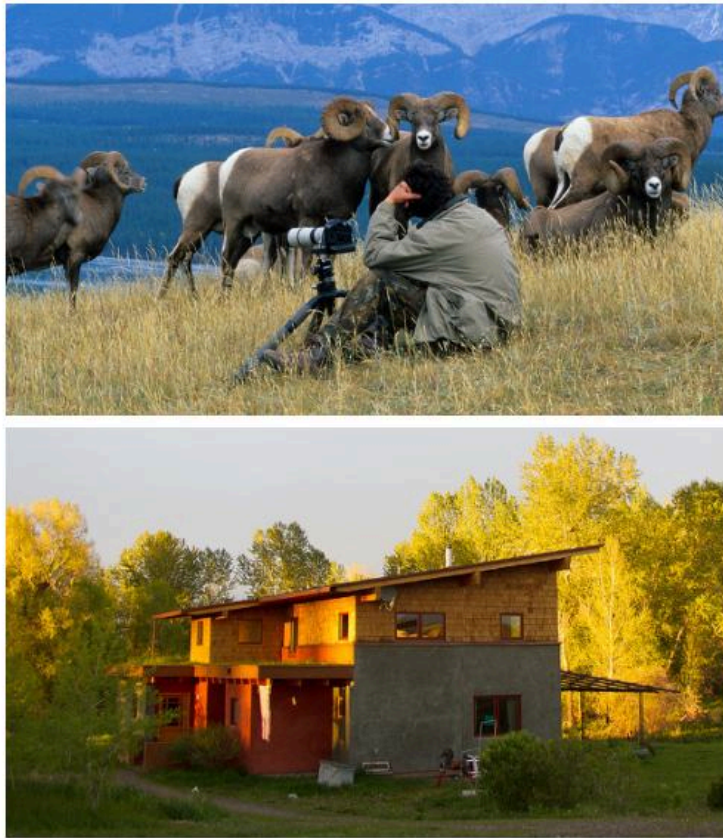




A DIFFERENT FOOD CHAIN

PHOTOGRAPHY AND STORY *by* DUSAN AND LORCA SMETANA



Growing up as children on opposite ends of the world, we both knew foods that started and ended in family hands. Lorca was raised in the West, harvesting vegetables, mushrooms, shellfish, seaweeds, and fish from rich mountain and coastal lands. And in a small village in a deep valley in Czechoslovakia, Dusan lived in a world where community herders collected family flocks of geese, cows, and sheep from each house in the mornings and took them up into the hills. All houses had gardens, and hunters gathered around stoves in the evening—smoking, eating sardines and telling stories of stag, boar and roebuck to the listening ears of kids hoping someday to become, too, a *myslivec*—a word that holds two meanings: hunter and thinker.

In that world, you earned the right to hunt larger and larger game through points gained over years of study, woodcraft, and hours spent tending and observing centuries-old forest lands and their inhabitants. These same gnarled hunter's hands grafted fruit tree branches, smoked blood sausages, crafted plum brandy, and built chicken coops. One of the most valued qualities in man, woman or child was that of craftiness—the ability to make something from nothing, to waste little, to turn your hands to anything.

Now, a hemisphere away in Montana, we live a life grown from these Old World roots, grafted with fresh, wild, western stock. Always dreaming to live someday in the Wild West of his nighttime stories, Dusan stubbornly made his way here, tempting Lorca away from islands to the great Rockies. Montana has great scope for public access to foodstuffs. Starting from bare land, our family has crafted a progressively more self-sustaining and community-fed life, one in which bodies, land, skills and foods are intimately entwined. We ask more of our food than it just be available in a box. It's opened our curiosity about provenance, freshness, and nutrition, but also about engagement, beauty and narrative. This engagement has fed not only our bodies, but who we are to each other, and how our children have grown into this world.

There is both a pragmatism and a gentleness in our kids around animal life and death, a way of being around mortality that feels more real and more true than what we see in children sheltered from any and all death. Our kids can dote upon and bottle-feed lambs, carry ducks around in their arms, cradle tiny chicks, and still get really pleased about the night's chicken soup, an antelope brought home, the slow-roasted whole lamb, or the successful sale of a hand-raised pig. Being the one to actually harvest an

animal is not theirs yet, but it comes closer as they practice target shooting with bow and .22, pluck feathers and shot from grouse brought home, and track or sit in tree stands with Dusan as he hunts for deer, like he did with his father.

They take a similar pleasure in eating braised pheasant meat as they do in picking and eating peas from the garden that they planted and watched grow. As we cleaned those pheasants, we laid out the bright contents of their stomachs and the kids noticed the variety in each bird's breakfast — blueberries and soybeans from one, green leaves and tiny grasshoppers for another, red and white snowberries for a third. With each comes an imaged landscape, a vision of a bright pheasant morning, a good pheasant life.

The strength in the deeply colored breast muscles, the brilliance of their feathers, and the grace of their limbs speaks to the health and vitality of these bodies that will feed ours.

This is a different kind of food chain we have claimed here. There is the link of the food that we hunt and fish in the wild—elk, deer, antelope, grouse, pheasants, partridge, salmon, trout, and walleye. There is the food that we gather in the wild, like chanterelle, morel, oyster mushrooms, elderberries, chokecherries, and rose hips. There is the link that consists of the food that we grow—root vegetables, fruits and greens, honey, eggs, and herbs. There is the link of the meat that we raise and harvest here on our land—lamb, pork, chicken, turkey and duck.





There is the fifth link of food that we collect from friends—potatoes, goat cheese, jellies, plums, mead and beef. And finally, there is the link of the food that we buy—coffee and tea, yogurt, crackers, wine, beer, and oil. One day, some of these last things may move into the other links.

Food that has a story tastes different. All harvested animals in our lives are known, thanked, and honored. The mushrooms gathered with a sister on the spring banks of the Yellowstone River have a savor to them. The elk bull that you hauled off the mountains in the company of an old friend and a five-month-old baby makes your face light up at the table when it's served, garnished by laughter. The wild boar shot with the gun your father always used is served up with memory. The dross of what we harvest is not wasted, but goes to feed Czech-born hunting dogs, poultry, and the gardens, feeding the larger cycle of life. We create entire meals that the kids had their hands on — planting, weeding, watering, feeding, harvesting, stalking, hauling, discovering, slicing, measuring, baking and serving. Why we harvest, why we breed, why we barter — this is how we treat our children, our bodies, our land, our world — with love. As we sit at the table and see the looks on our children's faces — that pride, that interest, that fun! — we exhale, and Dusan says, "That's why we hunt."

This beauty and this heart is the what, and it is the why.

