Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 86–102 March 2023

Canadian Food Studies La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Original Research Article

A livelihood to feel good about: Enacting values around animals, land, and food outside of the agricultural core

Elizabeth Finnis*

University of Guelph; ORCID: 0000-0002-1688-0108

Abstract

This paper presents and reflects on findings from ethnographic research conducted with smaller-scale farmers in the Parry Sound district, Ontario, Canada. The research highlights understandings of what it means to be a "good farmer" and explores how farmers enact their personal values and morals in efforts to produce "good food" for their communities. Central issues that emerge include notions of how to ethically care for animals and the land, as well as how to navigate tensions that can emerge while engaged in agricultural livelihoods. In their agriculturally peripheral location, participants point to how they imagine and embody possibilities about "good farming" and "good food" that challenge in various ways the larger-scale agricultural approaches that dominate agricultural core areas in southern Ontario.

Keywords: Smaller-scale agriculture; Ontario; local food

*Corresponding author: efinnis@uoguelph.ca

DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v10i1.599
ISSN: 2292-3071

Résumé

Cet article présente, tout en y réfléchissant, les observations d'une recherche ethnographique menée auprès de petits producteurs agricoles dans le district de Parry Sound, en Ontario, au Canada. La recherche fait ressortir diverses interprétations de ce que signifie être « un bon fermier ». Elle explore la manière dont les agriculteurs appliquent leurs valeurs personnelles et morales dans leurs efforts pour produire de la « bonne nourriture » pour leurs communautés. Les principaux enjeux qui en émergent touchent la notion d'éthique dans les soins aux animaux et à la terre aussi bien que la manière de composer avec les tensions qui surviennent parfois dans les activités agricoles. Situés en périphérie des régions agricoles, les participants révèlent les possibilités qu'ils imaginent et souhaitent concrétiser en matière de « bonne agriculture » et de « bonne nourriture », possibilités qui défient de diverses façons les approches à grande échelle dominant les principales zones agricoles du sud de l'Ontario.

Introduction

There is ongoing recognition of the importance of considering how local agricultural discourses and practices may play out within broader food system contexts, both in Canada and elsewhere (e.g., Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020; Bronson et al., 2019; Laforge et al., 2017; Lavallee-Picard 2016; Loring, 2021; MacLeod, 2016; O'Neill, 2008; Price et al., 2022). Understanding the diversity of possibilities and opportunities means engaging with a range of voices in the food system (Blay-Palmer et al., 2020), and this includes in-depth reflections on agricultural priorities and practices among farmers located outside of the agricultural core. In this article, I draw on ethnographic, qualitative data from my work with smaller-scale food producers in the Parry Sound district, Ontario, Canada. These participants are located outside of the core of Ontario agriculture, both geographically and conceptually. Geographically, core spaces are those where agricultural infrastructure and supports are relatively plentiful and straightforward to access; conceptually, core spaces are those in which smaller-scale, non-intensive agricultural practices may be overlooked or downplayed within broader agricultural policies and priorities. Despite being located outside of the core, there is a range of agricultural activities in the district that contribute to local food options and to feeding people more broadly. Elsewhere (Finnis, 2021) I have considered some of the practical and policy challenges that emerge for food producers in this district. In this companion piece, I demonstrate the ways in which some producers highlight the opportunities and flexibility that can emerge in peripheral locales, with a specific focus on how notions of what it means to be a "good farmer," particularly with regards to livestock and land engagements, intersect with the pursuit of producing "good food."

Research exploring what it means to be a "good farmer" has drawn attention to farmer identities throughout the lifecourse (Riley, 2014), gendered differences in agricultural values (Burns 2021), and the specific perspectives of organic farmers (Stock, 2007; Tovey, 1997). Much of the literature focusses on areas of

overlap and distinctions that emerge between conventional and organic or environmentally-oriented agriculture (Burton, 2004; Hunt, 2010; McGuire et al., 2013; Saunders, 2016; Setten, 2004; Silvasti, 2003; Stotten, 2016; Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012), including considerations of how established norms of "good farming" can change with time and the influx of different approaches to farming (e.g., Burton et al., 2021; Sutherland and Darnhoffer, 2012). As Burton et al. (2021) remind us, there is no single definition of a good farmer.

Similarly, there is a range of research that interrogates what "good" and/or local food means in terms of farming and alternative food networks (e.g., Feagan et al., 2004; Hinrichs, 2003; Kallio, 2020; MacLeod, 2016; O'Neill, 2008; Torjusen et al., 2008). This includes considerations of shorter supply chains, direct marketing, and producer-consumer engagement (Feagan & Morris, 2009; Furman et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2015; McKitterick et al., 2016; Mert-Cakal & Miele, 2020; Sage, 2003). As Beingessner and Fletcher (2020) note in their research with farmers in Saskatchewan, Canada, there is an increasing place for local food systems within the broader, intensive, agricultural context. Yet, notions of what "good food" means can be contested and unreflexively bundled with ideas of "local food" (Connell et al., 2008), or "authenticity" (Smithers & Joseph, 2010).

Why does understanding the specific time-and-place nature of these connections matter? As McGuire et al. (2013) point out, there is still more to understand about how farmers perceive and enact their identities in terms of agricultural actions in diverse contexts (see also Bronson et al., 2019); this includes locations outside of food system "hot spots" where there are expectations of intensive land and animal management (Murdoch, 2000). These considerations are also important as agricultural contexts shift, including in terms of expansions into new or marginal locales as climates change (Price et al., 2022). Taking seriously the voices of farmers in terms of how they define notions of "goodness" in practice allows for understandings of how—and why—they might push back against conventional agriculture in such contexts. DeLind (2011) argues that considerations of local food require "engaging in the continual creation, negotiation, and re-creation of identity, memory, and meaning" (p. 279). Although DeLind (2011) is discussing consumers, her point is also relevant with regard to producers (see MacLeod, 2016, for example), and exploring agricultural practices and priorities in specific locales allows us to consider how farmers' identities and practices can both reflect and shape agricultural potentials and possibilities. Considering the specificities of ideas of "good food" within diverse spaces and policy/practice contexts remains both critical (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020; see also O'Neill, 2008) and timely.

