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Perspective

Life of Bryan: Working the magic of sustainable food's sweet spot

Part One

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Abstract

Bryan Gilvesy is one of Canada's most-recognized farm innovators, as well as one of the country's best-known leaders of the food movement. That combination is unusual in any region or country—one of the ways that Gilvesy exemplifies both the hallmarks of the food movement in Canada, as well as the unique components of agroecology as it emerges in a temperate-cold climate. This portrait of a food and farm leader is based on my own reporter's notes taken over seven years of attending meetings where Gilvesy has spoken, and on files of news clippings and academic articles related to the farming methods he's pioneered in Canada. Part 1 of this article provides an overview of Gilvesy's background and personal evolution prior to his adoption of views and practices for which he's presently renowned. Parts 2 and 3, which will be posted in subsequent issues, introduce his measures to promote a wrenching shift in food system redesign—specifically the provision to pay farmers for ecosystem services they produce on the working landscape of their farm. Parts 2 and 3 will also spell out specific trends within Canada's food movement, such as its promotion of concrete, positive and practical reform measures and its service as a Big Tent coalition of various public interest groups—trends that Gilvesy personifies.

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Y U Ranch

Bryan Gilvesy has been on a winning streak for the last decade. Recognition of his contribution to a whole new way of thinking about food and farming started humbly in 2006 when the Toronto Food Policy Council—which I then staffed—gave him its low-profile Local Food Hero Award. The next year, he won the Ontario Premier’s Award for Agricultural Innovation. He went national the year after, and won the Canadian Agri-Food Award of Excellence for Environmental Stewardship. In 2009, he went global and was named the International Texas Longhorn Breeder of the Year. One year later, he won the Ontario Environment Minister’s Award for Environmental Excellence. In 2013, he received both the Canadian Farmer-Rancher Pollinator Award and the Ontario Premier’s Award for Agricultural Innovation. While he doesn’t identify with any single comprehensive philosophy of farming, Gilvesy is comfortable being referred to as a pioneering Canadian practitioner of food production methods understood globally as *agroecology*.

In his day job, Gilvesy is a rancher who stands out because of his innovative use of native and wild grasses to feed livestock and nurture a variety of environmentally friendly ecosystem services for which he hopes to charge members of the public. In his volunteer work, he serves as a popular leader of both the food and ecological farming movements, as co-chair of Sustain Ontario, a coalition of food activists from many backgrounds, as chair of the farmer-based Alternative Land Use Service (ALUS) committee in his home county of Norfolk, Ontario and as Eastern Canada lead for ALUS. Several of the hallmarks that distinguish the food movement in Canada from food movements in other regions and countries—the capacity to bring rural farmers and urban good food advocates under the Big Tent of one organization, and the ability to organize around practical and positive programs that can be implemented in the here-and-now, to give but two illustrations—are central to Gilvesy’s persona and stature.

Y U Ranch isn’t a household name, partly because it’s not branded for sale through supermarkets or chains. Instead, Gilvesy pioneers as a farmer-retailer, who sells about a third of what he produces to individuals, many of whom just finished a hay wagon tour of his land and are keen to tell dinner guests a great story, while offering them exceptional steaks from grass-fed Longhorns. The Y U name also graces the menu of some dozen restaurants oriented to local, sustainable, cool, smart and authentic foods. Whenever I go to Guelph and eat at Borealis, I see a larger-than-life portrait of Bryan and Cathy Gilvesy and one of their Texas Longhorns as I enter the washroom. I really like you, I nod to the picture, but having you peek over my shoulder while I pee is a bit creepy. Never mind, it’s a reminder that even a poster boy for the green and food movement stays close to the humble realities of daily life.

Neither Bryan nor Cathy fit the stereotype of sustainable food leaders. Born in 1958, the last year of the certified baby boomers, Bryan is 25 years older than most ag and food movement activists. He gives most of his talks wearing business casual, leans back to show a belt buckle with a honkin’ big Texas Longhorn in the middle—he gave me one for Christmas, but I haven’t yet found the right occasion to wear it—and usually starts a public lecture by poking fun at his bald spot, unaware that such jokes only reveal his glass-is-half-full approach to life: truth be told, his head sports more of a hair spot than a bald spot. The Gilvesy home is close to the village of Delhi in southwestern Ontario, itself a bit of a drive to Tillsonburg and a winding hour-long drive from London. Country people, Bryan and Cathy have only recently thought of big cities as

exciting, rather than scary. Back in 2006, he thanked the Toronto Food Policy Council for introducing him and Cathy to a Toronto that was friendly and welcoming, rather than a terrifying canyon of high-rises.

