

Innovation and Contributions from Agriculture at the Fringe

by Ralph C. Martin

When Joel Salatin was a lad, and his parents started farming in Virginia, the Klu Klux Klan threatened them as though they were communists. Why? The Salatins farmed differently, and although they were U.S. citizens, they had previously farmed in South America.

To restore soil organic matter they planted trees and grazed cattle and contained them with electric wire on fence posts, held up by concrete in old car tires. The soil was too thin to pound posts in. The manure improved soil. Corn cobs, thought worthless and a nuisance by neighbours, were hauled home to add carbon to soil on the Salatin homestead.

Today Joel has a prosperous enterprise, Polyface Inc. (www.polyfacefarms.com) based on the same land base. They produce salad bar beef and pastured poultry and pigs. He refers to himself as a Christian, libertarian, environmentalist, capitalist lunatic fringe (with a smile and tongue in cheek), and yet firstly, a farmer.

Some would argue that the fringe cannot feed the 9 billion people expected by 2050. In the Western context of wasting 40% of food and eating excess food, much of it unhealthy, there is room to investigate how to feed ourselves more sustainably.

The ten principles he illustrated make sense in his creative system and can also apply to those in the mainstream. Many farmers of all stripes subscribe knowingly or unknowingly to some or most of these principles.

The first principle is simple. Animals move. The second is fundamental across all scales in agriculture. Carbon builds soil. The third is less commonly recognized and applied to heal ecological food growing systems. Perennials are more important than annuals.

The fourth principle is an example of what often is not seen. There is no animal-less ecology. Soil animals will team if given a chance and Joel looks for symbioses with other animals which are essential on his farm. The fifth is not usually stated perhaps because many of us have not dared to believe it. Nature's default position is wellness. In contrast, those who

would have us accept scarcity as a way to arrange our lives suggest that ever more human interventions are needed to wrestle what we need from hostile ecosystems.

The sixth principle could confound. Water forgiveness is paramount. There is a temptation to restrain water in defined places or pump it to other places. Agricultural systems designed to mimic nature, allow pulses of water which can soak and drain and/or be held for plants in soil with high organic matter and plant cover. Dancing with water, works better without forcing or clutching it.

The seventh principle has also been proclaimed by Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson. More people are a good thing, as the eyes to acres ratio increases. Joel encourages visitors to his transparent farm and was pleased when he saw a sign he wants to nail up on his fence, “Trespassers will be impressed.”

The last three principles apply across the food chain. The shorter the food chain, the better. Encourage holocentric food systems with dynamic domestic culinary arts. Nutrient density varies across the production model. To see farms within a value chain of other well-meaning people who also want contribute to health is worth incorporating in all food systems, whether fringe or mainstream.

“In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.” This quote attributed to Yogi Berra helps me understand why Joel’s principles deserve second, third and many looks. He doesn’t just sit in an office like the academic I am. He posits and practices and posits and practices again, as he keeps iteratively advancing until there are nuggets to offer.

Just in case you think Joel is a go-with-the-flow hippie, he assertively denounces this characterization. He is as hard-nosed about business as any supplier. Buyers (restaurants, stores) who default on their account longer than 35 days are advised they will be ‘outed’ on the Polyface website, after 10 more days of transgression, for jeopardizing hard working, entrepreneurial farmers. Almost all pay up presto. Others lose access to Polyface food that customers keep requesting.

Innovation is realized at all scales of agriculture and yet Joel wants his audiences to appreciate how much comes from the fringe. He asserts that all innovations start with embryonic prototypes and can be diffused at early stages. However, he sees major impediments to innovation because customers have limited options for foods of choice, from sources of choice.

He concedes that a government food safety system is necessary but wants room for the lunatic fringe of creative farmers. He noted that some government food makes people sick too and recounted how a neighbour needed his hormone-free and antibiotic-free meat to regain her health.

From the fringe, Joel is challenging North Americans to take responsibility for food choices and for farmers to maintain their economic, ecological and social resilience. Can we afford to forgo the innovative options that fringe farmers offer?

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