As I show in this paper, notions of "good food" and "good farming" intersect with land, livestock, and the possibilities provided by a peripheral agricultural space that specifically lacks the markers of intensive agriculture. To explore these connections, I first provide an overview of the research area, along with research methods and demographic information. This is followed by a discussion of how participants connect the idea of "good farming" to values and priorities around the treatment of land and livestock. This leads to a consideration of how, for at least some of the producers I have worked with, locally embedded good farming practices intersect with constructions of what it means to produce "good food."

The Parry Sound district is the most southerly district within the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation's remit. Approximately 43,000 people live in smaller communities scattered across just over 9,000

square kilometers.[1] The district has a history of agriculture dating to the late 1800s. However, when it comes to contemporary economic development, discussions typically fall into categories of tourism and recreation (Michels, 2017). These priorities are supported by a landscape of woodlands, lakes, and nearby provincial parks, along with existing cottage, resort, and camping options.

This is not a location of unbroken tracts of uniform agricultural fields that characterise areas of intensive agriculture (Burton, 2004). Instead, the landscape is variable and diverse, including areas with rockier, thinner soils, rolling hills, wetlands, and thick woodlands, along with some areas that have a more "standardized" appearance of flat agricultural lands. The weather is colder, and growing seasons are shorter than in southern Ontario.[2] The closest livestock auction house is at least a one-and-a-half-hour drive to the south, but, depending on location within the district, and the nature of the roads travelled, transportation can take longer. Farm supply options and large animal veterinarians are limited.[3] However, the relative affordability of agricultural land remains in marked contrast to other parts of Ontario (Rotz et al., 2019), in part because farmland does not face the same urban sprawl development pressures found in parts of southern Ontario (Francis et al., 2012).[4] This has made the area attractive to young or newer farmers and contributes to the development of new food production operations.

Methods and demographic information

I draw on research conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observation at district farmers' markets and food-related activities such as food symposia or farm stand tours. Given that the project concentrated on local food systems, recruitment focussed on operations that produced at least some foods for human consumption. Operations that represented exclusively feed or tree farms, for example,

[1] A small number of participants lived in the neighbouring Nipissing district. However, they farmed in the same contexts as the Parry Sound district, and in some cases also owned or rented farmland in the Parry Sound district. The two districts belong to the same Ontario Federation of Agriculture (East Nipissing-Parry Sound) region. From an agricultural perspective, the lines between Nipissing and Parry Sound districts are blurred.

[2] Some participants highlighted warmer weather and extending growing seasons related to climate change. While some anticipated that local warming will allow a wider variety of crops to be grown, others were concerned that unfavourable weather will become more common. This anxiety particularly emerged during a dry summer and large forest fires that affected parts of the district in 2018.

[3] Abattoir access fluctuated over the research period. In 2017, there were two abattoirs located in the district (one for small livestock and one for larger). By 2020, both had closed. In February 2022, an announcement was made about a proposed abattoir expansion in nearby North Bay, Ontario, with the stated goal of sourcing meat from northeastern Ontario and Quebec (Kelly, 2022).

[4] This was the situation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As occurred elsewhere in the country, property (land and housing) prices in the area increased during the pandemic. Whether prices decrease over time remains to be seen.

were not included. Although in this section I provide a brief overview of all participating households to situate my argument, for the purposes of this paper I primarily draw on twenty households who discussed "good farming" and producing local, "good food" in the context of their district. These households included maple syrup producers along with vegetable, small and large livestock, and mixed-use (vegetables and livestock) operations. This group of participants fell into all age ranges and represented both more established (75%) and newer (25%) farmers.

Participants were recruited through a combination of approaches, including emails or phone calls, discussions at farmers' markets or food events, personal contacts, and snowball sampling. I gave local talks at various points during the project, discussing preliminary results and next steps, which led to some additional participant recruitment. Although recruitment also required that people produced at least some of their food for sale, I did not set a minimum income amount for participation. I wanted to ensure that I was able to connect with people who were in early, experimental, or development phases of food production operations, and this ultimately accounted for approximately 12% of participants.

In total, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty-one households. Most interviews were conducted between early 2017 and late 2018, took place on-farm, and were sometimes accompanied by short farm tours or other activities. Interviews were transcribed and then coded through NVivo, using a range of codes. Some of the codes relevant to this paper include 'Good Food', 'Caring for the Land', 'Staying Local, Feeding Ontario', 'Big vs Small Farms (and recognition)', and 'Potentials'.

Participants were 48% women and 52% men, and 67% were between the ages of fifty and eighty when interviewed.[5] Some participants were relatively new farmers, while others were more established. Some were working land that had been in their families for generations, and others had purchased agricultural land more recently. For the most part, operations relied on family labour, although some hired local help during peak activity times. The amount of land actively worked depended on the nature of the operation. For example, those who raised larger livestock might own and/or rent hundreds of acres to support pasture and hay needs, while vegetable farmers might work two acres or less.

Approximately 71% of participants were involved in large or small livestock production, typically as part of a mixed livestock or livestock-vegetable approach. Livestock represented included cattle, poultry, sheep, honeybees, pigs, and goats. A diversity of vegetables, and some berries, were also produced; some households also offered seedlings or value-added products such as dried herbs, dried vegetable soup bases, or pickles. In addition, some participants produced maple syrup and/or maple syrup products, primarily as the sole product, but sometimes as a secondary product. None of the farms were certified organic, but many participants indicated they intentionally used minimal or no purchased inputs and were functionally organic.

Participants primarily sold to local consumers through farmers' markets, farm stand/farm gate sales, community-supported agriculture, and pre-orders of livestock. Some sold to wider markets, for example through websites with national shipping, livestock auction houses, through a wide variety of stores, or, in the case of dairy farms, through provincial processes.

