goal, these four farmers decided to refocus their energy in growing pulse crops: edible annual legumes like peas and lentils that also fix atmospheric nitrogen. By 1994, their enterprise grew into a small organic lentil and heritage grain business, Timeless Natural Food. Later on, by diversifying into processing, wholesale distribution, and branded marketing, Timeless Natural Food helped link other parts of the food chain. Today, Timeless Natural Food is a thriving enterprise in central Montana involving a closely knitted network of dozens of organic farmers growing a plethora of heirloom crops and adding many jobs to their local economy.

In *Lentil Underground—Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America*, Liz Carlisle relates the story of Timeless Natural Food and its farmers, reflecting the many social and environmental angles of agricultural sustainability. By embedding herself with organic growers in her home state of Montana, the author who holds a B.A. from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of California, Berkeley, explores the network at the base of an alternative food system, recounting its many setbacks and successes. During her keen chronicle, Carlisle meets a wide variety of unorthodox farmers: from the idealist who studied philosophy and dropped out from grad school to return to his family farm and convinced his father to convert to organic, to the yoga practitioner who sings arias as he drives a tractor; from the gun-toting libertarian, to the deeply Christian who becomes an outspoken advocate for organic farming and healthy food systems. While having different views and opinions of the reality that surrounds them, together this wide array of farmers share a deep understanding of the importance of soil health, ecosystem integrity, community development, and sustainability. They are systems thinkers continuously assessing economic trade-offs while considering the health of their biologically diverse farms and rural communities. Collectively, these farmers and their families challenge any stereotype the reader may have about rural communities in the United States.

Confronting the corporate agribusiness model is not a simple task. Yet, Timeless Natural Food and its thriving movement of locally connected organic farmers are a living example that it can be done. Their credibility is assured by the thousands of acres that every year are seeded organically with diverse crops, their million-dollar enterprise, and the hundreds of food stores that retail their products. Throughout the book, Liz Carlisle goes beyond recounting their stories and, in doing so, she reflects on the complexity of sustainable socioecological enterprises. Winner of the 2015 General Nonfiction category at the Green Book Festival, *Lentil Underground* is written for a general audience. Yet, it will also be of interest for undergraduate students interested in critiquing the assumptions of conventional agriculture as well as for the

academically savvy scholar who wants to learn more about the struggles and successes of a remote and vibrant community of dryland farmers who every day are transforming our food systems.

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