As a university student, Bryan studied business, not agriculture or food studies. He and his parents believed business school offered the right training for the business of farming. He is always pleased to give talks to business school students, and he peppers his presentations about his bold and radical farming methods with biz-speak phrases about niche markets and value-added offerings. For some, the oddest thing about both Cathy and Bryan is that they like to have fun, are excited about life, think well of most people, don't seem to pass judgment and just keep pressing ahead as best they can.

In my view, Bryan Gilvesy is a world-class visionary of the movement for better food and farming, because he identifies the need for a fundamental food system change that sees farmers paid as producers of a healthy environment, not just healthy food. That's why I wrote about him in the *No-Nonsense Guide to World Food*.

But I'm writing this article because I also think his evolution as an individual, rancher, environmental farm leader and food movement spokesperson personifies important trends in the evolution of the Ontario and Canadian food movement. His decision to become a solo entrepreneur selling his own brand of local, sustainable, safe and nutrient-rich beef is a prime example of what food movement analysts mean when they talk about the quality turn. This pivotal transition started shortly after 2000 when a number of farmers, artisan processors, specialized retailers and chefs turned their backs on the sheer *productivist* tradition that drove the obsession with high yields and low prices since the end of World War II. The quality turn is about shifting the range of food choices from quantity to quality, whether that quality is taste or nutrients or social and ecological benefits.²

Gilvesy's personal history also reflects several important shifts within the movement referred to as sustainable agriculture. Until the new millennium, the sustainable ag conversation was mostly about the need for low inputs, particularly of toxic chemicals. The common acronym for this was LISA, which stands for Low Input Sustainable Agriculture. The very term speaks to the messaging that has kept environmentalism both a marginal and misunderstood force, suspected of a lifestyle featuring a dress code of sackcloth and ashes.

Gilvesy has been part of major quality turns in the understanding of sustainable ag. Although he and his family had long taken pride in their stewardship of the land, he didn't really embrace sustainability until shortly after certifying with Local Food Plus. Someone from that organization showed him the United States Farm Bill of 1990, with a five-part definition that specified "economic viability of farm operations" as well as enhanced "quality of life for farmers and society as a whole," as key attributes of sustainable agriculture.³ That was "an unbelievable eye-opener for me," he says, "the world's biggest epiphany ever" because—as the father of a young family—it was important that environmental management be linked to economic success. Learning that sustainability wasn't just about "morality, guilt and sacrifice," but also made business sense, was a breakthrough for him. That was Gilvesy's introduction to what is now an article of faith in the Canadian food movement's understanding of sustainability—a *win-win-win* combo of measures that are good for the economy, good for society, good for the environment.

² Goodman, D. (2003). The quality 'turn' and alternative food practices: reflections and agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 1-7.

³ United States Department of Agriculture. (1999 and 2007). Sustainable Agriculture: Definitions and Terms. Alternative Farming Systems Information Center.

In terms of the conversation which the food movement fosters with the general public about sustainable food systems, that approach has been a game-changer, and he serves as a business case of this new face of the movement within the larger farm community.

As well, Gilvesy's understanding of sustainability goes far beyond the 1990s low input mantra, which became somewhat obsolete in the new century. Since the release of one UN report on ecosystem services in 2005, and another UN report in 2010 on biodiversity and the economy, sustainability discussions have hinged on an understanding of the environment as the life support system necessary for human survival—a set of essential services that are either irreplaceable or extremely expensive to replace. Emphasis shifted from harm humans inflict on Nature to benefits humans can net by respecting Nature; in turn, that insight opened a portal to understanding good environmental behavior as an investment, not just an expense or existential experience, which in turn opened the gateway to *fees for environmental services*, a transformative concept in terms of the role of farming in the overall political economy. In 2005, the same year that some 700 leading scientists and economists signed off on the UN's ecosystem assessment report, the neo-liberal *Economist* magazine put its finger on experiences that were bringing such a new paradigm to the fore. An article on the destruction of Florida's Everglades recalled the failure of Louisiana's similarly-destroyed marshes to perform their sponge-like function by holding onto torrential rainfall from Hurricane Katrina, and thereby prevent the disastrous flooding of New Orleans. Since then, the *Economist* argued, correcting "the balance between protecting people from nature, and protecting nature from people, has become an urgent matter of public policy."⁴ Valuing ecosystem services, not to put too fine a point on it, is about saving humans money as much as saving the planet, an insight that serves as a cornerstone of any strategy to engage people in the work of protecting and rejuvenating 'natural capital' and 'living infrastructure' (aka the environment).