[5] To put this into context, the 2021 census found that, in the Parry Sound district, the average age of the population was 49.4 years, and the median age was 55.2 years, with 30.2 % of the population over the age of sixty-five (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Most participants used a mix of marketing strategies, reflecting the range of agricultural activities they were engaged in.

Only one household indicated 100% income from their land, and this included non-agriculture income-generating activities. Several households were working towards the goal of 100% agricultural income, but this was a long-term and slow process. The reality is that non-agricultural income sources were critical, and, in some cases, participants stated that they worked other jobs *in order* to be able to farm.

Results and discussion

Farming well in the Parry Sound district: What should a "good farmer" be doing?

Processes of reflexively assessing personal agricultural priorities and finding ways to enact those priorities (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012, p. 236; see also MacLeod, 2016; Stock, 2007) entail aligning core values and practices. For the farmers I worked with, key core values included recognizing and working within the complexities and specificities of agricultural spaces and organisms; understanding livestock and reflecting on their quality of life; and, ideally, providing spaces for non-agricultural species. In this section, I explore how farmers articulate these values and the ways that they can intersect.

One cold afternoon in January 2017, I arrived at a farm to interview a husband and wife in their sixties who operated a mixed-use livestock and vegetable farm. They had been living and farming in the area for well over a decade. As we drank tea, I asked about key challenges that they experienced in a peripheral agricultural locale. Rather than focussing solely on infrastructure or other resources, their responses also prioritised talking about learning to become "good farmers": "figuring out how to do things right first, and then how to do it easier," the husband said, almost immediately segueing into a discussion of their unfolding understanding of what it was they were doing when they were farming. As newer farmers, they were constantly looking for better ways "to do things right."

> Husband: When we first started farming, we thought we were raising animals. Then we thought we were raising forages to feed the animals, but then we realized it was soil biology. And plowing and pesticides and chemicals destroy soil biology…There is a food web beneath the soil. And plants are interacting with soil biology, which feeds the roots… You have to try things and figure out the consequences.

Their understanding of becoming "good farmers" had come in layers, as they learned about the needs of livestock, and then the land, and then the soil, through workshops, reading, and practical experience; an emphasis on longer-term land management (Furman et al., 2014) also emerged. Doing things "right" also involved thinking about how their animals lived. Specific ideas of quality of life intersected with know-how and skills.

> Husband: With regards to animal husbandry, it has to be humane…and you have to be able to help them when they're in distress. For example, I knew a guy with one cow—and that's a mistake itself, it's a herd animal—and the cow went into labour. It got hip lock, and he had no idea how to deal with it. So, he

> just shot the cow.[6] It can't be a humane operation if you don't know how to take care of the animals.
>
> Wife: It's important to us that our animals live the way they were meant to. They are grazing animals, and they should be grazing. I think confinement raising can be done humanely, but it's not what we want to do.

Confinement raising was also constructed by this household as problematic in terms of environmental stewardship. Keeping animals to pasture meant managing numbers, along with ongoing reflections on and modifications of agricultural practices, that allowed for "[raising] animals in a way that doesn't do harm for the environment…You have to be conscious of how you do things that minimize the downsides to what you're doing" (husband).

The condition of livestock is important in a range of agricultural contexts (e.g., Burns, 2021; Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012), and questions of wellbeing may be linked to the ways farmers situate the size and ethos of their operations (Bronson et al., 2019). For many of the farmers I worked with, livestock wellbeing was specifically linked with ideas of quality of life and respect for animals that they placed within the realm of possibilities for smaller-scale operations. Some, for example, shared stories about individual animals, their favourite animals, and those with individual quirks or needs. They discussed the "pure joy of seeing a calf being born" (mixed livestock farmer, woman, fifties) and the importance of appreciating animals as having their own behaviours and engagements with each other, the land, and humans. A poultry farmer in her sixties discussed making clothes for hens that needed a little extra care. A cattle farmer in his sixties talked about a favourite cow, one that saved him from a cranky bull, and about his appreciation of the curiosity of new calves as they surrounded him in his fields. He also emphasized the importance of detailed understandings of livestock needs, and of knowing how to care for animals and make hard decisions to minimize suffering, saying,

> If it's sick, fix it or put it down. A neighbour had a sick cow, and she stood for two weeks then fell down. I was appalled he didn't put her down. "It was hard on me," he said, but why let them suffer? Take control of the situation and end it if that's what it needs. It's your responsibility to look after them and if you don't do it, it's not taking responsibility.

Stock (2007) has argued that "land or soil then acts as an intermediary through which farmers direct moral action towards individuals" (p. 96). For the farmers I worked with, livestock also served as a moral intermediary, and, in some cases, there was a specific connection made between land and livestock wellbeing. This perspective was clearly articulated by farmers who saw poor management skills, and/or a lack of reflexive assessment of established practices, as a reflection of overall questionable agricultural values, particularly in terms of a contrast between exploiting the land and taking care of it (Silvasti 2003, p. 147). As noted previously, some areas of the district are very rocky with thin soils that require particular attention to ensure pasture health. Farmers in those areas were especially critical of others in the district who were not "taking responsibility," and who they described as "miners" of the land who would "crop, crop, crop and then they walk away when there's nothing left," rather than thinking about the ways that delicate soils could be supported and enriched over time, leaving the soil "in better condition" (cattle farmer, woman, seventies) for the future of local food production. One cattle farmer

[6] Although there are some large animal veterinarians in the district, accessing them in an emergency can be difficult or impossible. This means that knowing how to help your animals becomes critical.

linked short-term mentalities with laziness (Burton, 2004) and disrespect for land and animals, using this to question who truly deserved to be called a farmer. Demonstrating a link between respectful land practices and healthy animals, he said,

