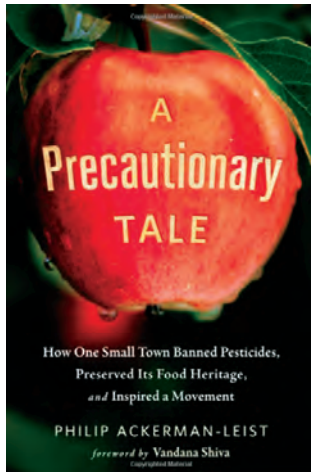


A Precautionary Tale

HOW ONE SMALL TOWN BANNED PESTICIDES, PRESERVED ITS FOOD HERITAGE, AND INSPIRED A MOVEMENT



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Published by Chelsea Green
Publishing, White River
Junction, Vermont
2017, 256 pages

While the conflict over pesticide drift is a major theme in this book, and the pesticide ban is the climax of the story, this is primarily a tale about a place called Mals, the people who inhabit it, their relationships and values. Even though the title of this book includes the word “town,” this book is actually

about a “comune,” a unit of government that may contain several subunits. Mals, the subject of this book, is over 93 square miles in area and encompasses ten villages and hamlets, as well as farmland, providing homes to 5,092 people.

Mals is located 3,445 feet above sea level in the province of South Tyrol in the Upper Vinschgau Valley, at the intersection of Italy, Austria, and Switzerland. Although it is now considered part of Italy, 97% of the population speaks German as a first language. Glaciers immediately above the Vinschgau Valley rise to almost 13,000 feet above sea level.

Mals and the Upper Vinschgau Valley have traditionally been home to a diverse agriculture, including dairy cattle, ancient and modern grains, fruits, and vegetables. Until recently, it was not possible to grow apples on a commercial scale there, but global climate change has made the climate more conducive to commercial apple production. “Big Apple”—large-scale chemical-intensive apple production—has been marching up the valley, replacing the diverse small farms with large apple monocultures. These large monocultures spray their apple trees 20–30 times per year.

Citizens of Mals were deeply concerned when they learned about the toxic chemicals—such as chlorpyrifos, captan, and

dithiocarbamates—carried by strong winds blowing up the valley and being found in hay, honey, and food, as well as in the schoolyard. As they learned more, they became even more concerned about the combinations of chemicals, including so-called “inert,” or undisclosed secret, ingredients designed to make the active ingredients more potent. They were concerned about their livelihoods, since the organic certification of some farms had been revoked. They were concerned about their health. They cared about the impact of pesticide drift on the tourist industry. And they were also troubled by the impact of the chemical-dependent monoculture on the culture of Mals.

The culture of Mals is not only diverse in its agriculture, but is also diverse in language and food traditions. It was pursuing a goal of becoming a sustainable community through changes in transportation, energy development, and ecotourism. Many in Mals felt threatened not only by pesticide drift, but also by the intrusion of monoculture in the form of Big Apple, or industrialized apple production.

All these concerns brought the community together for a united purpose. That goal was realized with the passage of a ban on pesticides in Mals, which required multiple strategies and actions. The advocates for a ban won, but you’ll have to read the book to find out why. As one person said, it was a tussle. Above all, the advocates stressed the importance of a positive vision for Mals, even as they proposed a ballot measure focusing on the dangers of pesticides. The ballot measure passed with 75% of the vote, with 69% of the electorate voting. The referendum was then put into law by action of the Mals Municipal Council and survived a legal challenge that struck down the referendum, but not the ordinance passed by the Council.

Read *A Precautionary Tale* for the details and for a wonderful portrait of Mals and its inhabitants. Their stories inspire the action taking place across the U.S. as communities come together to adopt ordinances to ban toxic pesticides and adopt organic land and landscape management policies and practices.

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