In this new paradigm, the environment is no longer 'out there', a pretty young thing abused by human greed and shortsightedness. Nature also lives in the wild medicines that cure disease, the hillside bushes that prevent mudslides, the marshes that reduce flooding, the wild pollinators that produce so many fruits and vegetables, the trees and grasses that store carbon in the ground and keep it out of the atmosphere, where too much carbon triggers climate chaos and global warming. Just as the mainstream industrial economy in the Global North went from the production of hard goods to the production of soft services during the 1960s, the understanding of Nature's economy began to shift from the production of goods—lumber, water and fish, for example—to the production of services, as far-ranging as carbon storage to protection from erosion. As in the mainstream economy, the services sector can add many times more value, and charge many times more dollars, than the goods sector. This is the new potential source of wealth creation and value production identified by an ecosystems view of Nature's economy.

Three practical propositions flow from understanding and measuring the economic value of Nature's ecosystem services. First, people who think of environmental integrity as a source of valuable human services have a stronger business case to pitch than people who describe the environment as invaluable and priceless, a term that doesn't register in a capitalist system. So the first proposition is that food advocates intervene in the mainstream dialogue about food and the economy. Second, people who champion practical actions to boost environmental performance are heard as being more positive than the allegedly negative people known only for actions they condemn. So the second proposition is that food advocates take care that they are seen as

⁴ *Economist*. (October 8, 2005). "Water, bird, man," p. 31.

constructive critics. Third, leaders who promote individual and community actions to support environmental, economic and social well-being are seen as more inclusive and empowering of people than those who demand government pass regulations banning harmful practices. So the third proposition is that food advocates identify as people who want to empower people, rather than as people calling on the state to discipline people. It's my observation that most people in the food movement get these basic propositions, while many people in the official environment movement do not. That's a distinguishing characteristic of the food movement, and accounts for what's commonly called its 'positive energy', an energy that is central to the Gilvesy persona as well as his shaping of the political positioning of the food movement.

In 2005, the very year the UN assessment on ecosystem services was released, Gilvesy learned about a grassroots farm group called Alternative Land Use Services or ALUS. At about the same time, leading Toronto charitable foundations, first Metcalf and then Friends of the Greenbelt, recognized that ecosystem services could be provided by working landscapes such as farms—and not just by totally protected areas, such as wilderness parks. These charitable foundations began funding organizations such as ALUS in Norfolk County and Toronto-based Local Food Plus, which promoted local and sustainable food systems on the biggest use of land in the country—which is farms, not wilderness parks. Shortly thereafter, Metcalf initiated meetings to bring city and countryside community food leaders together to develop one common vehicle for food and farm advocates—what became Sustain Ontario. When Gilvesy became an advocate for Local Food Plus in 2006 and took a leadership position with Sustain Ontario in 2010, he lent credibility to Sustain as an advocate for both city and countryside elements of the food and agriculture equation—a signal achievement of the Ontario food movement, rarely achieved elsewhere. It's much more typical for the food movement and environmentalist messages to be understood as anti-farmer.

But I have gotten ahead of myself. These organizational developments flow from the transformations I must first document, which I will do by sketching Gilvesy's biography in the next section of Part 1 of this paper.

Bum steers

Before all sorts of nice things happened to Bryan Gilvesy, he suffered some pretty hard knocks, and developed the resilience that enabled him to bounce back—or rather forward. For those drawn to the melodrama of ancient myths and archetypes, his storyline reads eerily like the phoenix that rose from the ashes—in this case, cigarette ashes.

The key person in Bryan's early life was his grandfather George Gyulveszi, who, like many in the area around the village of Delhi, arrived from Hungary alone and penniless. The Y U in Y U Ranch express the esteem Bryan holds for his grandfather, whose name, spelled the Hungarian way, still commands respect in the region because of his economic success and many community contributions. Grandfather encouraged Bryan to go to business school because having a business on the side was absolute common sense for any enterprising person who farmed tobacco. The farm season went from May to mid-September, and a person needed a second career to keep busy during a lengthy off-season. Grandfather's off-season business was construction, in which he started with little and made a fortune no less than three times, having gifted it to others twice, the last time when he was 82. Bryan watched his granddad rebound the last time, and it gave him a real-life model of resilience that soon enough marked his own life.