> They should use other methods so they don't lose the soil...[but some] are cutting further and they don't care about the land. They make everything they can from it and then walk away to the next farm...and there's nothing that bugs me more than seeing hay sitting and rotting and people think they can feed their cattle with that, and they'll be healthy after the winter...If your animal's not good, you've done it... They don't deserve the title of farmer. (cattle farmer, sixties)

Such contrasts were often part of farmers' efforts to situate themselves more broadly as outside of intensive, large-scale farming practices. Some participants were very blunt about this difference. For example, a mixed livestock farmer in her fifties said, "we don't spray up here like down south," and her husband (fifties) followed up with, "the OMAFRA [Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs] point of view is that it's easier to back one big farm than smaller ones. It's not the way to go, but they will do it that way." A cattle farmer in his sixties reinforced this idea that government priorities do not reflect healthy approaches, saying, "they want everything in one area. Five thousand heads of cattle is more cost effective. But then it impacts the area, and the animals are less healthy, they're in close quarters, there's more doctoring." In contrast, he talked about how his small operation meant he could pay more attention to the individual needs of his animals.

A mixed livestock farmer in his forties who had previously lived and worked in southern Ontario discussed his re-evaluation of conventional agricultural practices once he moved to the district and argued that this increased his ability to respond to the unexpected. He said,

> I want to take care of the environment. I ran a sprayer for two years [in southern Ontario], and do I believe it's great? Not totally...I see the need for GMOs to help prevent diseases but pounding all the herbicides and fungicides is a problem. Go for a wholistic approach, above and under the soil. Like rotational grazing. It works. It's better, it takes more time, but it can mean more animals on the ground, and taking care of the ground...I used it to help weather the drought this year [2018].

It is important to note here that some project participants did discuss expansion and/or intensification aspirations and the possibilities for this in the future, particularly if climate and infrastructure contexts changed. The reality is that any space, agriculturally core or not, might potentially be used for intensive or non-intensive approaches to food production. I do not want to suggest that all participants were inherently committed to the idea of maintaining smaller-scale operations. In some cases, this idea was not entirely compatible with goals of making 100% of household income from farming. That said, although some argued that local farm expansion would be possible with adequate infrastructure and space, this was often framed in terms of relatively small expansions—for example, adding an additional fifty head of cattle if more pasturelands could be acquired or rehabilitated. This was tempered with the recognition of economies of scale. As one younger cattle farmer put it, there is a "small, happy medium between factory farming and homesteading...you need numbers to make the money as a farmer. One cow is worth one cow, and it's hard to increase numbers but not be factory farming."

It is also important to acknowledge that, for some participants, the commitment to smaller-scale

operations was in part a strategic economic decision that responded to changing markets—it was not just about personal values, but also about responding to consumer desires and being prepared to be transparent in sharing agricultural practices. As one livestock farmer in his sixties said, this is about "an animal being raised in a happy, comfortable environment and as normal as can be. I think that's what society wants. Twenty-five-year-old kids think differently than we did. They think about the environment and surroundings.... So, they ask how the animals are raised." A mixed livestock farmer in her seventies specifically situated their operation in terms of customer engagement, saying, "most of the food raised in Canada is safe. But I know my own produce and the beef and egg customers, they know how my beef was raised and any antibiotics that had to be used on them...That's their preference."

Producing "good food"

How do these values around livestock and land play out in terms of the associated meanings of "good food?" As noted above, there is a range of research exploring "good/local" food in terms of agricultural production. For example, Sage's (2003) discussion of the construction of "good food" among artisanal food producers and farmers in southwest Ireland demonstrates how locality and ecology can become emphasized (see also McKitterick et al., 2016). Food becomes "good" because it is embedded in "locality of origin, naturalness of its raw materials, and its methods of production" (Sage 2003, p. 50), with smaller scales of production and shorter supply chains. Yet these are not unproblematic perspectives, and local food and short supply chain movements have the potential for mixed effects (Mundler & Laughrea, 2016); may problematically assume social or environmental benefits and sustainability (Baritaux et al., 2016; Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020; Morris & Kirwan, 2011); and may ultimately emphasise individual actions over critiques of broader food system injustices (DeLind, 2011; Desmarais & Whittman, 2014).

Understanding the specificities of ideas of "good food" within diverse spaces is therefore critical. Among many of my participants, issues of locality emerged, where perceptions of "good food" were tied to specific spaces that allow for specific tastes. This was not particularly about what those spaces contain, i.e., this is not a discussion of terroir. Rather, this was structured around what those spaces *do not* contain: the by-products and stresses of intensive agriculture, the pressures to undertake intensive agricultural practices, and the possibility of having to compromise personal values in the name of production. This explicit contrast between intensive and non-intensive agriculture again encompassed values around livestock treatment that reduced stress, as well as engagements with livestock and land that focussed on quality rather than quantity. While the intensive versus non-intensive farming difference emerges here, it is framed in terms of being located outside of core agricultural spaces. Physical peripherality is situated as central to engaging in agriculture that reflects non-intensive philosophies. Therefore, this is not simply a discussion of less intensive agriculture, but also a discussion of place as shaping options and practice.

For example, mixed livestock farmers in their fifties drew contrasts between intensive agriculture and their own practices, connecting ideas of healthy land, healthy animals, and a better-quality product:

> Husband: I think what separates our meat from the guy with 30,000 pigs is stress. Our cattle's diet is 80-90% grass. Our pigs and chickens eat the same as the big places...But what makes the difference is twenty pigs in a barn versus the 1,500 pigs where I picked them [as weanlings]. I think that animals transfer their

> stress...If you have a smaller place, there's less stress for the animals.
>
> Wife: A better life, definitely. Physically, mentally, and the food they eat. When we go out to the pasture, we're looking at the quality of the pasture, the health of it because it's going to make a difference on the animals. It's all working together. If we're not maintaining their diets by watching over the land, then we're not going to have a great product.

