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Thought For Food

A full diet of topics filled the book, including farm ethics, the dynamics of refugee gardens and public markets and the politics of the potato

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Local, Simple Fresh considers the return of the family farm at Peaceful Belly Farm (far left), visits a 70-year-old Caldwell flour mill (lower right) and recalls 1941 (upper right) when teenagers lined up to work in Canyon County’s pea fields.

Idaho public servants have something new to chew on. Boise State’s College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs’ soon-to-be released Local, Simple, Fresh: Sustainable Food in the Boise Valley, examines the economics, culture and even politics of all things food in the Gem State. The publication is the fourth chronicle from the college’s Investigate Boise series, following Making Livable Places, in 2010, which included case studies of land-use conflicts; Growing Closer, in 2011, which showed how those conflicts played out in low-density housing sprawl; and 2012’s Down and Out in Ada County, which considered the ripple effects of unsustainable housing.

But a book about food in the Boise Valley wasn’t—at least initially—the first theme that editors suggested.

"Honestly, we first thought it would probably be about innovation," said Dr. Todd Shallat, director of the...
Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State, and the series' editor-in-chief. "Eighteen months ago, when we were finishing up our book on the recession, we kept asking everyone, 'How are we going to come out of that recession?' And when we asked about innovation, they would answer, 'Yeah.' But somehow the topic of food kept coming up and then they would say, 'Yeah.'"

What followed was a 12-month investigation that Shallat said "connected history to economics, politics to settlement patterns." When the project wrapped, a full diet of food topics filled the book, including farm subsidies, farm ethics, breweries and vineyards, the dynamics of refugee gardens and public markets, and the politics of the potato.

"The hardest thing for any writer is the boundlessness of a topic like this," said Shallat. "It's like nailing jelly to a wall."

But Shallat could feel justifiably satisfied as he handed a preview copy of Local, Simple, Fresh to Boise Weekly as he sat with a group of his students at the college's Center on Main storefront in the Alaska Building on Main Street. (The center will soon be relocated to new digs at 301 S. Capitol Blvd. in BODO as part of Boise State's $1.65 million purchase of 8,800 square feet of high-profile commercial space.)

"When we started this four years ago, our target audience was within the university," said Shallat. "But then the second book we published [Growing Closer] won an award from the Idaho Smart Growth organization, and we saw our work being used as a tool. Ever since, more and more books are being purchased on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. People really like this."

Boise State undergraduate Dennis O'Dell has seen his work published twice—in last year's Down and Out in Ada County, he examined Idaho Legal Aid, and in this year's Local, Simple Fresh, he followed the farm-to-table journey of Boise's Bittercreek Alehouse and Red Feather restaurants.

"It was never-ending," said O'Dell. "We followed their food supply from a farm 20 miles south of Marsing to their downtown restaurant. But we also watched their recycling efforts and how they even make their own ketchup so they don't have to buy it in tin cans or more plastic."

O'Dell is far from a stereotypical undergrad. The Vietnam War veteran will turn 63 in June. He has one more class to complete his bachelor's degree in communication.

"People use to ask me what I would do with a degree and I first thought it would give me material to make a paper airplane," said O'Dell. "I was totally wrong. The fact that I have been published has already landed me job with a California company that is coming into town next month to film a documentary."

Boise State likes to tout that much of its student body is "nontraditional." Perhaps its most tangible examples are the student journalists, like O'Dell, who have contributed to the Investigate Boise series.

"I'm 31 and I used to be a professional dancer with the Idaho Dance Theatre. Now, I've just finished my bachelor's degree in economics," said Jennifer Shelby, mom to a 6-year-old and stepmom to two teens.

Shelby spent the better part of the past year tracking the Capital City Public Market, a subject Boise Weekly readers know well, including the September firing of founder/director Karen Ellis (who has gone on to oversee a competing farmer's market).

"When I spoke with her, it was a pivotal moment. The day I interviewed Karen Ellis, she had been fired one hour prior," said Shelby. "But she had such a passion and I knew she would be back in some capacity."

Shelby told BW that her investigation and subsequent published work allowed her to "see the urban environment completely different."

"I don't walk down the street any longer and just see a street. I see urban design," she said. "For me, this whole program has developed new professional goals for me. I know I can help this city. I know there's a perfect job out there; I just don't know what it's called yet."

Another of Shelby's and O'Dell's nontraditional colleagues is 31-year-old Tonya Nelson, a Boise State history undergrad, who spent the past year investigating Boise's refugee gardeners.
"They give us diversification," said Nelson. "It's an opportunity for us to reach outside of our own world and away from our own problems."

Nelson not only wrote a chapter, but was promoted to become the book's student editor.

"She's brilliant and a great writer," said Shallat as Shelby beamed.

Shallat already has his sights on the topic for the college's next investigative piece.

"It's going to be about the Basque Block," he said.

Shallat said representatives of Boise's Basque Museum approached the college about writing a definitive narrative.

"But I told them, 'I just don't want this to be about history. We want this book to also be about the future,'" said Shallat. "And then they told us something very interesting: that they would like to extend the Basque Block. Now, that's a story nobody knows about just yet. That's about Boise's future."
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