When he began farming fulltime in the 1980s, it was already clear to Bryan Gilvesy that tobacco—the crop that had sustained most farms in the area for some time, and one of the few crops that could thrive in the sandy soil of the region—had no future. The medical evidence about the dangers of smoking was impossible to ignore by the 1980s, and it was clear there was no future in either making a living in, or feeling good about, the tobacco product. Aside from its poor business prospects, the young entrepreneurially-minded Gilvesy didn't take to the idea of working in an industry where huge corporations and impersonal markets beyond his ability to influence decided what farmers were to grow and how, and what price they would get. When Bryan Gilvesy bought his second farm in 1985 for \$200,000—a price indicating the dismal prospects of tobacco farming—he declined the full tobacco quota that came with the farm, planted only 45 of 70 cleared acres in tobacco, and turned his mind to other uses of the land resource. Like thoughtful neighbours around him, he was looking for alternatives. His next-door neighbor, for instance, was Joe Stroebel, one of the first farmers in Canada to promote legalizing hemp grown for fabric, fiber and cooking oil, rather than marijuana; “rope, not dope” was the slogan of the movement.⁵

For reasons he can't recall, Bryan Gilvesy and his dad bought two Texas Longhorns and put them out to pasture on the new farm. When he saw how the birds and the bees worked with beef—one cow and one bull added a new calf every year, a perfect illustration of how ecosystem services could grow a business for free—he saw his future in cattle breeding. By 1993, he made breeding his business. It was perfect for him, he thought: no corporate overlord, multiple customers, relatively low-cost technology and debt load—one door closes, and another opens.

The Longhorn—a breed descended from escaped cattle brought to Mexico by the Spanish—appealed to the independent maverick in Gilvesy. They adapted in the wilds of the North American plains, where only the hardiest and most efficient feeders survived. They are intelligent, long-living, have hard hooves, high resistance to disease, live outdoors summer and winter, have huge horns to fend off predators and can calve on their own in the outdoors. They eat rough grasses and can add weight even when on the move through barren country. They appealed to the romantic and solar enthusiast in Gilvesy, who likes to say that the grass converts sunlight into feed and the Longhorns convert that into solar beef—no need for feeds dependent on fossil fuel-based fertilizers, pesticides, planting and harvesting equipment. Perfect for a small and independent operator who wants pasture-raised animals and the lifestyle that goes with it.⁶

Gilvesy was a happy breeder of Texas Longhorns until 2003, when a case of ‘Mad Cow’ disease was discovered in Canada, and international borders to all Canadian cattle were suddenly closed. That finished him as a breeder, because most of his customers were in the U.S. “I saw 2.3 billion dollars in cattle values (across the country) vapourize overnight,” Gilvesy says.

Fortunately, he'd always had a nagging feeling that something was wrong with the way the beef business was organized. The rising chorus of public health critics worried about excessive animal fat in the diet reminded him eerily of the losing battle tobacco farmers faced when they came up against evidence of illness caused by a farm product. He was uneasy about the beef industry standard that aimed breeding and feeding at achieving high rates of marbled fat for Triple A grading. As well, he found the feed suppliers who were always pushing low-cost protein supplements a bit too aggressive, and never allowed such feeds on his property. He fed

⁵ I worked actively with Stroebel and others on that campaign, which succeeded in winning legal status for industrial-quality hemp in 1998; that was an early indication that farmers and urban creatives could work together to create environmentally-beneficial jobs.

⁶ For more on Texas Longhorns, www.tlbaa.org

all his animals on a strict plant diet, which they had evolved to eat. As well, he always held back a few steers from the corporate processing plants, ‘finished’ them on his own farm, and took them to town to be butchered under his instructions, for later use by family, friends and a few personal customers.

After the source of Mad Cow was traced to the low-cost protein supplement made from bone meal of cattle, Gilvesy realized that he had what marketing gurus call a Unique Sales Proposition. “All of a sudden, I had something to sell that no-one else had,” he said: a herd of cattle born and raised only on his land and fed only grass, with no low-cost protein supplements made from animal bone meal to fatten them, and thus no possibility of contact with Mad Cow disease. While the rest of the beef industry was in shambles, he had an option thanks to his foresight about cheap but bogus animal feeds. He walked down the driveway, and posted a hand-written sign on the road: “Beef For Sale.” He was ready to do his own sales under his own name, Y U Ranch, to his own customers. “The old paradigm fell apart that day,” he says. “I didn’t want to be selling a commodity or beholden to a corporation ever again. It was clear that the food chain was broken, added no value for us, just created distance between us and customers.”

At this point, Gilvesy had bounced back two times from the conventional agricultural journey that led away from sustainability. And he had taken the first step on a new journey toward sustainability, a journey that would lead him to live the life of a farmer working in harmony with Nature, working to produce high-quality food by mimicking the methods of natural systems and capturing some of the non-food benefits of working with natural systems. To implement this food production strategy and optimize the benefits that flow from it, he became an advocate of fees for farmer stewardship of ecosystem services and of the good food movement in Ontario.

That part of his journey will form the core of Part 2 of this article in the next journal issue.