Vegetable producers tended to mobilize notions of growing "as natural as possible" (vegetable farmer, woman, thirties), and the idea that, "food can taste good, but if it's full of chemicals, it's not good" (vegetable farmer, man, thirties), which for some was specifically related to their physical location. Members of one household (in their fifties) stressed the importance of fresh, organically grown, nutrient-dense foods, and their low-till, heirloom species approach to growing vegetables. While they were somewhat envious of the richer, flatter, and easier to maintain agricultural lands in southern Ontario, they also pointed to their ability to better control their agricultural practices precisely because they were not compromised by the decisions that others made in the face of intensification pressures (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020). As one household member put it, "where we grow is quiet, isolated, and there are no neighbours with GMOs or pesticides." Contamination of their organic operation therefore became a moot point because they had the physical space to farm without concerns about the practices of others. Similarly, one household of beekeepers noted that being physically distanced from areas that grew monocrops of corn, soy, or canola allowed them to be less concerned about pesticides, particularly neonicotinoids, affecting the health of their hives. The combination of geographical distance and non-intensive agriculture was important to them given inadequate government regulation of these agrochemicals (Ellis, 2019). Peripherality also emerged when some maple syrup producers spoke about why maple syrup from the region tended to win flavour and quality awards at competitions, and why it was in high demand; as one maple syrup producer put it, "maybe it's because there isn't much external in the soil around here."

In some cases, producing good food—and/or offering critical perspectives on contemporary food systems—became a moral way to interact with others and support rural communities, to connect with others through food, and to support visions of change (Cox et al., 2008). Similar perspectives have been found elsewhere when it comes to mobilizing alternative approaches to food production and distribution (e.g., Bronson et al., 2019; Hinrichs, 2008; Torjusen et al., 2008), although producer participation in local food movements may also be motivated by economic (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2017; Le Velly & Dufeu, 2016) and other goals.

For some participants, this community connection was framed in terms of displaying care and engagement with others. For example, a mixed livestock farmer in her forties said, "I like the part of doing something for someone. We're not so much contributing to the Ontario meat market, but we're contributing to our community," while a vegetable farmer in her twenties prioritized building relationships through food, saying, "I can grow things and keep things local and keep people closer and build community by growing here...and you're feeding people. I always liked the feeling of helping people and everyone likes food, and they like good food."

In other cases, the community connection took on activist elements, offering alternative approaches to food production and more direct ways of sharing resources, and pointing to the centrality of local food production in maintaining and building community

(Bronson et al., 2019). Local food was about "creating a movement that keeps moving forward" (mixed livestock farmer, woman, fifties), where money spent at local farms meant money staying in local communities, helping to support the viability and food security of those communities in the longer-term. One vegetable farmer in his sixties went further, linking notions of "good food" with critical analyses of food systems and encouraging community capacity building. His operation was part of his larger mission to get people to think critically about what they eat and where it comes from and to re-embed food production at local, including household, levels. Although he did not specifically use the term food sovereignty, his philosophy encompassed goals of shifting to an alternative agricultural system (Beingessner & Fletcher, 2020, p. 138). He said:

> I want to see people take a step back from what they're doing and how they're doing it, and not accept things as they are. We can't keep buying tomatoes from Mexico…It's important to make other people aware of what's here and there and save the diversity…and you can talk people into buying seeds and trying to grow something—even one thing—at home…Don't tell them, show them.

Recognizing and navigating tensions

A reflexive approach to understanding smaller-scale farming activities recognizes the "messy, overlapping, imperfect and contradictory experience within local farming communities" (Ferguson et al., 2017, p. 15). Part of this is acknowledging and engaging with potential and actual tensions that emerge when it comes to values and practices. This means recognizing that not all participants in this project held the same perspectives and priorities. As discussed briefly above, tensions between economics and values could emerge when thinking about possible expansion. Some participants discussed concepts of sustainability primarily or exclusively in economic terms, or "being able to make a living" (mixed livestock farmer, man, forties), which included a focus on improved marketing options and the ways they would need to reshape the landscape to facilitate expansion. While some favoured trying to balance "the ability of the farmer to make a living, but not destroy the environment" (cattle farmer, man, sixties), others wanted significant agricultural expansion that would potentially increase environmental pressures, but that they argued was nevertheless necessary for realistic agricultural livelihoods and to feed more people.

Even those participants who were more focused on the "good farmer-good food" values and practices discussed above experienced a range of issues that were conceptually "messy." Here I focus on two of them: a) the tensions created by market realities, and b) the ways that spaces for non-agricultural species were discussed and experienced. Both sets of tensions demonstrate how external factors can shape agricultural practices, regardless of individual priorities or preferences.

While livestock farmers may work to minimize stress and maximize a high quality of life, most of their animals are ultimately destined for market. This was sometimes difficult for participants to reconcile, and some spoke with considerable emotion about selling animals. As one cattle farmer in his sixties put it, "someday you have to do what you're raising them for. But it's hard sometimes." This was both about letting go of animals and about recognizing that the conditions under which animals were slaughtered may not reflect farmers' preferences and ideas around best practice. Although the abattoirs that participants used were smaller-scale, transportation distance was often a concern in terms of animal welfare and the quality of the meat. The cattle farmer quoted above discussed the importance of using a local abattoir (now closed, but

still operating at the time), calling it "the handiest", while other options were "a lot further to take them, and I like to have as small an impact on them as possible. They're my babies until they have to go...and they might as well have as good a life as possible while they're here." Part of that good life included minimizing transportation stresses.

Members of a mixed livestock and vegetable producing household argued for a restructuring of processing rules and were frustrated that butchering could not be done on-farm, where they felt it would be more humane and less stressful for their livestock.[7] They took an approach to mitigating some aspects of this stress, something that was possible with their smaller numbers of animals, saying,

> Transporting is not good for them, but the government forces this so we only put two [animals] at a time in the trailer, we put them in the day before with hay, in a nice big trailer...[normally] they're jammed into trucks so that they don't fall over if they slam down on the brakes, and they can sit in there for hours without food or water. I think that what we accept as good food practice is barbaric. It almost makes me cry to think about how animals are treated. We transport ours later in the day, when the cow is dozy, and it's cooler. (woman, sixties)

Reconciling these tensions was not easy, and, pragmatically, farmers recognized their animals were both living beings that deserved respect and care and income generators that must be sold and slaughtered to ensure continued agricultural activities. Policy changes that would allow for on-farm slaughter, perhaps through small-scale mobile operations, could potentially address aspects of this tension, but were also things that people knew they had no control over.

Another tension reflects the reality that agriculture is fundamentally predicated on landscape transformation (e.g., Silvasti, 2003). Given that concerns about the quality of their land were largely about *agricultural* spaces and their implications for *agricultural* species, there was some ambivalence among participants about non-agricultural organisms. Keeping "bush cut down" (cattle farmer, woman, seventies) was sometimes positioned as a moral obligation that honoured the work of previous generations and that ensured land did not return to "wasted" spaces of bush and bogs. The containment of nature also emerged when discussing species that were potentially inconvenient or harmful. For example, beavers, plentiful in the area, could become problematic in that their activities could undermine field drainage and water management. Discussion of beavers within a mixed livestock and vegetable household demonstrated the different perspectives that can be held within one household when it comes to reconciling the place of wildlife within the agricultural landscape (Burns, 2021):

> Husband (sixties): [The beavers are] a plague.
>
> Wife (sixties): But there should be a place for beavers.
>
> Husband: They flood fields and take six inches of topsoil and put it into the river, silting it up. Farmers can take out beaver dams, but not through excavation.
>
> Wife: [He] and I don't entirely agree about the beavers.

[7] The abattoir issue was part of broader frustration with policies that do not benefit smaller-scale farmers. Some farmers pointed out that food safety regulations were disadvantageous for small abattoirs, disincentivizing operations. When operations closed, it put additional pressures on the remaining nearby small abattoirs, slowing down marketing, increasing farm operation costs, and frustrating farmers and consumers. Similar issues have been found by Laforge et al. (2017), who highlight implications of this for a functioning local food system. For many of the farmers I worked with, butchering rules, policies, and access did not reflect their ethics around animal wellbeing, did not benefit their operational economics, and potentially lowered the quality of their product.

> Husband: I don't have a problem with getting rid of beavers because there are too many of them. But we don't even allow hunting on the farm.

Discussions around other species also highlighted tensions that can emerge in both preserving spaces for, but also finding ways of containing, non-agricultural species that have the potential to affect agricultural work. One tricky species is milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*). Important for wild pollinators and essential for the monarch butterfly lifecycle, milkweed is also problematic for pasture/hay quality and is difficult to eradicate once it has taken root. While some did not allow milkweed on their lands or in adjacent spaces, others addressed the problem through dual lenses of containment and balance. A mixed livestock farmer in his fifties, for example, said, "we have left milkweed, but it's expanding. We have three patches. We report the [monarch] caterpillar numbers, and we fence the [animals] out. This year will be Round Up to constrain the milkweed, to contain it. To try and balance it."

In some cases, participants argued that they had a responsibility to maintain space for nature, for example grassland birds. A mixed livestock and vegetable farmer in his sixties considered ensuring pasture nesting habitats for birds as one of the "things you should try to do," to "ecologically support things," even though this required that they adjust haying times and pasture maintenance. This perspective was echoed by the mixed livestock farmer in his fifties who, above, discussed his milkweed patches. Referring specifically to the Endangered Species Act, he said, "we have a management program for grassland birds, and we try to avoid prime habitats, and not cut for hay until they're done nesting." Others pointed out that maintaining active agriculture in the district ensured habitats for species at risk. Members of one multi-generational household that raised mixed livestock, for example, cited their commitment to maintaining barns that allowed for thirty barn swallow nests on their property.[8]

At the same time, the space available for non-agricultural species could be contingent on a lack of significant conflict. While species like beavers and milkweed might be acceptable in contained numbers, and compromises could sometimes be made about the timing of some agricultural activities to benefit nesting grassland birds, predators represented a different situation. Livestock farmers raised the problem of coyotes and wolves moving across or permanently into their agricultural spaces. The danger this represented, especially to younger livestock, required shooting predator species. At the same time, some participants cited poor wildlife management policies as creating situations where coyotes and wolves starved, putting them into direct conflict with farmers. A mixed livestock farmer in his seventies critiqued rules that protected wolves but not white-tailed deer, saying, "it doesn't make sense to protect the predators and let the prey go," because when deer populations fell due to a combination of disease, lack of winter food, and tourism-hunting, the predator populations turned to livestock. These externally imposed rules ultimately reinforced conflict, and while shooting predators was constructed as justified for herd safety and care, it was also not something that farmers necessarily felt good about. Moreover, some suggested that predator conflicts reflected poor farm management practices, where a lack of knowledge and best practices affected other farmers (and livestock) more broadly. One mixed livestock farmer in her sixties put it this way: "when people have problems with wolves, it's most times their fault. They do the wrong things."

[8] According to the Government of Ontario (2019), barn swallow numbers have declined by 66% since 1972, linked to the loss of barns for nesting and decreases in their insect food sources.

Why does it matter? Thinking about local agricultural possibilities

Why is it important to undertake ethnographic considerations of the experiences of farmers outside of core agricultural locales? As I have shown, farmers' perceptions of livestock quality of life, healthy lands, and raising "good food" for local communities can both shape and reflect the possibilities and spaces of this district. For some, farming in the area offers the possibility of explicitly pushing back against food production processes that they see as unsustainable and unhealthy. For others, preservation of land and giving their livestock good lives were more central, but nevertheless resulted in practices that they contrasted to those of intensive farming. The land, though less rich compared to southern Ontario, was also conceptualized as lacking in years of artificial inputs and intensification pressures; livestock, while still ultimately destined for abattoirs, nevertheless had the "chance to live" (mixed livestock farmer, woman, thirties) as part of an ethos of caring and engagement. Thus, for many of my participants, their location outside of core Ontario agricultural spaces allowed them flexibility, along with the potential to align their farming practices with the qualities they attributed to "good food."

This was also specifically constructed by many as personally rewarding in ways that were not necessarily monetary but were nevertheless valuable. I conclude this paper with a quote that encapsulates the importance of being able to farm in ways that provide a personally meaningful livelihood, and that is also a rich reminder of the diverse factors that can intersect in shaping agricultural operations and notions of "good food":

> We're not bottom-line people. We want to stay reasonable. We want to invest our money, time, experience, to create something respectful. We're passionate, it's not always about the money. It's about passion, quality…it's creating a livelihood you feel good about. Making life better for everyone and everything, including the bees. (beekeeper, woman, sixties)

Acknowledgements: This research was funded through a SSHRC Insight Development Grant. I am grateful to Erin Nelson for her encouragement, feedback, and insights on drafts of this paper, and to Jodie Salter for helping strategize approaches to the paper. I also am thankful for the members of the Forest Walk faculty writing group for their support and encouragement. Finally, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who offered thoughtful and helpful suggestions on this manuscript.

Bio: Elizabeth Finnis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph. Her research focusses on agricultural transitions and rural livelihoods in the Global South and the Global North.

References

Baritaux, V., Houdart, M., Boutonnet, J.-P., Chazoule, C., Corniaux, C., Fleury, P., Lacombe, N., Napoleone, M., & Tourrand, J.-F. (2016). Ecological embeddedness in animal food systems (re-)localisation: A comparative analysis of initiatives in France, Morocco, and Senegal. *Journal of Rural Studies, 43*, 13-26. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.11.009

Beingessner, N., & Fletcher, A. J. (2020). "Going local": Farmers' perspectives on local food systems in rural Canada.

Agriculture and Human Values, 37(1), 129-145. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-019-09975-6

Blay-Palmer, A., Carey, R., Valette, E., & Sanderson, M. R. (2020). Post COVID 19 and food pathways to sustainable transformation. *Agriculture and Human Values, 37*, 517-519. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10051-7

Bronson, K., Knezevic, I., & Clement, C. (2019). The Canadian family farm, in literature and in practice. *Journal of Rural Studies, 66*, 104-111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.01.003

Burns, L. (2021). Challenges to habitus: Scruffy hedges and weeds in the Irish countryside. *Sociologia Ruralis, 61*(1), 2-25. doi: 10.1111/soru.12307

Burton, R. J. F. (2004). Seeing through the 'good farmer's' eyes: Towards developing an understanding of the social symbolic value of 'productivist' behaviour. *Sociologica Ruralis, 44*(2), 195-215.

Burton, R. J. F., Forney, J., Stock, P., & Sutherland, L.-A. (2021). *The good farmer: Culture and identity in food and agriculture*. Routledge.

Connell, D. J., Smithers, J., & Joseph, A. (2008). Farmers' markets and the 'good food' value chain: A preliminary study. *Local Environment, 13*(3), 169-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830701669096

Cox, R., Holloway, L., Venn, L., Dowler, L., Ricketts Hein, J., Kneafsey, M., & Tuomainen, H. (2008). Common ground? Motivations for participation in a community-supported agriculture scheme. *Local Environment, 13*(3), 203-218. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830701669153

DeLind, L. B. (2011). Are local food and the local food movement taking us where we want to go? Or are we hitching our wagons to the wrong stars? *Agriculture and Human Values, 28*, 273-283. doi: 10.1007/s10460-010-9263-0

Desmarais, A. A., & Wittman, H. (2014). Farmers, foodies and First Nations: Getting to food sovereignty in Canada. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 41*(6), 1153-1173. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.876623

Ellis, R. (2019). Save the bees? Agrochemical corporations and the debate over neonicotinoids in Ontario. *Capitalism Nature Socialism, 30*(4), 104-122. https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2018.1494748

Feagan, R., Morris, D., & Krug, K. (2004). Niagara region farmers' markets: Local food systems and sustainability considerations. *Local Environment, 9*(3), 235-254. doi: 10.1080/1354983042000219351

Feagan, R. B., & Morris, D. (2009). Consumer quest for embeddedness: A case study of the Brantford Farmers' Market. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 33*, 235-243. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2009.00745.x

Ferguson, H., Kijas, J., Wessell, A., & Northern Rivers Landed Histories Research Group. (2017). Towards reflexive localism: Exploring the diverse co-creators of alternative food across time in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales, Australia. *Journal of Historical Geography, 56*, 14-21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.12.005

Finnis, E. (2021). Agricultural persistence and potentials on the edge of Northern Ontario. *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*, *43*(1), 60-70. doi: 10.1111/cuag.12269

Francis, C. A., Hansen, T. E., Fox, A. A. Hesje, P. J., Nelson, H. E., Lawseth, A. E., & English, A. (2012). Farmland conversion to non-agricultural uses in the US and Canada: Current impacts and concerns for the future. *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability, 10*(1),8-24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14735903.2012.649588

Furman, C., Roncoli, C., Nelson, D. R., & Hoogenboom, G. (2014). Growing food, growing a movement: Climate adaptation and civic agriculture in the southeastern United States. *Agriculture and Human Values, 31*, 69-82. doi: 10.1007/s10460-013-9458-2

Government of Ontario. (2019). *Barn Swallow Government Response Statement*. Government of Ontario. https://www.ontario.ca/page/barn-swallow-government-response-statement

Hinrichs, C. C. (2003). The practice and politics of food system localization. *Journal of Rural Studies, 19*, 33-45.

Hunt, L. (2010). Interpreting orchardists' talk about their orchards: the good orchardists. *Agriculture and Human Values, 27*, 415-426. doi: 10.1007/s10460-009-9240-7

Kallio, G. (2020). A carrot isn't a carrot isn't a carrot: Tracing value in alternative practice of food exchange. *Agriculture and Human Values, 37*, 1095-1109. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10113-w

Kelly, L. (2022). *Proposed North Bay abattoir could bring 150 jobs, expand export market*. Bay Today. https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/proposed-north-bay-abattoir-could-bring-150-jobs-expand-export-market-5053227

Laforge, J. M. L., Anderson, C. R., & McLachlan, S. M. (2017). Governments, grassroots, and the struggle for local food systems: Containing, coopting, contesting, and collaborating. *Agriculture and Human Values, 34*, 663-681. doi: 10.1007/s10460-016-9765-5

Lavallee-Picard, V. (2016). Planning for food sovereignty in Canada? A comparative case study of two rural communities. *Canadian Food Studies, 3*(1), 71-95. doi 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v3i1.73

Le Velly, R., & Dufeu, I. (2016). Alternative food networks as "market *agencements*": Exploring multiple hybridities. *Journal of Rural Studies, 43*, 173-182. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.11.015

Lombardi, A., Migliore, G., Verneau, F., Schifani, G., & Cembalo L. (2015). Are 'good guys' more likely to participate in local agriculture? *Food Quality and Preference, 45*, 158-165. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2015.06.005

Loring, P. A. (2021). The imperative to transform global food systems. *Canadian Food Studies, 8*(3), 1-4. doi: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i3.561

MacLeod, E. (2016). Food discourses in Cape Breton: Community, economy, and ecological food practices. *Canadian Food Studies, 3*(1), 20-45. doi: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v3i1.119

Mert-Cakal, T., & Miele, M. (2020). 'Workable utopias' for social change through inclusion and empowerment? Community supported agriculture (CSA) in Wales as social innovation. *Agriculture and Human Values, 37*, 1241-1260. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10141-6

Michels, J. (2017). *Permanent weekend: Nature, leisure and rural gentrification*. McGill-Queens University Press.

McGuire, J., Wright Morton, L., & Cast, A. D. (2013). Reconstructing the good farmer identity: Shifts in farmer identities and farm management practices to improve water quality. *Agriculture and Human Values, 30*, 57-69. doi: 10.1007/s10460-012-9381-y

McKitterick, L., Quinn, B., McAdam, R., & Dunn A. (2016). Innovation networks and the institutional actor-produced relationship in rural areas: The context of artisan food production. *Journal of Rural Studies, 48*, 41-52. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.09.005

Morris, C., & Kirwan, J. (2011). Ecological embeddedness: An interrogation and refinement of the concept within the context of alternative food networks in the UK. *Journal of Rural Studies, 27*, 322-330. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.03.004

Mundler, P., & Laughrea, S. (2016). The contributions of short food supply chains to territorial development: A study of three Quebec territories. *Journal of Rural Studies, 45*, 218-229. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.04.001

Murdoch, J. (2000). Networks – A new paradigm of rural development? *Journal of Rural Studies, 16*, 407-419.

O'Neill, K. J. (2008). Situating the 'alternative' within the 'conventional' – Local food experiences from the East Riding of Yorkshire, UK. *Journal of Rural Studies, 35*, 112-122. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.04.008

Price, M. J., Latta, A., Spring, A., Temmer, J., Johnston, C., Chicot, L., Jumbo, J., & Leishman, M. (2022). Agroecology in the North: Centering Indigenous food sovereignty and land stewardship in agricultural "frontiers". *Agriculture and Human Values*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-022-10312-7

Riley, M. (2014). Still being the 'good farmer': (non-)retirement and the preservation of farming identities in an older age. *Sociologia Ruralis, 56*(1), 96-115.

Rotz, A., Fraser, E. D. G., & Martin, R. C. (2019). Situating tenure, capital and finance in farmland relations: Implications for stewardship and agroecological health in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 46*(1), 142-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1351953

Sage, C. (2003). Social embeddedness and relations of regard: Alternative 'good food' networks in south-west Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies, 19*, 47-60.

Saunders, F.P. (2016). Complex shades of green: Gradually changing notions of the 'good farmer' in a Swedish context. *Sociologia Ruralis, 56*(3), 391-407. doi: 10.1111/soru.12115

Setten, G. (2004). The habitus, the rule and the moral landscape. *Cultural Geographies, 11*, 389-415.

Silvasti, T. (2003). The culture model of 'the good farmer' and the environmental question in Finland. *Agriculture and Human Values, 20*, 143-150.

Smithers, J., & Joseph, A. E. (2010). The trouble with authenticity: Separating ideology from practice at the farmers' market. *Agriculture and Human Values, 27*, 239-247. doi: 10.1007/s10460-009-9250-5

Statistics Canada (2022, October 26). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=parry%20sound%20&DGUIDlist=2021A00033549&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1&HEADERlist=0

Stock, P. V. (2007). 'Good farmers' as reflexive producers: An examination of family organic farmers in the US Midwest. *Sociologia Ruralis, 47*(2), 83-102.

Stotten, R. (2016). Farmers' perspectives on cultural landscapes in Central Switzerland: How landscape socialization and Habitus influence an aesthetic appreciation of landscape. *Society & Natural Resources, 29*, 166-184. doi: 10.1080/08941920.2015.1058995

Sutherland, L.-A. (2013). Can organic farmers be 'good farmers'? Adding the 'taste of necessity' to the conventionalization debate. *Agriculture and Human Values, 30*, 429-441. doi: 10.1007/s10460-013-9424-z

Sutherland, L.-A., & Darnhofer, A. (2012). Of organic farmers and 'good farmers': Changing habitus in rural England. *Journal of Rural Studies, 28*, 232-240. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.03.003

Torjusen, H., Lieblein, G., & Vitters, G. (2008). Learning, communicating and eating in local food-systems: The case of organic box schemes in Denmark and Norway. *Local Environment, 13*(3), 219-234. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830701669252

Tovey, H. (1997). Food, environmentalism and rural sociology: On the organic farming movement in Ireland. *Sociologia Ruralis, 37*(1), 21-37. doi: 10.1111/soru.12063